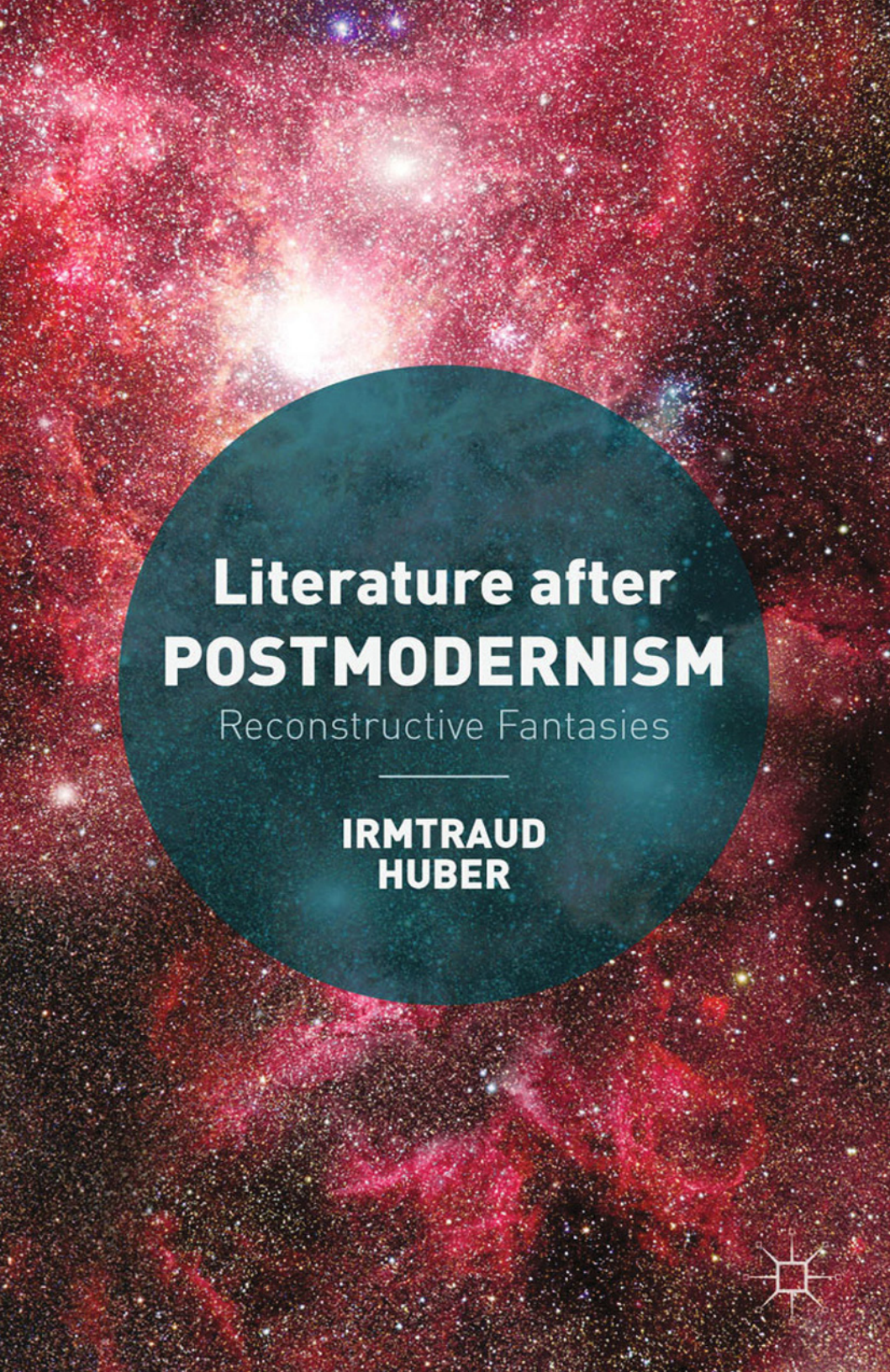
Literature after
POSTMODERNISM
Reconstructive Fantasies
IRMTRAUD
HUBER

Literature after Postmodernism

Also by Irmtraud Huber

AESTHETICS OF AUTHENTICITY (*co-editor with Wolfgang Funk and Florian Groß*)

Literature after Postmodernism

Reconstructive Fantasies

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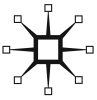

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To new beginnings

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List of Abbreviations

BA:	Atwood, Margaret. *The Blind Assassin*. 2nd edn. London: Virago Press, 2000.
BT:	Byatt, A. S. *The Biographer's Tale*. New York: Vintage International, 2001.
K&C:	Chabon, Michael. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. New York: Picador, 2000.
HoL:	Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. 2nd edn. London: Pantheon, 2000.
HWSG:	Eggers, Dave. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.
EiI:	Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Everything is Illuminated*. London: Penguin, 2003.
HYS:	García Márquez, Gabriel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. London: Penguin, 2007.
THL:	Krauss, Nicole. *The History of Love*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.
Pi:	Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi: A Novel*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2001.
n9d:	Mitchell, David Stephen. *number9dream*. London: Sceptre, 2001.

Introduction: Epitaph on a Ghost, or the Impossible End of Postmodernism

On 24 September, 2011, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London opened their exhibition "Postmodernism – Style and Subversion 1970–1990," which with those innocent-looking four numbers after the dash, declared an end to something that had claimed to be endless. Postmodernism, which proposed the end of history, has apparently become dated. Its style, its subversion, it seems, has petered out and lost its force sometime around the beginning of the last decade of the old century. In spite of its antagonism to stable structures, it has become institutionalised. Its interest in the margins nowadays paradoxically occupies the centre. In contrast to its emphasis on the indeterminable and on absence, it has gradually come to signify a specific set of philosophical ideas, thematic foci and aesthetic devices. These are very present today, indeed, not only in academia but also in popular culture. Postmodernism, so one could surmise, has been too successful for its own agenda.[1]

The assessment of the curators of the V&A exhibition is shared by an increasing number of recent scholarly publications, also and perhaps particularly in the field of literary studies, which assert to different degrees of vehemence that postmodernism is (probably) over.[2] This, of course, is not at all a new claim. The death-knells of postmodernist literature have notoriously been rung continuously ever since its birth. In fact, considering John Barth's early manifesto "The Literature of Exhaustion," literary postmodernism could be said to have been born a ghost. And, just like a ghost, it has proven exceedingly difficult to bury. As Ihab Hassan evocatively stated in 2001, looking back on the thirty years of his engagement with postmodernism: 'I believe it is a revenant, the return of the irrepressible; every time we are rid of it, its ghost rises back. Like a ghost, it eludes definition. Certainly, I know less

about postmodernism today than I did thirty years ago, when I began to write about it' ("Postmodernity" 1). Few are as confident in their death-declarations as Linda Hutcheon, who concludes her epilogue to the second edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism* with the assertion that 'the postmodern moment has passed' (181), or as Robert McLaughlin, who diagnoses 'an aesthetic sea change in literature, particularly fiction' ("Post-Postmodern Discontent" 55). Nevertheless, the feeling that there has been a significant shift in literature published in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century seems to be pervasive. Over the course of the last two decades, scholarly interest has increasingly turned towards the question of whether literature (or art in general for that matter) has moved beyond the postmodernist, how to best describe the emergent trend, and ultimately, whether such a move is conceivable at all.

But if postmodernism has really come to an end, what will come next? Such an inquiry faces serious difficulties. As already indicated by Hassan's perplexity, a major problem is posed by the contested definitions of postmodernism itself. Linda Hutcheon's complaint that '[o]f all the terms bandied about in both current cultural theory and contemporary writings on the arts, postmodernism must be the most over- and under-defined' (*Poetics* 3), is still as true as it was in 1988. A number of studies have since taken pains to review the usage and meanings of the term and struggled to find adequate definitions, only to reiterate its slipperiness. 'Postmodernism,' so they agree, has become 'a kind of data-cloud, a fog of discourse, that showed up on the radar even more conspicuously than what it was supposed to be about' (Connor 4). Thus, paradoxically, it still remains difficult to reconcile various understandings of postmodernism, even as a widely emerging consensus suggests that we are currently in the process of leaving postmodernism behind us. The picture becomes no clearer if one narrows the focus from a larger cultural situation to the specifics of what might constitute the aesthetics, ethics and politics of postmodernist literature in particular. The plethora of definitions, core texts and approaches that the term encompasses belie positivistic attempts to definitively circumscribe its canon.

To declare an end to something as diffuse as postmodernism can therefore never be more than a rhetorical move which constructs its point of departure just as much as the new beginning it seeks to establish. Any attempt to move beyond postmodernism inevitably leads to a reduction of the complexity and instability of the term. Ultimately, every endeavour to make sense of larger tendencies in culture depends on such simplification. The attempt to avoid it, so Fredric Jameson reminds us, would risk to 'fall back into a view of present history as

sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable' (*Postmodernism* 6). Indeed, in the process of periodisation, the definite shape of any period is determined to a large degree by the one it is succeeded by. Just as modernism has partly come to be defined retrospectively by 'post'-modernist revisions and deviations, the aesthetic shift to be perceived in the present moment will contribute to how future generations will think about postmodernism.

Meanwhile, any claim for a move beyond postmodernism is predicated on two conditions. First, if authors and critics now strive to move beyond established paradigms, this impetus takes the form of an attempt to transcend institutionalised ideas of what postmodernist fiction is, means and does. The rapid institutionalisation of postmodernism, which has gained a firm foothold in most Western university curricula over the last decades, has contributed significantly to the gradual emergence of a general consensus of some kind on what postmodernist literature is all about. While definitions continue to be slippery, postmodernism has stratified sufficiently to be coherently taught and talked about, and perhaps in spite of itself, it has come to be identified with a distinct set of aesthetic strategies and philosophical ideas. Thus, the best evidence for postmodernism's demise can perhaps be found in the fact that Bran Nicol, in the recent *Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, confidently presents its object to his student readership as 'something effectively in the past, like modernism, something we can treat as a more or less "complete" historical movement with its own set of core texts' (xv). Due to its success postmodernist writing has become 'the victim of a self-created paradox,' as Richard Bradford puts it: 'it has become what its practitioners sought and seek to avoid, a classifiable field and subgenre of literary writing' (70).

The second condition emerges directly from this internal contradiction. Postmodernism's conundrum is increasingly felt to lie in the very nature of its incessantly oppositional stance. It derives its main incentive from a critique of established structures and forms; it is fundamentally antagonistic, 'a rejection of many, if not most, of the cultural certainties on which life in the West has been structured over the past couple of centuries' (Sim, "Preface" vii). Ihab Hassan provides as good a characterisation as any when he highlights postmodernism's main tune: 'such terms of unmaking (antipoesis) as deconstruction, decentering, dissemination, disruption, displacement, difference, discontinuity, demystification, delegitimisation, disappearance became as rife as rock songs' ("Beyond Postmodernism?" 128–9). Debunking the grand

narratives of progress and historical teleology, postmodernism is rooted in the idea of the end of history. As a system which exposes the absence at the core of all systems and questions the finality of all boundaries, postmodernism incorporates its own change and endless revision and thereby pre-empts any possibility of its own transcendence, always returning as the trace of what has supposedly been superseded. To move beyond postmodernism might thus be, strictly speaking, impossible, since the postmodernist project of questioning is endless and no longer allows for a succession of states that evolve out of one another.

At the same time, however, postmodernism, as its name indicates, continues to define itself by the modernism it has overcome, exposing its myths, unsettling its structures, exploding its certainties. Indeed, Nicolas Bourriaud suggests that postmodernism is eternally determined by its various antagonists. It is 'an interminable "afterwards"; after the myth of progress, after the revolutionary utopia, after the retreat of colonialism, after the battles for political, social and sexual emancipation' (5).[3] Even while questioning teleology and progress, postmodernism understands itself as a process of overcoming and supersession and thus can hardly avoid evoking the very narrative of progression it hopes to abolish. Paradoxically, despite its professed endlessness, it may from today's perspective appear as 'a period of pause and levelling, brief as befits a historical moment entirely determined by the one before – a marshy delta on the river of time' (Bourriaud 5).

So one may ask, what happens to postmodernism's oppositional stance, what happens to subversion, this central postmodernist attitude, when it has become the topic of a V&A exhibition and thus entered the rooms of national institutions of royal tradition? When irony and self-reflexivity, those other two hallmarks of postmodernism, have become pervasive in everyday discourse and have been adopted and commodified in popular culture? Or, as David Foster Wallace puts the question in his much-cited essay on the interrelation between television and recent fiction "E Unibus Pluram": 'What do you do when postmodern rebellion becomes a pop-cultural institution?' (68).

Wallace's spirited essay is an important reference in this connection, as he suggests that the increasing desire to escape from postmodernist subversion and rebellion may be more than merely the oedipal ennui of 'artists [who] have become tired of recycling increasingly predictable postmodernist devices' (Eshelman, *Performatism* 32) in an incessant consumerist desire for something new. Rather, postmodernist scepticism and irony, which has for the longest time been claiming to serve a liberating purpose, has seen increasing commercialisation and has

gradually come to look like the paint with which we adorn the walls of our prison. Postmodernism relies upon the effectiveness of scepticism and self-reflexive irony as its prime means for questioning the beliefs of society and for providing new perspectives on accepted truisms. But scepticism and irony have become so pervasive in popular consumerist culture that art might now be called upon to provide a counterbalance, a respite from the irony haunting Western cultural expression (cf. Donovan 9; Maltby 29). After all, as Wallace impatiently declares: 'irony's singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks' ("E Unibus" 67).

Jonathan Franzen makes a similar point, complaining with characteristic gloom that

> when the avant-garde is all that remains – when the rebels who kept the establishment honest are themselves enshrined as the establishment – we're left without an opposition. I see academy (and foresee a national literature, produced by academics) lost in fantasies of transgression and subversion that are likely only to confirm for young people, who have a keen sense of bullshit, the complete irrelevance of literature. ("More of the Same" 36)

The question here takes the guise of a dramatic showdown: Postmodernism against Literature, and one of the two has to die. But even without such polemical verve, one may point, as Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard do, to the change in the political climate after the end of the Cold War, to the rise of fundamentalism, to 9/11 and its aftermath, to the technical advances and the life-changing influences of globalisation, to a neo-liberal hypercapitalism gone rampant and the dissolution of economic optimism in the course of global financial crisis, to the spreading of the awareness of the finiteness of resources and the global challenge of climate change, and surmise that the circumstances under which postmodernism arose have seen quite radical change (cf. 1). Is it not to be expected that literature, too, would change, or rather that it had better change if it wants to remain relevant?

Franzen's own case exemplifies well how the rhetoric of a new departure is predicated on a limited view of postmodernism, referring to the latter mainly in its institutionalised form as a discourse of alterity and scepticism that defines itself first and foremost as subversive. After having written two novels in the postmodernist vein, Franzen programmatically returned to social realism in his third (and first successful) novel, *The Corrections* (2001). He reflected on this decision in a by now notorious

essay published in *Harpers Magazine*, in which he casts this return as no less than a declaration of war on postmodernism (cf. "Perchance to Dream"). Still, his oppositional stance notwithstanding, Franzen's realism is deeply informed by, and indeed based on, postmodernist insights (cf. Burn 51 and *passim*). The new kind of realism does not revoke postmodernist claims about the power of discourse and the inaccessibility of the real, about the fragmentation of the subject and the impossibility of truth. Instead, it acknowledges them even while it asserts itself in spite of them. After postmodernism, we may find the 'both/and' (which postmodernism, thus a large critical consensus, has generally favoured over the modernist 'either/or') replaced by wilful aesthetics of the 'in spite of,' or as Geoffrey Holsclaw suggests, an attitude of 'true/but still.'

Franzen's case seems to exemplify a more general mood swing. There is a noticeable attempt in recent theory and literary practice to escape from this state of persistent belatedness and spectral form, which exists only by reference to what it no longer embodies. As Nicoline Timmer puts it:

> the 'tactic' of deconstructing is always parasitical on existing systems, structures and ideas. But now, the call for an alternative vision is heard more loudly. Quite simply put it is not unthinkable that after endless proposals for *de*constructions, a desire to *construct* will break through. (21; original emphasis)

Among scholars who are currently trying to chart the contemporary (possibly) transitional moment in literature, this diagnosis seems to find almost unanimous consent.

Meanwhile, opinions on what precisely will eventually be remembered as the dominant factor in the current literary shift vary widely. Nevertheless, realism, sincerity and authenticity make their appearance with a striking frequency: 'Neo-Realism' (Rebein, *Dirty Realist*), 'Speculative Realism' (Saldívar), 'New Sincerity' (Kelly), 'Aesthetics of Authenticity' (Funk) or 'Aesthetic of Trust' (Hassan). All these suggestions stress some sort of a return to the real not only in their labels. But there also seems to be a general agreement that this development does not constitute as radical a break as Franzen purports it to be. Quite the contrary, another point of general agreement is that these labels describe a shift of interest, rather than a rupture, that the literature they are concerned with holds on to much of what was postmodernist but looks beyond postmodernism's constant endeavours to disrupt, to alienate and to subvert. It attempts to bridge the rupture (not to cover it), to be accessible

(though not transparent), to create (but not to posit). After and because of deconstruction, it seeks to reconstruct.

Fantasy: of literature beyond subversion

Let's assume the curators of the V&A exhibition have got a point. Let's say subversion's dominance ended in 1990 and we have entered a phase of reorientation and reconstruction. Would the widely asserted return to realism follow as an inevitable consequence? What would such an aesthetic shift entail for the anti-realist, the marvellous or the fantastic, which has been hailed as *The Literature of Subversion* ever since Rosemary Jackson published her seminal study by that title in the 1980s? After all, a well-established consensus has it that the primary function and main ethical potential of the fantastic mode lies in its ability to 'erode the pillars of society by un-doing categorical structures' (Jackson 176). So what will happen to a literary mode that has seen a considerable rise in academic status within the context of postmodernism, precisely because it succeeded in presenting itself as inherently subversive? Will the literature of the fantastic subside again into the scholarly obscurity from which it had just struggled to escape?

These questions serve as the starting point of my investigation. Thus, this book will offer no overview of the vast variety of aesthetic means and topics to be found in recent literature as others have attempted (cf. Bradford; Head; Boxall; Tolan). Neither do I aim for a comprehensive analysis of the state of the fantastic in contemporary literature in general. Rather, I shall focus on a small number of novels, all of which employ versions of the fantastic mode in a similar way, and I ask how these texts relate to the characteristics of the present aesthetic shift as it is currently being described by an increasing number of scholars. Since the novels do not simply adhere to the proclaimed return to realism, the question arises of how they use fantastic elements in response to and negotiation with their postmodernist predecessors. Focusing thus on *one* specific strategy to respond to and escape from postmodernism which has so far largely escaped critical notice, my readings can enter into a productive and mutually illuminating dialogue with the main critical claims about the present literary moment.[4]

The four novels at the heart of my argument, all of which were published at the beginning of the millennium, around the same time as Franzen's *The Corrections*, show a striking similarity in the way they employ the fantastic: they include fantastic narratives as fictions within fictions, safely embedded in a (in the widest sense) realist frame story.

Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) poses as an academic treatise discussing a gothic horror film, reminiscent of *The Blair Witch Project* in its documentary style, but clearly states in its diegetic frame that the film is not only fictional, but is, indeed, itself a fiction: it never existed within the fictional reality the novel establishes in the first place. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) combines the story of a heritage trip to the Ukraine with the fabulous novel one of the protagonists writes about the shtetl of his ancestors. Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) pays loving tribute to the early comic book and includes some of the superhero stories the novel's protagonists invent. Finally, David Mitchell's *number9dream* (2001) presents its readers with a whole line-up of fantasies ranging from daydreams and nightmares to video games and marvellous children's stories, all embedded in a fairly straightforward, though rather unconventional, coming-of-age story.

In order to address the basic commonalities shared by a variety of significantly diverse genres extending from horror and magic realism to video games and fables, my definition of the fantastic is fairly broad. Nevertheless, I do not simply juxtapose it to realism.[5] Instead, the central characteristic of the fantastic in my understanding of the mode is that it variously contrasts two essentially different literary stances, the mimetic and the marvellous. It is thus situated in the middle position on what may be envisioned as a continuum of possible interactions between the two stances (I will clarify my use of 'stance,' 'mode' and 'genre' shortly).

At the mimetic end of such a continuum one finds literary texts which aim to stay as close to extratextual reality as possible, such as non-fiction novels, new journalism, autobiography, documentaries or travelogues.[6] On the other end, that of the marvellous, one might situate texts that depict imaginary realms and other worlds, like fairy tales, some science fiction, or what Brian Attebery calls 'formula fantasy' (3). Every literary text could be positioned somewhere along the continuum that spans between these two poles, leaning towards one or the other, either 'mimetically dominated' or 'fantasy [I would say 'marvellous'] dominated' (Cornwell 39). To call a text mimetic in this sense would thus not necessarily mean that it reproduces conventions of nineteenth-century realism, but that it lays claim to a certain authenticity and referential accuracy of representation, that it endeavours to hold up a mirror to either an objective or a subjective reality. The mimetic stance thus pays tribute to that artistic ideal of correspondence to reality, which is symbolised by the grapes of Zeuxis, an ideal that is deeply

ingrained in Western culture.[7] My use of the term 'mimesis' has to be understood as strictly limited to its association with this ideal, not in its wider Aristotelian sense of general narrative verisimilitude or in its rhetorical signification as *imitatio*. Moreover, what I call a mimetic stance is not dependent on a specific style or set of conventions. I thus understand the mimetic in the wide sense Andrzej Gąsiorek gives realism, 'not so much a set of textual characteristics as a general cognitive stance *vis-à-vis* the world, which finds different expression at different historical moments, manifesting itself in a wide range of fictional forms' (14).[8] It refers to the *relation* the text is understood to establish with the extratextual world, the intentionality it develops towards it, and not to specific means by which a text strives to establish that relation nor to the respective success of such means.

Conversely, the marvellous stance involves a deliberate departure from perceivable reality and thus a willing suspension of the claim to reflect the extratextual world, as in Stendhal's famous mirror. In purely marvellous texts the supernatural, the magical and the bizarre are usually taken for granted, and the text-world explicitly does not coincide with the extratextual world. Thus accurate depiction and approximation of reality in representation no longer serve as the yardsticks of artistic achievement, even though verisimilitude, in the sense of coherence and narrative congruity, certainly remains important. Just as strategies of the mimetic stance are not restricted to the code conventions of nineteenth-century realism, the marvellous is not necessarily dependent on the supernatural.

The two stances also raise different reader expectations and demand different reading strategies and ways of interpretation. In that sense, mimesis and the marvellous are as much stances of reading as they are stances of production. A marvellous text implies a reader who accepts that it does not mirror reality and who realises that it imagines a different, marvellous world – a reader who does not read the fairy tale for its historical accuracy or the fable for its precise depiction of animal behaviour. A mimetic text, by contrast, implies a reader who acknowledges its attempts to depict reality and does not take it for pure fanciful invention.

The differences between the stances in such clear cases remain latent, inconspicuous and unproblematic. Only when they enter into some sort of contradiction within the text, when it becomes difficult to distinguish and keep them apart, only then do differences in form, function and interpretation become salient, taking a prominent position in a text's creation of meaning. It is precisely such kind of uncertainty

arising from the combination of the two stances that characterises the fantastic mode. Whereas the stances describe different attitudes literary texts take towards reality, the fantastic mode, as I propose to understand the term here, refuses to be entirely annexed to either of the stances. As Lance Olsen puts it, the fantastic '[h]over[s] between the marvelous and the mimetic modes [I would say 'stances'] on our continuum.' It is 'a mode that confounds and confuses the marvelous and the mimetic [, that] plays one mode off the other, creating a dialectic which refuses synthesis' (*Ellipse* 19). While the fantastic mode often leans towards one or the other stance, it derives its main effect and pleasure from an exploitation of their basic irreconcilability.

I therefore use 'stance' to describe two basic 'impulses' (Hume 20) of literature, in preference to talking of juxtaposed codes as others have done (cf. Chanady; Kluwick),[9] while I reserve the term 'mode' to designate the fantastic as a conspicuous combination of the two stances. While the fantastic itself is not a stance, since it is not of the same nature and generality as the two basic impulses or poles of the mimetic and the marvellous which it combines and juxtaposes, I also prefer not to speak of it as a genre. Itself a highly contested term, genre would seem to be of more use to describe historically and formally more clearly determined literary forms. In contrast to that, the fantastic mode, as I use the term here, can manifest itself in various ways. The classical gothic fantastic and magic realism, for example, would be two prominent exponents of the mode, which differ not in their basic fantastic nature but primarily in the specific ways in which they combine the two stances.[10]

The combination, juxtaposition and interplay of the two basic stances are central to the aesthetic project of all the novels which I discuss in more detail in the following pages. Nevertheless, none of them is straightforwardly fantastic. Instead, it is essential that, in all of them, fantastic narratives are inserted as embedded stories and are marked as fictions within fictions in the course of the frame tale. What these novels do therewith, one could argue, is to contain the fantastic safely within the bounds of fiction. Whereas the claims for a subversive potential of the fantastic that have largely dominated the discussion of the mode over the last decades were based on the supposed rupture of the discourse of the real by the intrusion of the supernatural, in the case of the framed fantastic tales encountered in these texts, reality is never under any lasting strain. After all, the fantastic elements are explicitly exposed as fictional within the reality of the text-world that the frame tale establishes. There is therefore, for the most part, little ontological claim to the fantastic occurrences narrated in these texts.

They do not disturb a sense of verisimilitude and the possible because they are revealed to be mere products of the characters' imaginations. The fantastic refrains from asserting its own reality and thus no longer induces readers to question their ontological convictions in order to acknowledge its existence. But can this simply be subsumed to the widely proclaimed return to realism after postmodernism's anti-realist agenda? If so, why draw on the fantastic mode at all? What function does it fulfil within the texts, in particular with regard to their endeavour to go beyond postmodernism? I propose that a closer consideration of these questions can do much to contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which my literary examples position themselves with regard to postmodernist discourse, and therewith helps to gain further insight into the qualities and characteristics of the wider aesthetic shift in recent literature.

From postmodernism to reconstruction: a chapter overview

Part I of this study provides the discursive and theoretical context in which these questions arise. Chapter 1 is dedicated to an overview of the current debate about a movement beyond postmodernism.[11] I delineate how my own findings relate to a current critical discourse about a moment of transition, whose incipient influence seems to register in various ways on the contemporary Western literary scene. While this debate is currently gaining momentum, it is still in its initial stages and quite heterogeneous. I compare and juxtapose different critical assessments of literature after postmodernism in order to identify common basic features pervading the discussion. Following from this characterisation, I argue for the usefulness of the term 'reconstruction' to describe recent aesthetic developments.[12]

After such a characterisation of the larger academic and literary context in which the debate is situated, Chapter 2 will focus more specifically on the question of what role the fantastic may play within this emergent change. Taking into account the specific narrative structure of the novels discussed, I set out to rethink common assumptions about the mode and suggest an alternative approach. Based on my understanding of the fantastic mode as a hesitation between two stances, I suggest that within these novels the epistemological and ontological questions that have long been at the centre of the fantastic are gradually being displaced by what I would call pragmatic considerations. I thus propose to add a third, mediating term to the 'methodological double standard' between semantic and syntactic approaches to definitions of

the fantastic which Fredric Jameson described and lamented in a chapter of *The Political Unconscious* (95). Semantic approaches, according to Jameson, 'aim to describe the essence or meaning of a given genre by way of the reconstruction of an imaginary entity [. . .] which is something like the generalized existential experience behind the individual texts' (94). Syntactic approaches, in contrast, try to define a genre by laying down its structural and formal rules, 'where genre is apprehended in terms of a series of determinate functions, or what we will call a structure or a *fixed form*' (94).[13] I would argue that what is missing both from Jameson's list and from most of the discussion about the mode is an explicitly pragmatic focus: A pragmatic approach would foreground the role genre (or mode, for that matter) plays in structuring reader expectation and response, a process that has to be understood as reciprocal, as a position or perspective that is negotiated between textual clues and reader reception. While the semantic perspective, according to Jameson, 'asks the text what it *means*' and syntactic analyses 'ask how it *works*' (184, original emphasis), a pragmatic approach would ask for its *effect*.

From this perspective it becomes possible to see the definition of the fantastic as continually under contestation on all three of these levels, with different theories emphasising different aspects according to their respective selection of literary texts and influenced by their historical and ideological biases. My own understanding, as it arises from the reconstructive tendencies in the contemporary novels I discuss, by no means claims to be an exception. While taking various semantic and syntactic approaches into account, the thoughts on the fantastic that I will develop in Chapter 2 are clearly biased towards the pragmatic, thus mirroring the increasing focus on the conditions of communication and the functions of the fictive that can be found in recent authors' engagements with the mode.

My usage of 'pragmatic' in this context is not exclusively derived from the philosophical school of thought which has adopted its name and which is currently seeing a decided revival, not only in form of Rortian neo-pragmatism, but also in a rediscovery and revaluation of earlier work by William James, Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey. Instead, I understand the term more generally as a useful nexus of intersecting concerns that lie at the core of the specific use of the fantastic I am interested in. As a general philosophical term, a 'pragmatic' perspective complements ontological and epistemological considerations by foregrounding ethical and intersubjective tensions and problems. As a more specific philosophical programme, pragmatism emphasises the basis of truth and knowledge in communicative agreement. In the area

of linguistic research, a pragmatic approach explores the conditions and contexts of communication. Finally, in common usage, it may refer to a turn from theory to an engagement with the practicalities of day-to-day life. All these various aspects, I would argue, can be seen to converge to some extent in the specific use my literary examples make of the fantastic, as they use the mode to explore the pragmatic aspects of fictions.

Drawing on Wolfgang Iser's theory of the fictive, I argue that what my literary examples essentially do is to give prominence to an aspect of the fantastic that has previously remained mostly tacit: the fact that the fantastic, more than other genres or modes, is based on an exposure of the processes constituting the fictive. In order to clarify this claim, in the course of Chapter 2 I will discuss Wolfgang Iser's theory of the fictive in some detail, as he developed it in his late work *The Fictive and the Imaginary*. To sum it up briefly at this point, he posits that the traditional juxtaposition of reality and fiction is misleading. Instead, the fictive has to be understood as a dynamic process of fictionalising acts which negotiate between the real and the imaginary. In the fictive, the determinacy of the real is opened up towards a multiplicity of meaning by the imaginary, while the indeterminate and shapeless imaginary can only take shape (in the sense of *Gestalt*) by drawing on the real. Iser's concept of the fictive, I argue, mirrors the structure of the fantastic mode. Thus, the fantastic lends itself well to metafictional considerations that highlight the specific nature and workings of the fictive, since its essential effect is based precisely on exposing the constituting interaction between the real and the imaginary to view. As Tzvetan Todorov proposed, the fantastic can be said to 'represent [. . .] the quintessence of literature, insofar as the questioning of the limit between real and unreal, proper to all literature, is its explicit center' (168). Whereas the mimetic stance tends to hide the influence of the imaginary and the marvellous tends to hide its reliance on the real, the fantastic mode foregrounds their mutual presence, be it in form of an antagonistic clash, as in the gothic fantastic, or in form of an ambiguous coexistence, as in the case of magic realism.

A brief discussion of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* at this point allows me to illustrate my argument that an inclusion of fantastic stories as fictional artefacts, which are produced and consumed within the bounds of the frame narrative, may serve as a double focus on the nature and the functions of the fictive. All the novels I discuss include fictions within fictions and are concerned with the ways in which both the production and consumption of narrative fictions influence and shape their

protagonists. They draw on the fantastic as paradigmatically fictive in order to emphasise that such questions are not sufficiently answered by considering a text's degree of referentiality and claim to mimetic fealty, but that the contribution of the imaginary needs to be taken into account. These novels are thus truly metafictional, not in the postmodernist sense of illusion-breaking self-reflection, but in different senses: they are metafictional in that they foreground the interplay of the real and the imaginary in the fictive, and in that they raise pragmatic questions about its uses and consequences. They employ the fantastic not to question and subvert our sense of reality but to explore the creative potential of fictions.

After this introduction into the theoretical and methodological premises that inform my perspective, Part II turns to detailed readings of the four contemporary novels mentioned above, chiselling out their respective reconstructive substrata. In their own ways, each of these texts could be described as 'novels after theory,' a phrase Judith Ryan uses for the 'remarkable number of novels [that] is substantially informed by theory' (1) in the literary production of the last forty years.[14] Their awareness of theoretical discourses deeply informs the responses to the challenges of postmodernism these contemporary authors develop. As the following chapters will show, *House of Leaves* makes its debt, not only to the ideas, but also to the very discourse of literary theory quite explicit (engaging in particular with poststructuralism and deconstruction à la Derrida). *Everything is Illuminated* and *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* both enter into a creative dialogue with postmodernist concerns about historical narrative, truth in representation and theories of trauma, while *number9dream* is concerned with the simulation and simulacra of capitalist consumer culture and the fragmentation of identity.

Each of the novels thus constructs the particular version of postmodernism it reacts to, a construction that is necessarily limited and reductive, broken down to a handful of specific aspects. In this, various strands of postmodernist theory serve as an implicit counterpoint, a tacit backdrop against which the novels' creative innovations can be delineated and situated. Nevertheless, the fact that they single out particular (and often simplified) theoretical positions from among those that are associated with postmodernism does not derogate their responses. Although their engagement with and eventual departure from postmodernism may be, to a considerable extent, a rhetorical move, their constructions of both themselves and of their postmodernist predecessors does not render their reconstructive objective invalid

and meaningless. After all, all literary history is based on constructions. '"[P]ostmodernism,"' writes Brian McHale, 'is one of them. So, too, for that matter is "literature" itself' (*Constructing* 2).

My observations about such individual endeavours gain a broader relevance in their focus on the similarity of the parameters informing these reconstructive attempts to move beyond the postmodernist. Even while the postmodernisms they construct, each in their turn, are highly divergent, their central concerns are closely related. All of them shift their focus from ontological and epistemological questions to pragmatic ones in an attempt to reclaim fiction as a form of communication that actually manages to convey meaning, however unstable and compromised it may be. In face of the postmodernist tenets of the inaccessibility of the real, the indeterminacy of meaning and the impossibility of truth, they explore the ways in which we nonetheless understand reality, construct meanings and communicate with each other. In face of the omnipresence of fiction, they ask for our agency in its production and to assume responsibility for the fictions we tell.

Tracing these concerns in their various manifestations and contexts in the four novels, I will begin by discussing a work which, for all appearances, very much still adheres to postmodernism, both in form and in content: Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*. While a postmodernist interpretative approach offers much insight into this text (as has frequently been demonstrated), I single out those aspects that escape such a perspective. Looking in detail at the use of fantastic elements in conjunction with the text's highly complex narrative structure, I argue that the novel eventually turns away from its postmodernist ontological and epistemological scepticisms and commits itself to a narrative of intersubjective responsibility and the possible contribution of fictions to a story of maturation.

Whereas in Danielewski such a reconstructive project is still highly dubitable and tentative, Foer's novel *Everything is Illuminated* is much more confident in celebrating fiction's ethical and creative potential. With deliberate, paradoxically self-conscious naïveté, it asserts the value of the fictive both as marvellous and as mimetic, juxtaposing the possibilities and limits of the two stances in a representation of the absent that pitches its loving tribute against the inaccessibility of the real. If one finds the 'true/but still,' the 'in spite of' that seems to mark the move beyond the postmodernist precariously established after a long existential struggle at the end of *House of Leaves*, for *Everything is Illuminated* it both constitutes the novel's central thematic tension and serves as the very premise for the narrative. In Foer's novel, one finds

humour in spite of horror, representation in spite of absence, truth in spite of unreliability and scepticism, love in spite of the impossibility of love. Meanwhile, it is precisely the exposure of the workings of the fictive in the fantastic that allows for the realisation of such an 'in spite of.' On this basis, the novel celebrates the role of fictional creation for an engagement with the past and the present whose ethical value lies in a process of intersubjective communication and an awareness of narrative responsibility.

By comparison, in Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* the attitude of 'in spite of' has truly come into its own. Its implications, possibilities and ethical consequences are never similarly pondered and agonised over as they are in the previous two novels. Instead, they are tacitly taken for granted and serve as the basis for the novel's focus on the other extreme of the pendulum's amplitude: If Danielewski's and Foer's novels were centrally concerned with the possibility and impossibility of fiction's representation of reality and truth, both generally and in their use of the fantastic mode specifically, Chabon's novel turns towards an exploration of the benefits and problems of escapism. In this, the novel not only commends the ability of fiction to offer an escape to the realm of the imaginary, but also points to the importance of a reconnection to reality. It thus stresses the interaction of both aspects of the fictive negotiations as defined by Iser, the imaginary and the real. While the celebration of the fictive in *Everything is Illuminated* tends to foreground the imaginary, *Kavalier & Clay*, for all its praise of escapism, eventually insists on the complementary importance of the determining function of the real as the basis for maturity and responsibility.

By bringing the novels into this order, my discussion thus suggests the possibility of reading them as successive steps in a reconstructive move beyond postmodernism, a progression that will further figure centrally in the reading of my last literary example, David Mitchell's novel *number9dream*. *House of Leaves* is doubtlessly still deeply entrenched in postmodernism, both formally and thematically, and is centrally concerned with many of its main philosophical and aesthetic quandaries. While full of postmodernist playfulness on the surface, *Everything is Illuminated* turns its back on postmodernism in its deliberately naïve belief in the power of love and fiction. Drawing extensively on aesthetic devices that have long been associated with postmodernism, Foer's novel never does so to the same anti-illusionist and subversive effect. *Kavalier & Clay*, then, largely leaves postmodernism's aesthetic strategies behind, turning instead to the conventions of the social historical

novel. Nevertheless, it remains informed by postmodernist insights. Postmodernism is not simply rejected or ignored but made productive for a reconsideration of the possibilities, functions and responsibilities of fiction. While *House of Leaves* engages with postmodernism very explicitly and centrally, in *Kavalier & Clay* such an engagement has receded to an underlying premise, a foundation on which the novel develops its own aesthetics.

Strikingly, the increasing distance to postmodernism that can be traced in the successive novels is accompanied by a change in their choice of fantastic genre. In *House of Leaves*, readers encounter a classical fantastic scenario of fear, uncertainty and struggle, closely associated with the early exponents of the mode in nineteenth-century gothic fiction. The supernatural is experienced as a threatening intrusion rupturing the surface of everyday reality. *Everything is Illuminated*, in contrast, recalls a somewhat more recent manifestation of the fantastic mode, the genre of magic realism. In the fantastic narrative strand of the novel, the supernatural elements are seamlessly integrated into the narrative reality, and accepted as natural by the characters without causing anxiety or fear. Finally, in the fantastic narrative strands of *Kavalier & Clay*, which turns to superhero narratives, the supernatural itself is the focus, its embedding within reality is secondary. This effectively amounts to an ever-stronger imbalance towards the marvellous stance in the forms of the fantastic modes employed by the novels. But this apparent shift of sympathy towards the marvellous at the same time comes with an increasingly clear demarcation of ontological boundaries. The precise relation to reality of the fantastic story at the heart of *House of Leaves* remains somewhat uncertain throughout the novel, and fantastic narration in *Everything is Illuminated* does arise from and refer to real circumstances. In contrast, *Kavalier & Clay* insistently reasserts genre boundaries, despite admitting freely to the fictionality of its own framing mimetic narrative strand. An increasing investment in genre distinctions, which strives not so much to (re-)establish ontological boundaries but rather insists on the basic difference between the two stances, marvellous and mimetic, while emphasising their equal and complementary validity, thus seems to be part and parcel of the move beyond postmodernism these novels effect.

In order to recapitulate and draw these aspects together, I finally turn to David Mitchell's novel *number9dream*, as a last case study. Because it includes several different kinds of inserted narratives and fantastic genres, the discussion of this novel allows me to effectively retrace the steps from the existential struggles with ontological uncertainty

in *House of Leaves*, via the quandaries of representation in *Everything is Illuminated*, to *Kavalier & Clay*'s concerns with escapism. At the same time, *number9dream* initially repeats the aforementioned trend towards an increasingly clearer differentiation between the two stances. However, just like this trend never quite leads to an unreservedly committed return to realism, not even in the case of *Kavalier & Clay*, *number9dream* eventually swings back into the fantastic mode in its last chapter. Once again, the fantastic mode is employed as a stand-in for the fictive itself, which the novel eventually invokes for its creative potential to form and transform both self and world.

But Mitchell's novel also brings an aspect to the fore that is implicitly evoked, not only in all of the novels, but also in the very trajectory of my argument throughout Part II: all of them present us, to various degrees, with *Bildungsroman* narratives.[15] In my concluding chapter, I turn my attention to the various *Bildungsroman* trajectories the novels describe and ask for their possible relevance for and connection to contemporary literary attempts to leave postmodernism behind. While such a revival of the *Bildungsroman* narrative is striking in itself in view of a widespread scepticism towards the genre in modernism and postmodernism, I will ask for the common characteristics of the contemporary evocations. Paying particular attention to the role of father figures in these texts, I argue that the decidedly conciliatory nature of the protagonists' struggle to come into their own reflects the relation between postmodernism and its reconstructive successor. Since the traditional *Bildungsroman* trajectory is a specifically male one, I will juxtapose this discussion to some observations on the reconstructive traits of three novels by female authors, Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000), A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* (2000) and Nicole Krauss' *The History of Love* (2005). Finally, I offer some concluding thoughts about possible connections of the perceived reconstructive aesthetic shift to a larger cultural change, to ask whether they might indeed herald the passing not only of postmodernism, but even of postmodernity.

Part I
Tracing Shifts

1
Post-post, Beyond and Back: Literature in the Wake of Postmodernism

In his 2008 novel *Man in the Dark*, Paul Auster has his narrator spend his sleepless nights imagining an alternative world in which the US is torn up by a savage civil war. In what has become an all too familiar postmodernist metaleptical short-circuiting of narrative levels, Owen Brick, the protagonist of this inset narrative, is sent on a mission to murder the narrator himself in order to put an end to the war for which the latter is in every sense of the word responsible, being, after all, the one who is dreaming it all up. After nearly half a century of postmodernist literary experiments and philosophical revisions, such metaleptic breaches of ontological boundaries may seem all too familiar and could easily strike one as just another tired narrative trick.

Obviously well aware of this, Auster has a surprise up his sleeve. After the inset narrative has been intermittently spun out over about two thirds of the novel, and readers might just about begin to expect Owen Brick to wander into the narrator's home in flesh and blood, he is suddenly killed quite unceremoniously, abruptly bringing the inset narrative to a close. The narrator dryly comments:

> Does it have to end that way? Yes, probably yes, although it wouldn't be difficult to think of a less brutal outcome. But what would be the point? [. . .] The only solution is to leave Brick behind me, make sure that he gets a decent burial, and then come up with another story. Something low to the ground this time, a counterweight to the fantastical machine I've just built. Giordano Bruno and the theory of infinite worlds. Provocative stuff, yes, but there are other stones to be unearthed as well. (118–19)

Brick's story ultimately fails as a remedy for the narrator's insomnia because it does not adequately address the emotional problems the narrator needs to come to terms with in his relation to himself and his family.

Brick's sudden and off-hand demise, I would claim, is nothing less than symbolic. Alongside his assassinated body, postmodernism's paradoxes are given their (more or less) decent burial. Increasingly, attention is turned to other issues, more down-to-earth stuff, the grit of war and loss, human belief and betrayal and the endless variations of inter-human relationships. Immediately after Brick has been so abruptly done away with, the narrator accordingly recalls three war stories he has been told by various acquaintances during a trip in Europe, all of them evoking testimonial accounts of ostensibly real events. At the same time, these three inset narratives insist on their nature *as* stories, accounts that are being told and retold, refracted through multiple narrators, exponents of oral history. In a very decided and marked way the novel thus turns away from postmodernist fantastical machines towards '[s]omething low to the ground,' which it finds in the mimetic stance of testimonial realism. It no longer indulges in the imaginative freedom of fiction's possible worlds, but reclaims its fictional world as coextensive with experiential reality. Nevertheless, it always remains aware of the constructed nature of its testimonial claims, emphasising at all times the mediating role of the storyteller. The decision to forego the ontological conundrums of Brick's metaleptical story and to turn to realism and testimony eventually enables the narrator to reconnect to his family and to address the pain, guilt and regret that haunt the relationships in his home.

While much more could be said about Auster's novel, I will restrict myself in this context to suggesting that the decisive *volte-face* in the novel's narrative development is, in many of its aspects, paradigmatic for a general tendency in contemporary literature's engagement with postmodernism. We are, it seems, moving beyond postmodernism, which might still be 'provocative stuff,' but is also understood to have its limitations. A considerable critical agreement maintains that recent literature has tired of postmodernist concerns and is starting to look elsewhere for its topics. Quite in keeping with the direction the narrator of *Man in the Dark* opts for, this 'elsewhere' frequently takes the form of a reinforced commitment to realism and to the responsibilities and difficulties of intersubjective relations and communications. Meanwhile, the novel's continuing engagement with postmodernist ideas and aesthetics, even while they may be eventually rejected or turned to

different ends, likewise emerges as symptomatic of a recent literary trend to explore possibilities and paths beyond postmodernism.

But is it even possible to move beyond postmodernism? Robert Rebein brings the multiple difficulties which beleaguer such a project to a point:

> what could possibly come 'after' postmodernism? Does not postmodernism itself connote a kind of finality, 'the end of things' – not least of which would be the end of innocence with regard to language and mimesis? Does not the term refer to a period of time we are still, demonstrably, in? And anyway, doesn't a denial of the dominion of postmodernism amount to a de facto admission of artistic and cultural conservatism? Are we not speaking here of a kind of *regression*, aesthetically speaking? (*Dirty Realists* 7; original emphasis)

Every attempt to think beyond postmodernism has to consider these questions. And indeed, many of the attempts to chart the landscape of literature after postmodernism might seem to imply a kind of regression, a conservatist counter-reaction to postmodernist subversion.

David Foster Wallace, both one of the earliest voices prophesying such a literary generation of anti-rebels, and an important literary influence on a whole generation of young writers, is well worth quoting at length here:

> The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how banal.' To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world

> of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. ("E Unibus" 82)

What Wallace envisions in this passage resonates in multiple ways with various attempts to understand recent literary reactions to postmodernism. Having reached the limits of irony and scepticism, there seems to be a general agreement that literature is struggling to recover a sense of commitment and sincerity. Such a struggle, as we will see, can indeed at times seem blatantly anachronistic, desperately futile, hopelessly naïve or embarrassingly optimistic.

An increasing number of scholars are currently attempting to make sense of what is happening in literature at the present moment, but so far little agreement on a new label or even on what the specific characteristics of an emergent literature after postmodernism might be can be found. In what follows, I will map some of these attempts in order to suggest a wider context of contemporary literary production within which the analyses of recent novels in the subsequent chapters have to be situated and understood. Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of the current discussion, which cannot yet profit from the perspective granted by temporal distance from the process it endeavours to describe, Wallace's prediction already hints at some common denominators beyond the individual forms and aspects the literary reaction to postmodernism can be seen to take: on the one hand, the conscious engagement with, but transformation of, postmodernist attitudes, as an act of impossible rebellion against revolution; on the other, a fiction that is no longer centrally concerned with unmasking, dissolving, subverting and unsettling, but sets out to gradually displace postmodernism's fantastic paranoia by attempts to reconstruct, (re-)connect, communicate and engage.

Return to realism?

In the attempt to describe and define a perceived shift beyond postmodernism, one of the most frequent foci is on what Rebein calls a 'revitalisation of realism' (*Dirty Realists* 7). Thomas Claviez joins this assessment in the introduction to the a special journal issue on 'Neorealism,' assembling discussions of work by Raymond Carver, Don DeLillo, Bret Easton Ellis, E. Annie Proulx, Marilynne Robinson and Jonathan Franzen. Claviez suggests that a 'change has occurred within the landscape of American literature – or so it seems. The fabulators of postmodernism are on the demise and about to be displaced by a literary mode and

generation that have become known as Neo-Realism and Neo-Realists respectively' (Claviez 5). The 'neo' implies a return to what has been done before and the rejection of postmodernist aesthetics would quite obviously follow from such a new textual politics. Mentioning a similar neo-realist tendency in British fiction and art, Alan Kirby, in fact, points out that the various movements he reviews (Dogme 95, New Puritans, Stuckists, cf. 18–27) mostly lack their own distinctive aesthetic profile. According to Kirby, the neo-realist rhetoric frequently owes its main force and coherence from a 'shared perception of the decline and fall of postmodernism' (44). Being essentially oppositional, many neo-realist positions eventually fail to suggest effective alternatives.

Rebein, however, takes pains to argue against such an exclusively reactionary logic. For one, he categorically rejects the idea that literature develops teleologically, reminding his readers of the continuity of realist literary production even during the heyday of postmodernist experimentation (cf. *Dirty Realists* 6).[1] Furthermore, he joins those critics who argue that the renewed realist trend in recent literature does not simply and naïvely return to pre-postmodernist innocence, but takes post-structural and postmodernist arguments into account:

> contemporary realist writers have *absorbed* postmodernism's most lasting contributions and gone on to forge a new realism that is more or less traditional in its handling of character, reportorial in its depiction of milieu and time, but is at the same time self-conscious about language and the limits of mimesis. (*Dirty Realists* 20; original emphasis)

Even while they return to a largely traditional style, these neo-realist texts acknowledge the contingency of the narrative act and thus frame their return to realism as a conscious choice in the plethora of possible language games (cf. also Burn 51).[2] As Toth explains, '[t]he defining feature of neo-realism [. . .] is thus its apparent evasion of the paradoxical idealism implied in the postmodern claim that a responsible narrative *must* overtly acknowledge the absolute contingency of all narrative acts' (119; original emphasis; cf. also Versluys, "Introduction"). The basis of mimesis in conventions, Rebein suggests, is freely acknowledged by neo-realist authors like Denis Johnson, William T. Vollmann or the Don DeLillo of *Underworld*:

> The question, however, becomes what we do with this knowledge. Do we back ourselves into a corner and insist, as so many of the postmodernists have, on a completely different set of conventions with

> their own peculiar limitations? Or do we simply accept the mimetic limitations of realism [. . .] *as obvious* and move on from there to build what Tom Wolfe insists will be a bigger, better realism? (*Dirty Realists* 19; original emphasis)

This is a realism of defiance that knows its truth claims to be contestable but nevertheless does not eschew them, fully aware of the conventions that guide them. Indeed, this realism knows that it relies on precisely those genre conventions in order to signal its attempt at sincere representation.

Instead of denying the insights into the constructions of language and meaning which postmodernist philosophy has offered, they are accepted as givens by the neo-realists who, according to Rebein, start from this premise to move beyond it. If all narrative acts are contingent, the choice of mimetic realism at the end of the day is just as valid as any anti-illusionist metafictional disruption: it's just a different kind of game to play. The focus in such recent literature, as McLaughlin puts it, is

> less on self-conscious wordplay and the violation of narrative conventions and more on representing the world we all more or less share. Yet in presenting that world, this new fiction nevertheless has to show that it's a world that we know through language and layers of representation; language, narrative, and the processes of representation are the only means we have to experience and know the world, ourselves, and our possibilities for being human. ("Post-Postmodern Discontent" 67)

If there is really nothing beyond the text, text itself presents itself as perhaps the most adequate way to communicate about our world.

Accordingly, where neo-realist texts use such typically postmodernist devices as metafictional comments and explicit textual self-consciousness, they are not primarily a means to disrupt aesthetic illusion but mainly serve for further authentication of the authorial voice. Arguing along these lines, specifically in relation to the fiction of William T. Vollmann, Rebein explains that '[i]nstead of entering the work to declare it is a trick, [Vollmann] stands inside it as a witness – vouching for its authenticity' (*Dirty Realists* 58). Footnotes, metafictional comments and authorial involvement are not used to undermine fiction's truth claims, but rather to acknowledge them as precisely that: as claims which are both conscious and contentious.

This is not a simple return to the extradiegetic authorial comment Victorian realists were fond of. While the Victorian narrator typically assumes an omniscient, controlling and judging (as well as predominantly male) confidence, neo-realism knows its perspective to be limited and contingent, circumscribed by the constraints of the subject. But the authenticity and sincerity of the narrative voice is asserted in the act of exposing its construction. However, this kind of authenticity does not return to modernist desires for universal experiences; nor does it elevate a subjective perspective to ultimate truth. Rather, it is predicated on its own individual contingency. Neo-realism, as Winfried Fluck suggests, no longer pivots on the epiphanic moment in a search for deep knowledge and 'existential truths but [on] accidental occurrences in a dehierachized sequence of daily events' (72). Instead of investing in the confident authority of the detached omniscient narrator of Victorian realism, neo-realist truth claims are fragmented ones of an entrenched, involved and subjective sincerity of first-hand experience. While largely eschewing objective or metaphysical truth claims (and thus, according to Rebein, taking postmodernism into account) neo-realists do return to mimetic assertions and the communicative value of narrative which is, eventually, based on a trust in the authenticity of the speaker's voice.

Accordingly, Rebein specifically celebrates the work of authors like Dorothy Allison and James Welch, who give credence to their fictions by their own embeddedness in the milieu they describe, be it in form of regionalism, poor 'white trash' realism dealing with the life of underprivileged classes, prison narratives or tribalism. It appears that what comes beyond postmodernism turns towards a revival of authenticity, an authenticity that is often anchored in the subject of the author. If postmodernism was heralded by Roland Barthes' proclamation of the death of the author, the 'bigger, better realism' which Rebein evokes comes along with a 'renewed importance of the concept of place, and the expansion of our traditional ideas of authorship to include those who in the past would have appeared in our literature only as characters, and stereotypes at that' (*Dirty Realists* 7). The authorial subject is here reinstated – not as an interpretative authority controlling the meaning of the text but as a guarantor for the sincerity of the act of communication.[3]

Such a replacement of capitalised Truth with individualised authenticity is quite paradoxically in keeping with postmodernism's agenda of fragmentation and the privileging of *petit récits* that Jean-François Lyotard famously championed. At the same time, the attempt is to

recover a confidence in the ultimate possibility of meaningful intersubjective communication based on a notion of referentiality that has been ostracised by postmodernist thought. What Zadie Smith criticises as the 'lyrical Realism' of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* is a perfect illustration of this trick of the neo-realist novel 'to have its metaphysical cake and eat it, too.' The final scene of this authenticity-obsessed novel establishes the characteristic communal construction of a world in spite of postmodernist ironic awareness as the protagonist, reunited with his family after extended separation, rises to the top of the London Eye ferris wheel. In face of the gradual breakdown of reference as the city seen from above turns into an unrecognisable and unnavigable labyrinth, it is the loving other that provides support:

> I join [my wife] just as we reach the very top of our celestial circuit and for this reason I have no need to do anything more than put an arm round her shoulder. A self-evident and prefabricated symbolism attaches itself to this slow climb to the zenith, and we are not so foolishly ironic, or confident, as to miss the opportunity to glimpse significantly into the eyes of the other and share the thought that occurs to all at this summit, which is, of course, that they have made it thus far, to a point where they can see horizons previously unseen, and the old earth reveals itself newly. (246)

Rather than a return to realist aesthetics, I would suggest it is just such a profession of faith in the ultimate possibility of communication, established in intersubjective relations and based on a shared awareness of its own conventions and limitations, that seems to inform recent literature more generally and that can be seen as a decisive move beyond postmodernist disillusion. The return to realist aesthetics, the emphasis on place, origins and marginal voices that Rebein describes, can thus be understood as one among several possible responses to postmodernism among others, one possible aesthetic path to take in the endeavour to recover meaningful communicative contact.[4]

Consequently, not everyone shares Rebein's neo-realist bias. In discussing the emergent shift, other scholars have turned their focus to authors who continue to largely eschew the realist tradition. However, even while the work of these more experimental writers remains stylistically closely related to postmodernism, recent studies frequently point out that, similarly to the neo-realists, they tend to privilege authenticity and are often concerned with a return to some sort of 'real,' in a paradoxical endeavour for 'something like "contingent referentiality"'

(Stierstorfer 10). Josh Toth's *The Passing of Postmodernism* is perhaps exemplary for the way in which Rebein's neo-realist bias is being adjusted and broadened in the current critical debate:

> While many critics have associated the end of postmodernism with the growing dominance of neo(or, dirty)-realism, [. . .] the emergent forms of narrative are marked by an overall rejection of past aesthetic imperatives. [. . .] Rather than just new 'realisms,' then, what we see – in the work of writers and/or directors like [Mark] Leyner, [Toni] Morrison, [Ian] Banks, Richard Powers, David Foster Wallace, Lorrie Moore, Danielewski, [David] Lynch, Sophia Coppola, Wes Anderson, Paul Thomas Anderson, Noah Baumbach, Jared Hess, Maxine Hong Kingston, Nicholson Baker, and Dave Eggers – are narrative forms that renew the realist faith in mimesis while simultaneously deferring and frustrating that faith via the irony and stylistics of a now past, or *passed*, postmodernism. (132; original emphasis)

Aside from being interesting for its list of representative names, which reappear repeatedly in similar discussions, this passage agrees with the diagnosis that the decisive counter-move against postmodernism manifests as a return to a kind of realism. The concept of realism proposed here, however, is much broader than the one neo-realists are advocating.

Instead of understanding the move away from postmodernism as a radical break or rejection, Toth suggests that it is more adequately described as a perceptible shift in emphasis. As he argues exemplarily in the context of Mark Leyner's markedly playful and anti-illusionist novel *The Tetherballs of Bougainville,* 'Leyner seemingly embraces the impossibility of mimesis as a portrayable reality in itself, as a way of returning to a type of realist mode of representation' (79). Thus, instead of proclaiming a return to traditional realist aesthetics, as Rebein and other advocates of neo-realism have done (most polemically neo-realist authors like Tom Wolfe and Jonathan Franzen themselves; see also Olsen "The Next Generation"; Leypoldt), this broader perspective attempts to describe the shift as a reconfiguration of what 'realism' could mean in relation to a continuation and gradual transformation of postmodernism (cf. Toth 78).

While neo-realism implies a return to realist aesthetics, referentiality remains more fundamentally problematic for a generation of writers who are too steeped in postmodernist scepticism to find satisfaction in the kind of revaluation of origins and place that Rebein identifies as a

basis of neo-realism.[5] Toth thus argues that the emergent literature (in contradistinction to 'new realism' Toth refers to this literature rather playfully as 'renewalism') rethinks what 'realism' could mean in terms of an impossible possibility of faith in a referentiality we know to be illusory. It rejects postmodernism not so much in the latter's insights but in the postmodernist insistence that such faith should be (or even can be) avoided:

> While the postmodern aesthetic can be defined by a need to expose the impossibility of the mimetic text [. . .] the shift away from postmodern metafiction is marked by a pronounced realization that faith in, or a gamble on, the possibility of absolute certainty must necessarily haunt any claim or narrative act, even the claim that such faith is a dangerous ideological illusion. (106)

Toth thus reiterates, in slightly different words, the points that have been made by McLaughlin, Rebein and others: the emergent fiction does not radically turn from postmodernism but writes through and beyond it – less avant-garde and rebels than diplomats and negotiators. In the same spirit, Christopher Donovan has spoken of a 'movement towards postmodern reconciliation' (176), the attempt in recent literature to reconcile postmodernist irony with the struggle for some form of social commitment. Renewalist rejection of postmodernism, according to Toth, is thus grounded in its acknowledgement of postmodernism's impossibility to get rid of the spectre of the Habermasian unfinished project of modernity that continued to haunt it. Drawing on Derrida in providing a 'spectrology' of both postmodernism and beyond, Toth argues throughout his study that while postmodernism aimed to expose the impossibility of the modernist project, renewalism

> works to embrace both the possibility *and* the impossibility of the specter. Renewalism is, I am arguing, defined by an epistemological willingness – or, we might begin to say at this point, *an imperative* – to, as a later Derrida would have it, "respect the spectre." (118; original emphasis).

In other words, while the work of the younger generation draws on postmodernist playfulness and artificiality, it does so in 'an appeal to the individual, an ethical imperative even, to preserve their unique and genuine, authentic, understanding of the greater frame of reference, in which their existence is played out' (Funk, "Found Objects" 58).

While Toth's study provides a useful approach to contemporary literary production which is much broader in scope than perspectives that exclusively foreground neo-realism, his description of the specifics of such new aesthetics risks to remain rather vague, since he attempts to detach renewalism from structural, stylistic and thematic concerns and to focus primarily on what presents itself as a more general textual ethics – respecting the spectre or, as he puts it elsewhere, 'a renewalist ethics of indecision' (106). Though the complexity of Toth's analysis and his consideration of specific examples does much to belie such a simplistic summary, Toth's work runs the danger of falling into tautology insofar as the main common characteristic of renewalism eventually seems to be that it is no longer dominantly postmodernist. This is all the more problematic, because Toth's study cannot avoid proposing a highly restrictive view of postmodernism. While to a certain extent this is probably inevitable for any attempt to describe a literature that is no longer postmodernist (my own included), Toth's argument depends perhaps a little too heavily on casting postmodernism as a solipsistic enterprise whose only logical and consequent conclusion would have been the development of an exclusively private discourse that ultimately precludes communication, 'a final act of narrative suicide' (118).

Whereas Toth offers little clarification of renewalist aesthetics beyond the most general terms, Nicoline Timmer does not hesitate to provide a detailed list of typical features of what she calls 'the post-postmodern syndrome' in literature in her study *Do You Feel it Too*?. Focusing specifically on what she perceives to be a new conception of the self, she locates the main driving force behind the aesthetic shift in a reaction to the dissatisfaction with a solipsistic postmodernist subjectivity (cf. 13). Accordingly, she centres her readings of Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* on the various narratives of the self these texts spin out. These are, so she claims, 'structured not around a centered and stable self-concept, but are constructed, primarily, around *feelings* which, once shared, can lay the foundation, possibly, for beginning to make sense of "what it means to be me"' (46). This new self is predicated on communication and connection, precisely because it is fragmented. Since it is without foundation, the self can only precariously manifest itself in negotiation, as a communal or at least reciprocal act which 'forces (if only by an awkward leap of faith) into being a "you and me," a "we" – a structure activated only by a form of responsiveness' (Timmer 46).

Timmer's analysis has its focus on the specifics of changing identity formation and a new sense of the self, but she is bold enough to look

beyond this thematic restriction. The list of 'post-postmodern' characteristics which she attaches to her study as an appendix, though perhaps both too detailed and too eclectic to provide more than a rough map, offers an intriguing guide to an exploration of the newly emergent literary geography and contributes some valuable insight into the central concerns of this generation of writers. If my discussion of Toth's work has allowed me to revisit and revaluate the widely held claim of a recent return to realism as it was brought forth by Rebein and others, Timmer's list will help me to further rethink the new mood in other terms than as a shift along the realism/anti-realism divide. Instead of reviewing her list in detail, however, I will extract those points from it that appear to me to be the most central and generally applicable and will subsequently attempt to trace their resonance in the work of other scholars in the field.

For the most part, Timmer's categories can be subsumed under three central aspects arising in direct correlation with each other. To these I add a fourth which emerges as an unacknowledged subtext both from Timmer's list and from the wider discussion:

1. *Return to the real*: In agreement with what has been established above, Timmer argues that 'in the post-postmodern novel new "shared frameworks of reality" are under construction' (361). For Timmer, as for Toth, such a return to the real does not necessarily imply a return to stylistic realism. Indeed, the reconnection to the real is often based on the very premises on which postmodernism has founded its anti-realist critique.
2. *Stylistic continuity*: Timmer largely agrees with Toth in situating the significant change not primarily in style but rather in a certain textual stance, or politics. The post-postmodernist novel often continues to use postmodernist techniques, but 'they have simply come to function as "realistic" devices' or even become 'critically targeted as hindering the narrator to get to the "realer, more sentimental parts"' (360). She also points out that irony, though still present, has ceased to be the dominant mode.
3. *Communicative bonding*: While the first two points have already been raised in my discussion of Toth's description of renewalism, this last point comes strongly to the foreground in Timmer's study. More than half of the characteristics Timmer lists could be summarised under this heading, as she repeatedly returns to the novels' attempt at 'sharing,' at empathy and the communication of feeling, their direct engagements of the reader and their expression of what she

calls 'a structural need for a we' (359). Moreover, I would argue that her strong emphasis on feeling (which is, decisively, an emphasis on *shared* feeling, on the question 'Do you feel it, *too*?') can also be subsumed under this point, as affect becomes a central means to ensure the effectiveness of communication. This focus on communicative bonding goes hand in hand with deliberate considerations and explorations of the premises, means and effects of fiction as communication and thus with a shifting focus on the pragmatic and ethical aspects of fictional narration (as opposed to postmodernism's ontological and ideological concerns).

4. *Embarrassed optimism/strategic naïveté*: Timmer's marked propensity to put all her references to reality or the real in quotation marks speaks eloquently of the tentativeness and even embarrassment that conditions any use of such terms after postmodernism. An attitude of a wilful 'in spite of' acutely aware of its own paradox pervades recent literature. In a choice of words that attests both to the novels' willingness to risk ridicule (as Wallace had prophesied) and her own latent embarrassment, Timmer argues that 'a "what if" mentality oozes from the post-postmodern novel, a "willingness to belief" (for example in the form of a strategic naïveté, a suspension of disbelief, and taking a leap of faith)' (359). This strategic naïveté, this embarrassed optimism, seems to haunt much of the recent reassertions of realism (or, empathy, sincerity and authenticity, for that matter).

These four aspects reappear again and again in the various contributions to the discussion about the new mood. Wolfgang Funk, for example, proposes 'a new aesthetic attitude in art and the media, which through the employment of metareferential elements tries to achieve a higher level of truthfulness/authenticity in the medial encounter' ("Quest" 134). Focusing his attention on the use of (typically postmodernist) techniques of disrupting aesthetic illusion by metafiction, metalepsis and fragmentation in a concerted attempt to recover authenticity, he stresses that this new kind of truthfulness can only emerge through a 'communalisation of the narrative act' in an authorial 'gesture of humility, which results in a suspension of interpretative authority and an exhortation to the readers to accept or at least judge for themselves the truthfulness of the experience communicated' ("Quest" 136). Funk's prime example, which also features prominently in Timmer's discussion, is Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, a work that is declaredly 'knowing about [its] self-conscious self-referentiality' (*HWSG* xxx), and a 'self-flagellating mess' (*HWSG* xi). This fictionalised

memoir declares its double premise even in its epigraph: 'First of all: / I am tired. / I am true of heart! / And also: / You are tired. / You are true of heart!'. Tired of aesthetics that ridicule attempts at sincerity, the narrative voice offers himself as a sacrifice to the reader in a desperate attempt to commune and communicate:

> Oh but I do this for you. Don't you see I do this for you? [. . .] There is nowhere I stop and you begin. [. . .] What the fuck does it take to show you motherfuckers, what does it fucking take what do you want how much do you want because I am willing and I'll stand before you and I'll raise my arms and give you my chest and throat and wait. (*HWSG* 435–7)

The establishment of a communicative bonding that is predicated on a simultaneous self-exposure and self-depreciation thus becomes the premise for a tentative trust in a new kind of referential investment.

David Foster Wallace's short story "Octet," which is frequently evoked in this context, offers an even more paradigmatic and highly condensed exemplification of the recent aesthetic shift. The formally quite experimental story meticulously exposes and reflects its own creative process in a desperate attempt to communicate a vague feeling of interconnectedness to the reader, well aware that it dangerously flirts with metafiction which 'might come off lame and tired and facile, and also runs the risk of compromising the queer *urgency* about whatever it is you feel you want the pieces to interrogate in whoever's reading them' (146–7; original emphasis). Equally conscious of 'sound[ing] pious and melodramatic' (156) and of the difficulty involved in 'actually us[ing] terms like *be with* and *relationship*, and use them *sincerely*' (155; original emphasis), all its endeavours revolve around questions of responsibility towards and for another and the impossible necessity to communicate. In a 'desperate last-ditch salvage operation' (156) the story, ultimately, consigns itself to the reader's judgement without reservations.

While Funk calls such manoeuvers an 'aesthetics of authenticity' ("Quest" 134) or an 'aesthetics of reconstruction' ("Found Objects" 58), Adam Kelly suggests 'New Sincerity' as an adequate term to express very similar concerns. Indeed, Kelly's recurrence on Lionel Trilling's differentiation between authenticity and sincerity illustrates very well the decisive shift that is at stake here. While authenticity 'conceives truth as something inward personal and hidden, the goal primarily of self-expression rather than other-directed communication,' as Kelly glosses Trilling, sincerity 'places emphasis on intersubjective truth and

communication with others' ("New Sincerity" 132). Concurring thus with Timmer's diagnosis of a rejection of solipsism, Kelly likewise perceives communication and a re-established connection to the other to be of central importance. He argues that a number of contemporary writers 'seek to rehabilitate concepts such as love, communication, and responsibility by renewing the possibility of literature as an open and oscillating transaction between writer and reader' ("Moments" 328), while also noting, with respect to the fiction of David Foster Wallace, a pervasive 'lack of complacency' that goes along with a constant 'conscious fear that humility can shade into self-regard at any moment' ("New Sincerity" 144n10).

Ihab Hassan similarly stresses the importance of connection and communication in a spirited manifesto published in 2003, in which he advocates what he calls a 'fiduciary realism' ("Aesthetic of Trust" 9). Decidedly (and self-consciously) utopian, Hassan's essay remains quite vague on the actual parameters of the new aesthetic he calls for (he does not name a single contemporary text as an example) but envisions it as 'a realism that redefines the relation between subject and object, self and other, in terms of profound trust' ("Aesthetic of Trust" 10). In remarkable proximity to Timmer's general emphasis on the renewed importance of feeling, he goes on to ask 'are we not close here to something deeper than empathy, something akin to love? Are we not broaching, beyond realism, Reality?' ("Aesthetic of Trust" 10). In what is beginning to look like a familiar combination of a profession of faith and discomfort, he feels immediately compelled to alleviate his own sense of embarrassment at the brandishing of such words as 'trust,' 'truth,' 'spirit,' 'faith' and 'reality' by cracking a joke: 'let me conclude now before I vanish into Buddhist nirvana before your eyes' ("Aesthetic of Trust" 10).

Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's ongoing concerted effort to establish their term 'metamodernism' in the critical debate clearly points into a similar direction when they assert that metamodernism 'oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.' While their argument suffers somewhat from a propensity for simplification and pompous rhetoric, their work offers interesting thoughts on the perceptibility of the shift in aesthetics beyond the field of literature, where they see postmodernist deconstruction, ambiguity and apathy giving way to metamodernist desire which manifests in unfulfillable oscillations (see Martin Eve for a critical discussion of the usefulness of their approach in a literary context).

A similarly broad cultural perspective is offered by Jeffrey T. Nealon, who emphasises the continuity of postmodernist strategies by prefering to speak of an intensification rather than an end of postmodernism. In his comments on literature, Nealon criticises in particular the 'weak or postmodern power of the false' which celebrates literature as inherently subversive, and contrasts it to a post-postmodern '"other other" power of the false, the power not to interrupt existing truths, but to create objects or posit different ways of separating out the true and the false.' Nealon calls these 'the affirmative powers of the false, rather than the primarily negative ones' (163). While this seems to be largely in tune with the other assessments of recent aesthetic developments I have discussed so far, the few literary examples Nealon offers serve to show that he draws strikingly different conclusions from these observations. In keeping with his diagnosis of an intensification of postmodernism, the poems by Bruce Andrews and Kenneth Goldsmith which he mentions as typically post-postmodernist refuse to communicate any meaning at all. They do not aim at 'meaning or edification,' or at 'pleasure [. . .], but [at] the austere task of relentless provocation' (164).

I, for my part, fail to see in how far such provocation and refusal of meaning is affirmative in the sense of Nealon's own description of the ' post-postmodern "strong" power of the false' (161). I would rather be tempted to appropriate Nealon's description of this affirmative power of literature and read it in the light of a strikingly widespread agreement between the various approaches I have discussed: in spite of their heterogeneity, they converge in proposing a commitment to a re-established communicative bond which serves recent texts as a means to regain a kind of realism (though one that is markedly different from neo-realism). I would further add that it is a tentative but pervasive *optimism* concerning the impossible possibility of communication that ultimately emerges as the essential qualitative difference of the emerging literary trend. Though not denying the importance of the perceived shift towards a new kind of realism, I propose that it is first and foremost this belief in the communicative potential of fiction which marks the distance between the emergent literature and the kind of widespread cultural pessimism that Jeremy Green has described as the typical background for late postmodernism, with its pervasive despair over literature's loss of cultural relevance. In contradistinction to late postmodernism, which, as Green points out, is haunted by the figure of the isolated author and the lonely eccentric reader in a world that is dominated by other media (cf. 45–50), a recent generation of authors reinstates the imaginative play of fiction as a means of intersubjective

communication, a possibility for a meaningful connection in an isolating world.[6] Even Toth pays his dues to the importance of a re-established communicative bond in renewalist fiction, albeit more indirectly than the others, by arguing that 'the defining characteristic of these emergent narrative forms is [. . .] their insistence on the possibility of what they paradoxically continue to expose as impossible: meaning, truth, mimesis, telos, communal understanding, and communication' (103). After all, the possibility of the impossible recovery of meaning, truth and mimesis is predicated precisely on the ability to communicate this impossibility. What renewalism offers then, according to Toth, is 'the possibility of *shared* recognition, even if what we *recognize* is the impossibility of recognition' (79; first emphasis mine).

According to Raoul Eshelman such an investment in the possibility of communication should be understood as a return to what he calls a monist semiology. Against the postmodernist split concept of the sign, which in practice leads to an 'inescapable state of undecidability regarding the truth status' of a work in an 'endless regress of referral that has no particular fix point, goal, or center' (*Performatism* 1), monism proposes a transcendent (or, in Eshelman's terms, 'ostensive') sign that is not primarily understood in its relation to its referent but as 'a name referring first and foremost back to its own successful performance' (*Performatism* 6). Rephrasing Eshelman slightly, one could say that on account of this '*performative tautology*' (ibid; original emphasis), referentiality is no longer the privileged linguistic function but is being displaced by the successful connection established by the communicative act itself. In Eshelman's opinion such a shift towards monism marks the recent aesthetic practise which he calls 'performatism.'

While I share Eshelman's emphasis on such a reinstatement of the pragmatic value of the sign beyond referentiality, his account fails to convince in the further consequences he draws from such a shift and in his endeavour to cast the difference between performatism and postmodernism in terms of exclusionary binary oppositions. Performatism, according to him, tends 'towards strategies emphasizing unity, identification, closure, hierarchy, and theist or authorial modes of narration' (*Performatism* xii) and displaces postmodernist dualist signs by a monist semiology. Furthermore, in a very peculiar recourse to gender binaries and religious vocabulary, he contrasts postmodernist deism, whose 'basic plot structure is one of tracking signs in their feminine formlessness,' with performatist theism's main narrative of 'imitating a transcendent father figure' (*Performatism* 13). Beyond the use of highly problematic and debatable analogies, the performatist

categories of monism and theism on which Eshelman insists imply a more radical change than the continuing relevance of postmodernist premises in recent literature, in my opinion, seems to warrant. Even though he concedes that '[t]he performatist turn in literature has been gradual and unmarked by spectacular quarrels, manifestoes, or stylistic experimentation' (*Performatism* 39), Eshelman leaves no doubt that he considers this change to be 'epochal' (*Performatism* 31).[7] As Alan Kirby has already pointed out, Eshelman's claims therefore depend heavily on a description of postmodernism as a monolithic cultural movement that has entirely dominated cultural discourse (cf. Kirby 39–41). He overlooks that referentiality and the split sign remain a problem for the new generation. Instead of categorically rejecting postmodernism, they attempt to find ways to address this problem by means of emphasising the communicative and pragmatic functions of language. Nevertheless, this endeavour to communicate is always conditioned by the impossibility of reference. Thus I do not follow Eshelman's further characterisation of performatism or his emphasis on theism and reinstatement of hierarchical authority. Quite the contrary, the re-establishment of a communicative bond which I would like to stress here is based not on authority but on authorial surrender, as could be seen with regard to Egger and Wallace's texts mentioned above. Such surrender often goes hand in hand with a sense of authorial humility and self-depreciation, a wilful optimistic naïveté that for the most part comes along with a self-conscious sense of embarrassment.

One aspect of Eshelman's account however, is of particular interest in the context of this study: his discussion of what he calls performatist 'double framing.' In what, according to Eshelman, amounts to 'a new, radical empowerment of the frame,' the relation between frame, content and context becomes the ground for the negotiation of a new relation to the sign (*Performatism* 2):

> On the one hand, you're practically forced to identify with something implausible or unbelievable within the frame – to *believe* in spite of yourself – but on the other, you still *feel* the coercive force causing this identification to take place, and intellectually you remain aware of the particularity of the argument at hand. Metaphysical skepticism and irony aren't eliminated but are held in check by the frame. (*Performatism* 2; original emphasis)

With its emphasis on the importance of belief, affect and empathy, this passage moves beyond attempts to reconnect the aesthetic shift to a

return to realism and intriguingly hints at the fantastic, the implausible and unbelievable that we are asked to accept. Readers, so Eshelman avers, are not only asked to suspend disbelief but, indeed, to *believe*. According to Eshelman, then, this double framing in performatism allows for a 'forced, artificial unification of a work' (*Performatism* 3) as the outer frame points readers back towards the contents of the inner narrative, to what Eshelman, drawing on Eric Gans, calls the 'originary scene' – understood as an act of spontaneous and effective communication (cf. *Performatism* 4) – and vice versa. Thus, '[t]he act of narrating itself becomes a circular, enclosed act of belief that cannot be made the object of metaphysical critique or deconstruction without destroying the substance of the work itself' (*Performatism* 19). This act of belief depends on a mutual exposal of frame and framed, which 'reinforces the set-apartness or givenness of the work itself and coercively establishes its status as *aesthetic*' (*Performatism* 37).

In other words, what Eshelman calls double framing amounts to a proclamation of the special ontological and pragmatic status of the aesthetic object. It explicitly draws attention to its framing by introducing another diegetic level that exposes its own rhetoric. What seems to be rather banal – the assertion that fiction is quite simply no more than fiction – becomes perhaps less so in the context of literature's time-honoured attempts to approximate reality on the one hand and postmodernist commonplaces about the textuality and fictionality of reality on the other. Both of these have attempted, as it were from opposite directions, to break down the boundary between fiction and reality. If recent literature puts renewed emphasis on the frame, this, in contrast, reinstates the difference between fiction and reality and also frames our modes of reception.

This insistence on the importance of frames as a means to structure and establish a communicative agreement is central to a perspective that attempts to think about the recent shift in literary aesthetics in different terms than that of a return to realism. While Eshelman's concept of double framing refers more generally to a necessary doubleness of the frame inherent in every narrative act, the doubling or multiplying of frames is both explicit and central in the novels this study focuses on, as all of them involve multiple narrative levels. In contradistinction to the revival of realism which has so frequently been considered to be central to the recent aesthetic trend, my literary examples deliberately draw on the fantastic mode in order to highlight the functions and pragmatics of the fictive as an act of communicative connection. I argue that such a re-empowerment of the frame allows not only for a reinvestment in the possibility of effective communication based on an exposure and

exploitation of narrative and generic premises, but also interrogates the means, potentials and limits of the fictive as such.

Centring on communication

Proceeding from the common assertion of a recent return to realism, I thus propose a perspective that foregrounds an increasing investment in fiction as a communicative bond beyond the dictates of referentiality. While a recovered commitment to some sort of self-proclaimed mimetic referentiality can be seen to prevail in my literary case studies, I would nevertheless like to suggest that a perspective which attempts to understand the new development by foregrounding the renegotiation of the communicative bond between author/narrator and reader might ultimately prove to be more profitable.

This perspective has several advantages. While it does not contradict claims for a revival of realism, it distances itself from potentially endless discussions about the possibility or impossibility of referentiality and may help to avoid the terminological confusion surrounding the term 'realism.' A focus on communication further offers a way out of the impasse of a juxtaposition of realism and experimentalism which has become untenable, as an increasing number of writers 'collapse both approaches together so that realism and estrangement become the same thing,' as Phil Redpath suggests (48; cf. also Boxall 216; Bradford 78; Gąsiorek 179–83). This makes it possible to think the shift in recent literature in other terms than as a regression (which is almost inevitably implied in an emphasis on realism). Indeed, as a critical perspective it echoes the changed preoccupations to be perceived in the fiction under discussion itself by no longer privileging ontological and epistemological questions (that is, by no longer continually interrogating the text's relation to reality), but rather ethical and pragmatic ones concerned with the motives, effects and conditions of fictive communication. This is not to say that referentiality and mimetic truth claims altogether cease to be of importance. Rather, mimetic truth claims are revived as one among many possible communicative functions, and their very possibility is perceived to be inextricably implicated in the genre conventions in which they are inscribed and on which they depend for successful communication. Mimetic referentiality is thus evoked as an effect of genre, as a mimetic stance is juxtaposed with fantastic or marvellous genres in a larger consideration of the nature of fictionality itself, which no longer privileges the mimetic abilities of the fictive but broadens its inquiry into other functions of fictionality.

This notable interest in communicative practices and responsibilities and in intersubjective connections could also be seen to respond to the increasing importance of communication and information in today's world. Indeed, the drastic transformation that contemporary societies have seen due to innovations in information and communication technology is doubtlessly one of the central reasons why the need to rethink the usefulness of postmodernism (both as an aesthetic programme and as a descriptive term) arises in the first place. Few scholars engaging with the question of twenty-first-century literature fail to point to the new realities technology has created in the course of the last 20 years to support their intuition that after the global conquest by the internet we cannot possibly still be the same postmoderns (or postmodernists) as before.[8] Contributions that focus on the impact of the media revolution thus complement those recurrent declarations of a return to realism that reappear time and again in assessments of a literary scene beyond postmodernism. They provide a further, connected but decidedly different perspective which situates its arguments outside of a realism/anti-realism debate.

To date one of the most encompassing engagements with the cultural consequences of this change is Alan Kirby's book-length study *Digimodernism*. Stressing the increasing possibilities technological advance opens for readers or viewers to directly intervene in textual production, Kirby argues that 'digimodernism has decisively displaced postmodernism to establish itself as the twenty-first century's new cultural paradigm' (1). Offering some very provocative thoughts on the effects of the new media on contemporary culture, Kirby effectively brings late postmodernism's literary pessimism to a head, suggesting that 'it is almost possible to argue that digimodernist literature does not exist' (218). Nor is this judgement very surprising considering that his interpretation of contemporary culture is very much predicated on the technological innovations the new media offer.[9]

While Kirby's analysis is often intriguing, I am disinclined to submit to his more general cultural pessimism. I would not bury the novel quite yet, and indeed much of my argument here will point to what seems to me to be a perceivable reinvigoration in the belief of the power of fiction. Still, his discussion of the digimodernist text strikingly resonates with and supplements the arguments made about recent literature I have outlined in these pages (though Kirby's understanding of text is a very broad one and a large number of his examples are taken from the visual media). Although many of the characteristics of digimodernism which Kirby lists are dependent on the (frequently still rather theoretical) possibilities of the new media – Kirby speaks of the onwardness, haphazardness,

multiple anonymous authorship and evanescence of a textual practice that no longer provides finished products but continually emerges and disappears – the turn towards the communicative link with the reader and the cession of authority by the author, which appear as recurrent themes in analyses of contemporary literature, find an intriguing parallel here.

Thus Funk, for example, who advocates an empowerment of the position of the reader as an active counterpart in an aesthetic of authenticity, holds that this trend is largely due to innovations in media technology (cf. "Seltsame Schleifen" 240). Like Kirby, Funk assumes that the increasing possibilities for interaction and cooperation offered by Web 2.0 potentially blur the boundaries between author and reader/audience. In contradistinction to Funk, who maintains that a similar blurring occurs in the reinforced investment in author/reader communication in the work of Dave Eggers, I would argue that such vigorous interest in the reading process as a communicative exchange indicates not so much a dissolution of traditional roles but, on the contrary, a renewed awareness of their structural importance as a basis for the specificity of literary communication. It seems to me that the distinction is not undermined or negated but self-consciously re-established as valuable, and that such literary practice stands thus in decided and possibly even programmatic opposition to the non-committal and anonymous communicative interactions of Web 2.0.

Kirby's analysis becomes especially pertinent for the context of this study where he turns from digimodernism's form towards what he perceives to be its qualitative traits: infantilism, earnestness, endlessness and apparent reality. Here, the recurrence of themes that inform the current debate about a literary aesthetic after postmodernism immediately becomes apparent, even though Kirby's different vantage point offers strikingly divergent evaluations. In a sort of distorted echo of the widespread return to realism that was repeatedly invoked and advocated above, Kirby diagnoses an encompassing rise of the 'apparently real' (2; his primary examples are forms of reality TV and Web 2.0 applications like Wikipedia) which 'comes without self-consciousness, without irony or self-interrogation, and without signalling itself to the reader or viewer' (140). Neo-realist practises in literature are, of course, rarely as naïve as that. But the point here is not that the apparently real inevitably is so only *apparently*, and is therefore a disingenuous illusion or a lie, but that it is 'the outcome of a silent negotiation between viewer and screen: we know it's not *totally* genuine, but if it utterly seems to be, then we will take it as such' (141; original emphasis). In its deliberate eschewal of postmodernist scepticism, the apparently real might thus seem less sophisticated than its literary cousin – as Kirby puts it, 'for

anyone used to the refinement of postmodernism, the apparently real may seem intolerably "stupid"' (140) – but on a closer look, it is not so much simple-minded as rather very open about what it is and what it does. In effect, it does not simply re-establish positivist faith in representation but rather reinforces the generic rules governing its communication. It presents itself as real; it openly displays its mimetic stance and pretences and therefore demands readers/viewers who are willing to accept it on this premise. In this, it comes very close indeed to the practise of the neo-realists and to the reinvestment in communicative processes within the recent aesthetic shift more generally.

Similarly, the qualities of infantilism and earnestness recall the strategic naïveté and sincerity that feature repeatedly in discussions of contemporary literature. Once again, however, the correlation is not straightforward. Kirby argues in a familiar manner that postmodernist irony is increasingly replaced by earnestness, but explicitly juxtaposes the latter to sincerity. While sincerity, according to him, depends on the active choice of an individual, that is, on the conscious endeavour to establish a sincere communicative bond, earnestness is 'a compulsive mode, involuntarily swamping its speaker' (151). Earnestness is in direct communion with the infantilism Kirby diagnoses for our times, that is, the extension of a childish conception of the world and immature behaviour into adult life. Kirby sees the evidence for these two tendencies in the popularity of children's stories (*Harry Potter*, *Narnia*, *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, superheroes . . .), especially on the Hollywood screen and in consumerism in general, which encourages adults to retain a child's desire for immediate gratification and for every new plaything (cf. 124–55). Earnestness, then, is the pathos and awe with which a child imbues an adult world it does not understand and therefore simplifies and glorifies. Digimodernism, Kirby concludes, might be the age of credulity (cf. 155). In far less celebratory tones, he thus echoes Hassan's aesthetic of trust, Timmer's willingness to belief or Eshelman's coercive belief. If sincerity and an aesthetic of trust are at the heart of the attempt of emergent literature to re-establish a meaningful communicative bond with the reader, they are always precariously pitched on the very edge of earnestness and infantilism. Clearly, earnestness, as Kirby understands it, is entirely independent of the referential truth claims that are re-established in the name of sincerity or authenticity. While he finds earnestness in the 'absence of critique, of critical intelligence' (153) from reality TV or Web 2.0 applications, implicitly lamenting the absence of irony, the central examples he provides stem from the fantastic lot of the peers of *Star Wars* and *Spiderman*.

Eyeing this development rather critically, Kirby suggests that earnestness and infantilism are in direct correlation with 'an evolution in narrative after postmodernism, away from the realist/anti-realist impasse towards a mythopoeic form more reminiscent of medieval storytelling' (153). Drawing on the differentiation between biblical and Homeric narratives which Erich Auerbach introduced in his monumental study *Mimesis*, Kirby discerns a recent revival of the latter. In the Homeric, so Kirby explains, 'everything [. . .] is exteriorized, clarified, expressed, everything connects explicitly and openly, characters do not change,' nothing is hidden or concealed and no didactic or moral aim is pursued (156). Leaving aside for the moment the question of the justification of Auerbach's characterisation of the two forms, it is intriguing that Kirby seems to correlate the Homeric directly with a broad revival of the mythopoeic or fantastic: 'Realism is superannuated, postmodernist anti-realism is bankrupt; here lies a solution, a way out of the impasse' (158). Implying that the relegation of the fantastic (or the Homeric, in Kirby's terms) to children's stories was an achievement of the Enlightenment that he rather regrets to see reversed, Kirby criticises the perceived return to 'neo- or pseudomedieval storytelling modes and content' (159).[10]

Kirby's deeply-felt anxiety about the infantilisation of today's culture may serve as a welcome regulatory contribution to the joyful optimism that seems to largely pervade the novels which will be discussed in the following chapters. Still, I tend to disagree with his general rejection of the fantastic, as he appears to deny the mode *per se* any claim to maturity and deeper meaning. Rather, I will interrogate the uses to which fantastic narratives are put in relation to more decidedly mimetic modes, arguing that the way out of the realism/anti-realism impasse in my examples of recent literature can be found not so much in a general turn to mythopoesis (nor in a return to realism, for that matter) but precisely in a renewed focus on both their common fictive nature and the difference in their communicative functions. Whereas it has been claimed that postmodernism strove to collapse genre distinctions, I would suggest that one avenue writers after postmodernism have taken is a revaluation of the potential of these distinctions and an exploitation of the respective signifying potentials of various genres.

Pitfalls of periodisation

Linda Hutcheon closed the epilogue to the 2002 edition of her seminal monograph *The Politics of Postmodernism* with a declaration of the end of the postmodernist moment and the call for a new label more

appropriate to our changed realities. She thus concluded 'with this challenge to readers to find it – and name it for the twenty-first century' (181). Clearly, this call has been heard: 'neo-realism' (Rebein and others), 'renewalism' (Toth), 'aesthetics of authenticity' (Funk), 'new sincerity' (Kelly), 'performatism' (Eshelman), 'digimodernism' (Kirby) – all of these terms attempt to designate the 'post-postmodern.'[11] 'Post-postmodern' itself – the use of which seems to stem for the most part from a spirit of resignation rather than from a belief in the descriptive value of the term – is not only rather vacant, opening 'the preposterous and dizzying prospect of an infinite series' (Green 2), but also misleading insofar as it seems to imply that we have left postmodernism behind us, that a clear break has been achieved. It should be obvious that I do not believe this to be the case. While this study contributes to the ongoing exploration of the many ways in which contemporary authors might be understood to engage with and attempt to transform or transcend postmodernist paradigms, it does not posit a radical turn against postmodernism.

Even while, as Josh Toth convincingly argues, 'this current "break" recalls, or re-enacts, the postmodernist break with modernism – that is, the way in which any such break, or epistemic rupture, can be viewed ironically as both complete and partial' (5), it still marks a change that is eventually at least as much grounded in the way we perceive and understand literary production as in a distinctive shift in aesthetic strategies. Instead of a clear break and a new epoch, what we are seeing is perhaps better described as a 'mood swing' (Hayles and Gannon 100) that affects not only the kind of literature that is currently being produced, but also what people are saying about this literature. Any such mood swing always affects perception and interpretation as least as much as production. Thus, without doubt, many of the traits that I and others are highlighting in our readings today can also be found in earlier examples of postmodernist literature, a fact that does not invalidate but rather confirms the changing perspective.[12] Like every such shift, the current turn away from postmodernist convictions, if it turns out to be sustainable, will cast everything that came before in a different light.

I thus agree with Toth, who proposes that:

> Rather than employing a rhetoric of complete epistemic ruptures [. . .] it is, I would argue, more useful to view each identifiable epochal, or epistemic, shift as *another* configuration, as another epistemological attempt to deal with a certain persistent and ineffaceable specter, a certain persistent and ineffaceable teleological aporia.

> From this perspective, an epoch remains understandably definable (or, perhaps, to a certain degree synchronically exclusive) while also remaining quite understandably partial, an inevitable continuation of the past. Each epistemic break is always, or *only*, a reconfiguration because its formation is necessarily contingent upon the fact that something (a specter) always and necessarily passes on. (5; original emphasis)[13]

Toth's appraisal is especially apt in this context, since the shift I and others have been describing for a large part rather markedly differs from the master narrative of the oedipal fight against the fathers that has come to dominate the discussion of literary evolution. There is a broad critical agreement on the assessment that although the new generation of writers sets out to do something different, the move is not so much *against* postmodernism but *through* and *beyond* it; the attempt of authors like David Foster Wallace 'not to retreat or retrench but [. . .] to write his way through it' (McLaughlin "Post-postmodern Discontent" 65). Indeed, I will return to this peculiar lack of antagonistic attitudes towards their literary predecessors among recent authors in my conclusion to this study and argue that it is quite emblematic of the various aspects characterising the recent aesthetic shift.[14]

Postmodernism never ceases to haunt the recent novels I am focusing on in this study, all of which could still be called postmodernist in so many ways. As Adam Kelly evocatively suggests, the oscillation and indecision manifesting itself here can be understood as endemic to the very endeavour recent authors subscribe to:

> being a 'post-postmodernist' of [David Foster] Wallace's generation means never quite being sure whether you are one, whether you have really managed to escape narcissism, solipsism, irony and insincerity. Again, this uncertainty is structural, allowing as it does for a genuine futurity that only the reader can provide. (Kelly, "New Sincerity" 145)

This uncertainty is perhaps the deepest undercurrent of the present moment, not only for the authors producing its literature, but very much so also for the scholars who struggle to make sense of it, as the proliferation of proposed labels strongly suggests. This might be an inevitable quality of every transitional moment, but it is perhaps especially true today, as the radical rebellious acts that drastically pitch a younger generation against their predecessors themselves have become tired and compromised.

Indeed, in view of the increasingly competitive race to identify a new literary paradigm one cannot help but wonder whether this has 'more to do with impatience than with actual conceptual shifts,' as Chabot already claimed for the earlier shift from modernism to postmodernism. The proclamation of yet another shift might be rather too much influenced by the constant consumerist urge for the new, which we would be well advised to receive 'as skeptically as we do commercials for other new products in the marketplace' (Chabot 109). Still, just as postmodernism has arguably eventually proven to be a useful heuristic tool for literary analysis in spite of Chabot's warning, the attempt to describe and make sense of the perceived difference of recent literary production from the typically postmodernist will help to shed some light on recent developments in contemporary Western cultural production.

My own concern in this chapter has not been primarily to propose a new designation but rather to uncover converging elements in the arguments at hand and to suggest a subtle shift in contemporary cultural discourse. I do not feel much inclined to make my own bid in the run for the most adequate new label. However, since practical and heuristic reasons compel me to find a way to speak about the mood swing my analysis contributes to, I will opt for 'reconstruction' in the following pages. This term, which frequently reappears with more or less prominence throughout the debate about the recent aesthetic change, emerges as the most adequate one for my purpose for several reasons. First of all, it establishes its heuristic value independent of any claims about realism, authenticity or belief and thus allows for a consideration of texts like the ones at the centre of this study, whose negotiation of literary stances is more complex than a return to realist mimesis would imply. At the same time it also refrains from referring back in some way or another to modernism. Although Adiseshiah and Hildyard point out that modernist aesthetic principles maintain a decisive influence on contemporary literature (cf. 5), the latter largely misses the uncompromising avant-garde spirit of a modernist need to reinvent the moment without regard for the past and thus seems to have gone beyond modernist as well as postmodernist concerns. Secondly, reconstruction presupposes prior deconstruction. As suggested by Davin Heckman and Matthew Wolf-Meyer in an editorial comment to the first volume of their e-journal *Reconstruction*, which they launched in 2001, 'whether or not we have reached the nadir of postmodernism, it has become evident that what is required of thinkers is an attempt to rebuild after the destructive nihilism of

postmodern apathy.' The term 'reconstruction' not only indicates the continuing importance of postmodernist thought but also already points to the specific aspect of postmodernism reconstruction mainly reacts to: the former's supposed nihilism, solipsism and deconstruction of values, subjects and agency. The term thus tacitly acknowledges its own limited perspective. Thirdly, 'reconstruction' answers both to the pervasive attempt to establish meaningful connections by renewing the (impossible) possibility of communication and to the revaluation of the fictive that attends this process. Therefore, 'reconstruction' seems to me at this point to be the most adequate term to describe the current literary attempts to write through postmodernism towards something else.

To sum up, I call for a reconsideration of the frequently proclaimed return to realism, emphasising instead a heightened investment in the processes of fictive communication and in the significance of genre as a framework guiding reception. Only on this premise can the reconstructive moments of my literary case studies be understood, since none of them easily fits with assertions of a revitalised realism. They all enact confrontations of mimetic and fantastic narratives by employing Chinese-box framing structures, in which the fantastic mode is contained and ontologically controlled as a fiction within a fiction. Though, as the following discussion will show, a certain tendency towards realism can indeed be identified among these texts, I argue that they serve to show that the common denominator informing the change within much contemporary Western Anglophone fiction lies beyond the realism/anti-realism debate: in the return to a commitment towards communication, connection and responsibility and a revaluation of genre distinctions. As we have seen, most arguments for a revitalisation of realism turn out to point implicitly in this very same direction. By slightly shifting the perspective I therefore do not wish to contradict the claims that have been made by others, but would broaden the focus in order to allow for an analysis of the role the fantastic plays in this transitional moment.

In that sense *Man in the Dark* can be taken to be emblematic for the kind of texts that will be my focus within this study. By counterbalancing the fantastical machines of postmodernism with a return to referential realism and the authenticity of the witness, Auster seems to capture our transitional moment precisely. Even while Owen Brick is violently and abruptly killed, Brick's (or postmodernism's) ghostly form does haunt half of the novel, literally pursuing the narrator in a murderous mission. And although Owen's story breaks off midway

and the novel turns towards a more traditionally realist plotline, the embedded story does serve an important function. It raises troubling questions about the responsibility we have got to take for the stories we tell, about our desire to escape reality, and our need to communicate. While the postmodernist experiment is discontinued, it is still being acknowledged as an important path that continues to be provocative, but that is now, once again, being complemented by other options – options which stress communication, the exchange of stories and about stories instead of the solipsistic dreams of insomnia and paranoia.

Let me conclude by pointing to some of the wider ideological implications that inform such a reconstructive impulse. In a later issue of the journal *Reconstruction*, Benton et al. profess passionately to the belief and practice of reconstruction, vividly summing up the stakes of the reconstructive movement as I have traced it throughout the current critical debate. In a polemic and utopian (that is, both impossible and necessary, hopeful and doomed) humanist spirit they declare:

> I write to be human. Learning from Lacan and Derrida, I know that words are never perfect, but all the same there is a kernel of usefulness that enables me to connect with someone else. Whether or not I am doomed through the secular sin of a break with the origin, there persists the desire for community, which enlists perceived similarities for the negotiation of difference – a return to unity. It is this Burkean notion of rhetoric, which is necessitated by unintelligibility but activated by intelligibility, which animates the spaces of everyday life. The contact between the ambiguous and the unambiguous generates the tactics and practices of making do, which preserves the agency of human existence. Far from the 'humanist' prescriptions of the modern era, there is an equally humanist subtext which escapes power in all its forms (science, law, force, rationality) – a practice of everyday life which is compromised, mobile, mutable – but always made sane by the desire to love, to build community, to communicate the truth.

In terms of fiction, this impulse finds expression in a turn towards the pragmatic and ethic dimensions of created meanings, to the exploration of that kernel of usefulness that promises the possibility of moments of communication *in spite of* ontological and epistemological uncertainties. Reconstructive literature addresses the perceived isolation of the individual, reaching out to establish connections both with others and

with the realities we live in. As McLaughlin asserts with similar utopian hope, fiction after postmodernism

> seeks not to reify the cynicism, the disconnect, the atomized privacy of our society nor to escape or mask it (as much art, serious and pop, does), but, by engaging the language-based nature of its operations, to make us newly aware of the reality that has been made for us and to remind us – because we live in a culture where we're encouraged to forget – that other realities are possible. ("Post-postmodern Discontent" 67)

2
Pragmatic Fantasies: From Subversion to Reconstruction

That a movement beyond postmodernism should come along with a revived interest in realism and an increased investment in the mimetic stance is hardly surprising. After all, postmodernism had programmatically turned its back on a realist concept of mimesis that relies on believable characters, on accurate depiction of realities, on affect, and on an ideal of transparent representation that emphasises the referential function of language. In contrast to modernism, which rejected and reformed realist aesthetics without necessarily giving up its belief in truthful representation, postmodernist writers tended to reject the ideal of representing reality itself. Instead, many of them developed a wide-ranging fascination with non-realist modes of writing.

The fantastic figures prominently among these due to an affinity which goes beyond the welcome alternative to realism it offered. Per definition, the mode departs from the certainties of consensus reality and opens up fictional worlds beyond readers' ken and experience, but nevertheless never entirely revokes its mimetic grounding. Playing out the tension between mimesis and the marvellous, the fantastic readily accommodated postmodernist critiques of positivistic knowledge and scientific discourses. Since the latter were associated with the mimetic truth claims of realism, its unsettling of mimesis by introducing the marvellous endowed the fantastic mode with disruptive potential. Furthermore, as a mode whose effect is based on ambiguity, the fantastic seemed to share much with the postmodernist emphasis on plurality and deferral of meaning (cf. Kreuzer, esp. 116–17).

These affinities have even led to the suggestion that postmodernism could be seen as the culmination of a 'gradual radicalization' of the fantastic, since in postmodernist texts all elements of the narrative undergo a fantastic unsettling in 'an alienating yet liberating expression

of discontinuity, relativity and mere contingency' (Hoffmann 282). Gerhard Hoffmann, for example, justifies his focus on the fantastic in his analysis of postmodernist fiction with 'the prominence of what Barth has called an "irrealistic" quality in the postmodern novel' (268; cf. also Olsen *Ellipse* 3–14). Brian McHale similarly speaks of 'a generalized fantastic effect or "charge" [that] seems to be diffused throughout postmodernist writing' (*Postmodernist Fiction* 82), and Neil Cornwell makes an even grander claim when he suggests a shift in literary primacy, arguing that in the twentieth century 'the "dominant" [. . .] has passed steadily from the old certainties of realism to the fragmented and ambiguous challenge posed by the literary fantastic' (144–5).

While such claims might overstate the case, postmodernism was certainly highly favourable to the fantastic mode (and vice versa) (cf. Attebery 37). Lucie Armitt's *Theorising the Fantastic*, with its extensive exploration of the resonances between the fantastic and influential theories, ranging from structuralism via psychoanalysis to postmodernism, serves well to show that this close association was mutually productive. Postmodernist approaches rescued the mode from narrow genre conscriptions, and from allegations of escapism, schematism and infantility it was frequently faced with. At the same time, theory advantageously drew on concepts, metaphors and structures that were associated with marvellous genres (Donna Harroway's cyborg being probably the most obvious example).

This allure of the fantastic mode, however, was arguably only partly due to its generic characteristics. To some degree, it may have owed its appeal precisely to its marginalised status in the literary and academic field. With realism's mimetic claims as the norm, the marvellous in general was understood to take the position of the ex-centric other that needs definition and that finds itself frequently reduced to negation, always in reference to the norm it stands in contrast to. Thus a standard understanding of the marvellous claims that it 'exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real' (Jackson 20). As the permanent other of mimetic claims to referentiality and verisimilitude, which it constantly exceeds and transgresses, so Joanna Russ maintains, 'fantasy is *what could not have happened*; i.e. what *cannot* happen, what *cannot* exist . . . the negative subjunctivity, the *cannot* or *could not*, constitutes in fact the chief pleasure of fantasy' (qtd. in Jackson 22; original emphasis).[1] It has been frequently argued that precisely this marginal status, this alterity of the marvellous in opposition to a mimetic norm, has made the fantastic mode – in which the mimetic and the marvellous are brought into contact and contradiction – so appealing for authors who felt

marginalised themselves, often due to gender, ethnicity or sexual preferences. Rejecting the discourse of rationality, power and science that had long excluded them and codified their subordinate status, they turned towards the irrational, to magic and the unexplainable, both in order to claim a way of expression that seemed less compromised than the dominant discourse, and to develop a critique of and counter-discourse to that dominance.[2]

The ex-centric position of the fantastic mode as a trivialised and denigrated form of writing favoured by marginalised literary voices clearly appealed to both postmodernism's populist tendencies and to its interest in counter-discourses. Moreover, academic work on the marvellous and the fantastic itself could be legitimised as a practice of countering dominant discourses (cf. Armitt, *Theorising* 1–4; Olsen "Overdrive"). The very decision to focus on this long-neglected area of literature could be framed as an act of (political, ideological) resistance. Rosemary Jackson's study *Fantasy: A Literature of Subversion* is exemplary for this kind of argument:

> Not surprisingly, fantastic art has been muted by a tradition of literary criticism concerned with supporting establishment ideals rather than with subverting them. [. . .] As an 'art' of unreason, and of desire, fantasy has persistently been silenced, or re-written, in transcendental rather than in transgressive terms. (173)

Firmly anchored in the postmodern *Zeitgeist* of focusing on the margins, on silenced voices and discourses, and on subversive practises, Jackson's attempt to shift the marvellous in general, and the fantastic in particular, into the focus of academic interest thus claims wider relevance by championing a whole range of misjudged texts, and repositioning them in the literary field.

During the three decades that have elapsed since the publication of Jackson's study in the early 1980s, however, general critical bias seems to have undergone a significant reversal. While some prejudice against the pure marvellous, such as popular fantasy novels in the tradition of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, may still prevail, scholarly interest in the fantastic no longer stands in need of special justification. On the contrary, prominent critical approaches like gender and queer studies, postcolonial theory or deconstruction, favour and emphasise subversion and counter-discourse, and have frequently acknowledged the potential of the fantastic for their agenda. Seriousness and sophistication of literary form is no longer measured primarily in terms of mimetic fealty. As the neo-realist

reaction which I have discussed in Chapter 1 already suggests, postmodernist anti-realism may be perceived to have claimed the centre, even to the extent that realism itself has become marginalised – amply illustrated by Ihab Hassan's ironic anticipation of his reader's exasperated incredulity in face of his appeal for a return to verisimilitude: 'Realism, you cry, in 2003, *realism*?' ("Aesthetic of Trust" 8). Drawing on Lance Olsen, Martin Horstkotte even goes so far as to propose in his study of the postmodernist fantastic that 'the tables were turned in the last decades, leaving the fantastic as the dominant mode in its postmodern form' (59).[3]

Conversely, it seems to have by now become an almost automatic academic reflex to understand the fantastic in postmodernist terms as a discourse of the margins, of alterity and subversion. However, since realism's long-maintained status as a norm has become precarious under the continual attacks by modernism and postmodernism, definitions of the fantastic in turn stand in need of some revaluation and rethinking. Just as rebellion and subversion themselves gradually became so ubiquitous as to border on the compulsory and constraining, the appeal of the fantastic may no longer lie primarily in its contested (and always problematical) ex-centricity. Particularly in light of its specific usage in some recent literature, its status as perennial other, as the ever-subversive force directed against the norm, comes into question.

The contemporary texts which I focus on in this study require a reconsideration of the mode. Subversion proves little suited to account for their employment of fantastic narration. Meanwhile, none of these novels are fantastic in the classical sense. The decisive feature they all share, and which necessitates a rethinking of common presumptions about the uses and effects of the mode, is their particular use of narrative structure: all of them embed some sort of decidedly fantastic (sometimes even outright marvellous) narrative strand, which is exposed as fictional within frame tales that clearly take a mimetic stance. Since these fantastic storylines are relegated to the status of fictions within fiction they are, so to speak, ontologically marginalised within the novels. In some cases, they seem to be mere digressions from the main plot development, quite inconsequential and arbitrary additions to the text. Furthermore, since they are explicitly introduced *as fictional* within the fictional world of the narrative frame (as novels, comic books, films, video games and so on, which the characters produce or consume), the marvellous elements in these stories never assert themselves as reflections of reality. They make no ontological claims.

In contrast, the traditional role of frame stories in the fantastic has been precisely to assert the ostensible veracity of the embedded fantastic

story. Typically, the narrative is presented as the truthful report of unbelievable but real events. On the paratextual level, the text is established as fictional, as a novel or story, a literary text produced to entertain a readership. Meanwhile, on the diegetic level, the level of the narrative frame, the text forcefully asserts truthfulness and accuracy for itself as well as for its metadiegetic insertions (in Genette's sense). It purports to tell or recount a story that really happened. The textual world is declared to be congruent with the actual world, and the story's effect (for example evoking fear, or wonder) is to a large extent based on the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief and read it as such. While narrative frames often serve a similar role even in entirely mimetic narratives – Jeffrey Williams calls this their 'rhetoric of verification' (113) – the intrusion of the unbelievable or supernatural, which is experienced as incongruent with the mimetic expectations raised by realism, makes even stronger protestations necessary in order to ensure that readers continue to accept its truth claims. Indeed, such truth claims seem to be essential to the contradictions that have been understood to lie at the heart of the fantastic as a literary mode. What happens if they are eschewed? If the supernatural is exposed as a mere fiction from the very outset? Does such a move not call into question the very essence and rationale of the fantastic mode? But if that should be the case, why insert these narratives at all? What is their function within the texts, and how can this register on the ways in which these novels relate to postmodernism?

In order to address these questions some common assumptions about the fantastic have to be rethought. While extant theories of the fantastic frequently highlight ontological and epistemological concerns, my own approach will draw upon Wolfgang Iser's triadic understanding of the fictive in order to specifically emphasise the pragmatic aspects of the mode: its paradigmatic fictionality, its strategies of creation and reception, as well as the ethics and responsibility of its negotiation between the real and the imaginary. Iser's theory of the fictive will help me to show how the fantastic mode exposes the fundamental structure of fictionality and serves well to make the workings of the fictive conspicuous. It is this aspect of the mode, I argue, that turns out to be of central importance in the literary examples Part II of this study is concerned with.

Revisiting the fantastic

Hesitation, contrast and ambiguity

The obvious starting point for any attempt to characterise the fantastic is Tzvetan Todorov. His seminal study *The Fantastic: A Structural*

Approach to a Literary Genre was one of the earliest and most structurally coherent attempts to propose an encompassing theory of the mode. Notwithstanding its structuralist approach, Todorov's definition already includes a decidedly pragmatic determinant. Situating the pure fantastic on the liminal site of the dividing line between what he calls the two other genres of the uncanny and the marvellous, he argues that its main defining characteristic is hesitation. A fantastic text, so Todorov opines, 'must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described' (33). The co-presence of mimesis and the marvellous therefore not only characterises the structure of the fantastic text. The two stances are at the same time realised as two possibilities of interpretation, of reading. The fantastic itself depends on the hesitation of the reader, a hesitation that can, but does not have to be, reflected in the reaction of a character (cf. Todorov 33). Readers are 'obliged' to hesitate because the text presents them with an ontological riddle, with the question of what is real and what is illusion.[4]

The appearance of this hesitation obviously depends on a particular reading stance. Readers must be able to acknowledge the two competing elements of mimesis and the marvellous. Their contradictoriness must be perceived. For readers who do not consider the marvellous extraordinary, or who reject the text's claim to depict reality outright, the effect of a fantastic story would certainly be quite different. No hesitation occurs because no contradiction is felt. The text would, under such circumstances, be read as either entirely unreal or entirely real in its referentiality. For a reader who sincerely believes in ghosts, there is nothing fantastic about a ghost story. Similarly, there is no fantastic effect in a text that is read purely allegorically or poetically, since in this case the question whether the portrayed events are to be taken as mimetically referential never arises (cf. Todorov 32–3).[5]

While highly influential, there are some widely recognised problems with Todorov's theory. His narrow definition of the fantastic as a genre is equated with the moment of hesitation to such an extent that it disappears as soon as certainty is reached. Once the ontological riddle is resolved one way or the other, either by the confirmation of the supernatural or by a rational explanation, the text becomes, in Todorov's terminology, either uncanny or marvellous. There are only very few texts which retain this ambiguity until their very end (the most frequently cited example being Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*). Even in such pure cases hesitation will arguably eventually be resolved by the reader's own preference of interpretation, since the supernatural and the

rational interpretations are mutually exclusive. Either one decides that the governess is mad, or one believes in the existence of the ghosts she claims to see. One interpretation suspends the other. Todorov's theory has often been criticised for this ephemeral quality of the fantastic, for the narrowness of the definition and for its exclusiveness. If the pure state of the fantastic can only be found in a handful of texts, if most texts tilt into the marvellous or the uncanny, can such a precarious genre even be said to exist? Is the genre of a text decided only at its conclusion? Or, if the fantastic is based entirely on reader hesitation, does it disappear from a text in a second reading?

I would propose that these justified questions arise not from Todorov's basic insight into the importance of hesitation. Rather, his definition is too narrow in its identification of the specific *kind* of hesitation involved, and in his attempt to limit the fantastic to a strictly historically and structurally determined form. In the particular historical form which is the object of Todorov's study, hesitation is mainly epistemological. As Todorov puts it:

> The person who experiences the [supernatural] event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. (25)

Todorov observes that this kind of doubt is largely a historical phenomenon. It is arguably anchored in the very real epistemological uncertainty about the existence of ghosts that was still tangible in the nineteenth century.[6] He is unable to find the kind of hesitation he is looking for in Kafka's work, whose characters show no surprise in face of the supernatural any more. Instead of recognising these texts as a new historical manifestation of the same mode, he declares the death of the fantastic and the rise of a new literature altogether (cf. Todorov 168).

However, as Brian McHale has already pointed out, Todorov's perspective is too restricted here. McHale calls attention to the fact that, according to Todorov's own definition, hesitation at the character-level is only an optional criterion of the fantastic. Although the fantastic might have been reduced to banality, McHale argues, 'some *resistance* of normality against the paranormal continues to be felt – if not by any of the characters, then at least by the reader. As long as such resistance is present, the dialogue between the normal and the paranormal

will continue' (*Postmodernist Fiction* 77; original emphasis). Though the epistemological hesitation on which Todorov's definition of the fantastic relies has disappeared from the later fantastic texts, according to McHale, Kafka's fantastic is still 'a zone of hesitation, a frontier – not, however, between the uncanny and the marvelous but between this world and the world next door' (*Postmodernist Fiction* 75). With this reformulation of Todorov's theory McHale hopes to reach the underlying ontological structure of the fantastic. He claims that the latter had been obscured by the historically determined epistemological form the mode temporarily took (cf. *Postmodernist Fiction* 76). Thereby he asserts the relevance of the fantastic mode for his analysis of postmodernist fiction, which to him marks a change in literature from an epistemological to an ontological dominant.[7]

While Todorov's main assertion is that the fantastic depends entirely on the element of doubt, McHale prefers to foreground the 'dual ontological structure of the fantastic' and replaces hesitation with resistance (*Postmodernist Fiction* 76). The presence of and dialogue between the two realms of the normal and the paranormal lead to a destabilisation of ontological certainties and grounding. While the epistemological uncertainty which Todorov found in classical fantastic texts ultimately concerned the extent of our knowledge about our reality, the ontological instability McHale encounters in more recent literature makes all representation problematic, and in its last consequence (in a final breakdown of resistance) undermines the belief in the existence or at least the accessibility of that reality itself.

However, once the normativity of mimesis has been successfully undermined, that is, once postmodernist insights into the constructedness and always mediated and represented status of reality as a discourse are taken for granted, the focus of the fantastic quite consequentially could be expected to change once again. Particularly in view of the way in which the mode is employed in the literary examples I draw on, I would like to suggest that duality and contradiction as well as hesitation and doubt happen on still another, perhaps even more fundamental level, which has been latently present in Todorov's definition all along: the pragmatic level of communication.

Todorov himself already explicitly points to the nature of this doubt when he argues that Kafka's "Metamorphosis" presents a puzzle to the reader:

> One might certainly suggest several allegorical interpretations of the text; but the text itself offers no explicit indication which would

> confirm any one of them. It is often said of Kafka that his narratives must be read above all as narratives, on the literal level. (172)

The fundamental hesitation which remains concerns the precise relation which the text establishes with reality. Are we to read Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis literally as a thought experiment of what would happen to a man and his family if he was turned into a bug? Or should we look for symbolic or figurative meanings of his transformation? Neither of the two options seems sufficient. The combination of the everyday and the supernatural leaves readers in doubt as to which meaning they should assign to the text, as to which stance of reading is the more appropriate one. In other words, the text forces the reader to hesitate between two stances of reading: one mimetic, presuming that a text tells us something about perceived reality; one marvellous, presuming that the text's connection to reality is mostly indirect, that it does not portray a reality that could possibly be experienced by its readers but rather, if at all, refers to extratextual reality symbolically or by analogy. If a text with referential claims includes elements which its readers assume to be quite impossible, they will be forced to reconsider their reading strategies.

Thus fantastic texts not only ask an epistemological question (is our knowledge about the depicted world reliable?) and an ontological one (what kind of world does it show?), but also a pragmatic question (what is the appropriate reaction to it?). If the basic structure of the fantastic mode is accordingly no longer conceived as a disturbance of a character's (or the reader's) understanding of reality that results in epistemological doubt, and neither as a combination of two different worlds that leads to ontological questions, but ultimately as a combination of two contradictory literary stances, Todorov's and McHale's insights can be brought into a fruitful dialogue. From this slightly changed perspective, *The Turn of the Screw* would no longer present the paradigmatic pure fantastic text it has frequently been hailed as. Though mimesis is disturbed by the intrusion of the marvellous (in form of the ghosts), both the text's possible solutions (the paranormal and the psychological explanation) tend towards the mimetic, as its affective charge is based on the uncanny possibility of the real existence of ghosts. The purest examples for the fantastic in my understanding of the mode would instead be found in some prime examples of magic realism, like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, in its perfect balance between allegory and historical novel. The very banality of the marvellous, which is understood to be one of the hallmarks of magic realism, frustrates any attempt to easily recognise one stance as privileged over the other.

By broadening Todorov's basic category of hesitation, my definition bears witness to my own understanding of the fantastic not as a clearly demarcated genre but as a mode encompassing different genres. But it is also important to note that to posit the fantastic as the result of a conspicuous combination of two competing stances – the mimetic and the marvellous – as I propose to do here, differs significantly from those theories of the mode which prefer to describe it as a break in a norm, an intrusion of the deviant into an established system of reality. Most prominently, such a definition was put forward by Eric Rabkin, who argued that 'the truly fantastic occurs when the ground rules of a narrative are forced to make a 180° reversal' (12; cf. also Durst 100; Hoffmann 276; Jackson 34). Others have already pointed out that such a model of narrative contradiction, while it has the advantage of not relying for its definition on such highly contested concepts as 'consensus reality' or 'the supernatural,' has difficulty accounting for fantastic texts that mix stances from their very first sentence and thus never establish ground rules which could subsequently be reversed (cf. for example Olsen, "Overdrive" 72; *Ellipse* 17–18). Such an agonistic model of intrusion reflects the strong mimetic bias which has long governed literature and literary scholarship by taking the intrusion of the supernatural to be a deviation from a mimetic norm. In further contrast to such theorists of the fantastic as Rabkin, Durst or Clayton, who commendably endeavour to locate the mode purely within textual relations, all of them arguing in their own way that '[f]antastic discourse can be defined only by its differential relation – of conjunction and opposition – to another discourse and not to some extralinguistic reality' (Clayton 61), I would insist that one cannot get rid of the question of the fantastic text's relation to reality. After all, as I have explained, the stances of the mimetic and the marvellous are determined by the text-world relations they imply. Indeed, in its mixing of the two stances, the fantastic, I would argue, is defined precisely by the emphasis it puts on that question. Beyond a general literary ambiguity, in which any starkly ambiguous text would count as a 'displaced form of the fantastic' (Brooke-Rose 65), such hesitation remains specifically fantastic due to the ontological and epistemological aspects of the mode. It is precisely in the *interplay* between the epistemological, the ontological and the communicative realms that fantastic hesitation takes effect.

To foreground the pragmatic aspect means to understand the dual structure of the fantastic McHale emphasises as rhetorical rather than ontological, and the hesitation Todorov foregrounds as communicative rather than epistemological. This is not to invalidate Todorov's and

McHale's insights, but rather to suggest that they focus on historical variants of the fantastic mode which have to be supplemented in view of recent literary trends. Being weary of asserting the kind of broad change in cultural dominant McHale argues for in his study, I would nevertheless agree with his insight that different forms of the mode can illustrate different central concerns and anxieties that are prevalent at specific moments in time. In analogy to McHale's assertion that 'the epistemological structure [of the classical fantastic] has tended to evaporate, leaving behind it the ontological deep structure of the fantastic still intact' (*Postmodernist Fiction* 76), I would argue that, while both epistemological and ontological concerns remain central aspects of the fantastic (and indeed, certainly still find numerous proponents in current literary practise), recent texts with a reconstructive agenda particularly explore the pragmatic structure of the mode.

Pragmatic hesitation in *Life of Pi*

But what could such a focus on the pragmatic aspect look like? Let me, at this point, briefly introduce a well-known example to clarify my point: The narrative structure of Yann Martel's Booker-Prize-winning novel *Life of Pi* serves well as an illustration, especially since it features a mix of traditional strategies of concealment of fictionality with those forms of its exposure that characterise all my literary examples.

The novel introduces its main narrative by means of an extradiegetic narrator who interviews the protagonist and compiles the story – a process that is described in an introductory 'Author's Note,' complete with acknowledgements and an exculpation for possible inaccuracies. While the extradiegetic narrator thus asserts his own reliability, Pi, the homodiegetic narrator of the novel's main story, in turn establishes himself as trustworthy by starting his autobiographical narrative somewhat incongruently with a recapitulation of his zoological master thesis on the three-toed sloth. The text meticulously provides precise information about the sense acuity and habits of these animals and even provides sound scientific references. Pi is thus immediately established as a serious, sober and academically trained voice.

By contrast, his account of his childhood in Pondicherry, while never truly fantastic, is highly reminiscent of the style of Salman Rushdie's seminal magic realist novel *Midnight's Children,* with its humorous, self-mocking tone and tendency for metaphor and hyperbole, its continuous assertion of the highly improbable and incredible, and its Indian setting.[8] This combination of sober report and analysis and rather improbable events characterises the whole novel. Its narrative unfolds

as an epic struggle for survival of the young Pi, who spends several months shipwrecked on a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger. Incredible as the story is, Pi is careful to account for both his behaviour and the tiger's in zoological terms that appear sound to (at least my) lay judgement. Still, his story turns all but fantastic, at the latest when he comes across a floating carnivorous island (rather reminiscent of Sinbad's fantastic encounters), or when he claims to have met another castaway in the middle of the ocean, both of them having fallen blind from malnutrition. This last occurrence is so improbable that the marvellous explanation Pi at first finds for the voice he hears – namely, that he must be speaking with the tiger – almost seems more credible (cf. *Pi* 306–21).

Not only do these events put the mimetic stance under some strain, but the novel even explicitly addresses their improbability in its final section, which consists of the transcription of an interview two Japanese officials '*of exemplary professionalism*' (*Pi* xi; original italics) conduct with Pi in the endeavour to find the cause for the sinking of the ship. Faced with their scepticism and their objections to the probability of his tale, Pi eventually offers an alternative story: 'I know what you want. You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless factuality' (*Pi* 381). In his alternative story, there are no animals. Instead, all the beastly actors are humans. It is a horrifying account of deprivation, dehumanisation and violence. Clearly, this story is judged to be the more probable one by the Japanese officials, who immediately interpret the former version as a kind of allegorical fable, the result of an attempt to deal with and avoid severe psychological strain by projecting inhuman acts onto animals. They thus approach the two stories each firmly within one of the two opposing literary stances, mimetic and marvellous respectively, and by doing so effectually dissolve the novel's fantastic ambiguity.

Neither of the two stories, however, entirely adds up. Both have their inconsistencies so that there is always a remainder (very literal and physical in the case of meerkat bones that are found on the life-raft, providing support for Pi's initial story), an excess that remains inexplicable. Furthermore, Pi only begins to tell his revised account after prolonged meditation, after which he announces: 'Here's another story' (*Pi* 381). Having concluded his second narrative, he asks the officers if this version has now satisfied them, if there was anything they could not believe or that he should change (cf. *Pi* 391). As Pi well discerns, they want a story whose elements fit their expectations, which provides

answers to their questions. The version he eventually comes up with does so by its bleak brutality and its general consistence with the known facts, but also by providing the officers with a plot that is close enough to the original story in its basic narrative events in order to easily accommodate an allegorical interpretation of Pi's first account. He thus wholly caters to their wishes, as the second story he offers is not only more credible to his listeners but also conveniently provides both a rationale for and an interpretation of the initial fantastic narrative.

Accepting the second story, it therefore turns out, implies not merely an endorsement of the mimetic stance but further a decision for a clear designation of stances. This applies even more strongly to the readers than to the officers. The officers, after all, are attempting to establish facts while readers are quite aware that they are reading a work of fiction.[9] Only once it is established that 'it makes no factual difference' – that is, once truth or any practical relevance to reality is out of the picture – Pi can legitimately ask the officers (and, of course, the readers for whom they serve as stand-ins): 'which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?' (*Pi* 398). The question can only be raised in face of the ultimate absence or inaccessibility of the real, in both a Lacanian and an experiential sense. This absence manifests itself dramatically in the central loss Pi experiences, from which the stories arise and to which they are a monument. Thus I would argue that the pivotal choice the novel offers at the end should not be understood, as Raoul Eshelman maintains, as one between 'what is false and what is most likely true' (*Performatism* 54), and not even between a marvellous and a mimetic narrative, but rather between containing or prolonging the fantastic sense of hesitation, between a desire for closure and explanation and a welcoming of wonder, of openness, of the unknown and unknowable.

Such open ambiguity seems to be very postmodernist and indeed that adjective has rather unsurprisingly been used to describe the novel (cf. Duncan). However, precisely by detaching the choice it offers from truth claims, by presenting the decision as an essentially aesthetic one that is no longer driven by the desire to know truth, the novel, so I would argue, goes beyond postmodernist scepticism. To this extent I agree with Eshelman, who proposes that in *Life of Pi* '[t]he ultimate frame of reference is performative, and not epistemological: The point of the text is not to have us grasp a trace of truth by relating something in the text to something outside of it but rather to make us believe and experience beauty within its own closed space' (*Performatism* 56). By foregrounding the fictionality of its choices, the novel liberates the reader from the

dictates of knowledge and truth. Truth is the absence that propels the narrative and is invoked *as absence*, but the narrative ultimately must be judged on its own grounds. In contradistinction to Eshelman, however, who argues that the text 'forces us, at least for the time being, to take the beautiful attitude of a believer rather than the skeptical attitude of a continually frustrated seeker of truth' (*Performatism* 56), I would claim that the central question posed here concerns what kind of fictions we prefer to tell and to believe and how they may influence the lives we live. If truth, as postmodernism has claimed, remains always elusive, an absence at the centre of every discourse, if a certain degree of fictionality therefore cannot be avoided, there seems to be all the more reason to think carefully about what kind of stories we tell.

In the case of *Life of Pi*, this question is posed not so much as one between belief and scepticism, as Eshelman has it, but between two stories: one of human predation and one of animal salvation; one that shows only how humans turn into animals and another that serves to expound a whole range of values which sound so incongruous to postmodern ears:

> *Words of divine consciousness: moral exaltation; lasting feelings of elevation, elation, joy; a quickening of the moral sense, which strikes one as more important than an intellectual understanding of things; an alignment of the universe along moral lines, not intellectual ones; a realization that the founding principle of existence is what we call love, which works itself out sometimes not clearly, not cleanly, not immediately, nonetheless ineluctably.* [. . .] *An intellect confounded yet a trusting sense of presence and of ultimate purpose*. (*Pi* 80; original italics)

By no means a refutation of postmodernism in its acknowledgement of the ultimate inaccessibility of the real, the novel still clearly moves beyond postmodernism in its appeal to the (re)constructive force of fiction. Pi chooses religion even while rejecting its ultimate truth claims; he chooses life, love and optimism in spite of his experience and awareness of death, horror and despair, and he communicates this choice in the story he tells. The novel presents this as an act of agency, a choice between different possible fictions in face of the absence of the real. It does so by using the fantastic mode in order to foreground processes that govern fictionality as such and by combining and contrasting various forms of fictive communication. The reader is offered a choice between different possible and valid stances towards the text. In a clear signal for the novel's movement beyond postmodernism, the only choice

Pi ultimately condemns is the typically postmodernist deferral which eschews the responsibility of choice altogether: 'Doubt is useful for a while. [. . .] But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation' (*Pi* 36).

Life of Pi's use of the fantastic is in many ways typical for the group of texts I focus on. Since the fantastic is, in all cases, clearly marked as fictional within the framing narrative, the element of ontological and epistemological hesitation that has widely been taken as a defining quality of the mode is contained and muted, though not completely absent. Nevertheless, this does not automatically lead to the establishment of clear-cut boundaries. Though radical metaleptic breaks are largely missing, the internal boundary between metadiegesis and diegesis is often subtly transgressed and the initial evaluation of respective levels of verisimilitude is always drawn into question. While within postmodernist aesthetics such strategies frequently tend to imply an essential indistinguishability (resulting in its pessimistic extremes in a denial of agency and a breakdown of meaning and communication), the reconstructive outlook developed in recent literature proposes a more pragmatic perspective. The turn towards the fantastic continues to be triggered by the presence of the unnameable as the inaccessibility of the real remains at the heart of reconstruction, manifest as central moments of irretrievable absence or loss. All my case studies play out as quests for adequate narrative form in the attempt to bridge the gap opened by loss, as a struggle to create meaning and signification in face of the incommensurability of the real. In this, they propose an enquiry for and comparison of the respective narrative possibilities offered by genres as heterogeneous as the folk-tale, the road movie, the horror story and social realism (to name but a few). Moreover, they bring to the fore the problems and potentials of genre choices and point to a critical assessment of their ethics. It is precisely because we can choose the ways and modes in which we want to tell the stories of our lives and our world that our choices matter.

Thus the novels self-critically question the uses and effects of the fictive, its consolatory power, its affinity to escapism, its ability to provoke thought and action, to misguide and to reveal. Calling attention to what I call the pragmatic aspect of the fantastic – that is, to the hesitation between different attitudes taken towards the text, between different ways of reading and interpreting the proposed relation the text establishes between fictional world and extratextual reality – reconstructive texts bring to the fore an aspect of the mode that suits a reconstructive agenda well: its paradigmatic fictionality.

Paradigmatic fictionality

The triadic structure of the fictive

The fantastic, I propose, is a literary mode that, like no other, is based on an exposure of the intrinsic processes of the fictive, as Wolfgang Iser described them in his study *The Fictive and the Imaginary*. The juxtaposition of mimesis and the marvellous that structures the discussion about the fantastic mode indeed echoes the timeless argument about the nature of the relation between the fictive and reality. The fictive is usually taken to be an antonym to fact, and has often enough been associated with irrelevant escapism or even with harmful lies. In an effort to rethink this position Wolfgang Iser argues that the juxtaposition of reality and fiction is misleading. He proposes to replace the dichotomy of the real and the fictive with a triad, including what he calls the imaginary. In this triad, the fictive is not a stable element but a process, a dynamic sum of acts which link the real to the imaginary. Just as every fiction includes elements of the real this transposition of the real into (literary) signs necessarily involves a creative re-imagination and therefore always activates the imaginary.

True, Iser's categories of the real and the imaginary are problematic. He never clearly defines the imaginary beyond saying that 'in our ordinary experience, the imaginary tends to manifest itself in a somewhat diffuse manner, in fleeting impressions that defy our attempts to pin it down in a concrete and stabilized form' (3). Vague as this may seem, it is precisely the protean formlessness of the imaginary which is its main quality. The imaginary is that which in its indeterminacy eludes consciousness and 'becomes tangible only in terms of products – perception, idea, dream, and so on – ' that seem arbitrary and amorphic. Each such manifestation, however, is already no longer exclusively a product of the imaginary, which 'does not produce its own salience, [but] comes about through interplay with the factors that have mobilized it' (184).

Its opposite, the real, is no less problematic. The main characteristic of the real, according to Iser, is determinacy. Although he talks about extratextual realities and argues that the 'fictionalizing act converts the reality reproduced into a sign' (3), he specifies in a footnote that he understands this extratextual reality to be constituted by discourses that structure and construct this reality for us: '*Reality*, then, is the variety of discourses relevant to the author's approach to the world through the text' (3n2; original emphasis). Still, Iser's real is not a dominantly constructivist notion but clearly assumes the existence of a world beyond text. Indeed, 'determinacy,' according to Iser, 'is a minimal definition of reality' (3).

Iser's whole theory evolves from his conviction that the main function of literature lies in its transgressive nature. Literature, so Iser argues, fulfils an anthropological need: the need to transgress the self, to simultaneously construct and transgress boundaries (cf. 297–303). However, transgression in this context should by no means be understood as a necessarily political or ideological act. It has no inherent connection with an agenda of subversion and resistance. The fictive is necessarily transgressive only in the sense that it brings the real and the imaginary into a dialogue – a transgression that Iser interprets in anthropological rather than social or political terms. By definition, the fictive crosses and re-crosses the boundaries between the real and the imaginary and thereby, according to Iser, 'fans out human plasticity into a panoply of shapes, each of which is an enactment of self-confrontation' (xi). It allows us 'to lead an ecstatic life by stepping out of what we are caught up in, in order to open up for ourselves what we are otherwise barred from' (303). 'Reading literature,' as Philipp Schweighauser glosses, 'allows us vicariously to explore alternative ways of living our lives, which in turn is an activity that invites us to reflect on the lives we really live' ("Doubly Real" 120). Accordingly, the function of literature is to serve as a stage for the boundless possibilities of human indeterminacy, enabling us to transgress the limits of our experience, to encounter the indeterminacy of the imaginary, while at the same time satisfying another anthropological desire – the one for closure. Confronted with the delimitation of meaning produced by the fictionalising acts, the reader is forced into an act of interpretation in the attempt 'to close the event and thus to master the experience of the imaginary' (Iser 17). In the encounter with the fictive we can briefly step outside of ourselves and perceive our own irreducibility to what we know about ourselves. It allows us to face and give expression to our self-alienation in the staging of the other as self and the self as other.

In view of the endless variety and indeterminacy that is necessary if literature is to fulfil this function, Iser stresses the role of the imaginary, thus departing from a common understanding of literature which tends to focus on its relation to the real. It is the imaginary which 'enables the subject that would like to see itself as its own ground to unfold itself as the endless mirroring of itself' (Iser 193). Instead of putting an emphasis on literature as a mirror of the real, Iser's theory suggests that the main function of the fictive is not 'mimesis of what exists but the staging of that which does not exist (yet)' (Schweighauser, "Doubly Real" 121). If the function of the fictive is therefore to unfold the horizon of human possibilities and to transgress boundaries, the imaginary is the

decisive element, while the real is the ground on which transgression is necessarily based.

The fictive thus constitutively involves the real as well as the imaginary. Both the imaginary and the real are necessary for the fictive to exist, since the former would be evanescent, formless and without intentionality without the material basis of the latter. Conversely, the real would be restricted in its determinacy and unable to develop complexity of meaning without the explosive force of the imaginary: 'Just as the fictionalizing act outstrips the determinacy of the real, so it provides the imaginary with the determinacy that it would not otherwise possess' (Iser 3). The fictive, then, is a double crossing of boundaries, an act of both dual countering and fusion, in which elements of the real are turned into signs whose meaning is no longer entirely determined by a clear referent. Thus they are turned into floating signifiers, while the vagueness and indeterminacy of the imaginary is congealed into form. The determinacy of the real is broken up by the indeterminacy of the imaginary and its meanings become derestricted. Conversely, the imaginary achieves that degree of concreteness which makes an encounter with it possible. In the fictive, both the real and the imaginary are accordingly transformed and cease to be what they were.

The fantastic as the quintessential fictive

The paradigmatic relation of the fantastic to the fictive has its roots in the similarity of their transitional and mediating position. On a continuum of textual manifestations reaching from mimesis to the marvellous, the fantastic is situated in the very middle and thus occupies within the fictive a position analogous to that of the fictive itself, which negotiates between the real and the imaginary. In its combination of the mimetic and the marvellous stance, the literary mode of the fantastic can accordingly be understood as a sort of *mise en abyme* of the fictive as such. Just as Iser calls the fictive 'a "transitional object," always hovering between the real and the imaginary, linking the two together' (20), the fantastic is typically described as a mode that 'is situated between the "realistic" and the "marvellous," stranded between this world and the next' (Jackson 180), with most scholars following Todorov's influential definition of the pure fantastic as 'a frontier between two adjacent realms,' a 'median line' between the genres of the uncanny and the marvellous (44).

Situated neither purely in the realm of the marvellous nor in that of mimesis, the fantastic resists a reduction to a single literary stance by introducing moments of contradiction and doubt. The mode thus

exhibits openly the interplay between the real and the imaginary that constitutes the fictive. While in the mimetic and the marvellous this interplay is veiled in a clear bias for one pole (in mimesis the role of the imaginary is obscured, in the marvellous the contribution of the real recedes from view), in the fantastic they remain basically irreconcilable.[10] It is this irreconcilability of the two stances that makes the fantastic so paradigmatically fictive, since it highlights those very fictionalising acts which, according to Iser, negotiate between the real and the imaginary to constitute the fictive: selection, combination and self-disclosure.

The basic structure of all of these acts is a crossing of boundaries, a transgressive event that opens up a multiplicity of meaning. Selection is the process by which elements are taken out of their original referential field and inserted in the text. They are thus dislocated from a system in which they are taken for granted and transposed into a context in which they become observable and semantically flexible (cf. Iser 5–7). Since every selection necessarily implies elision, every element that is present reflects and is reflected by all that is absent. By this process, the chosen elements become available for observation against the background of everything that has been excluded. The product of such selection and, necessarily, elision is intentionality (not to be confused with the author's intention). One aspect of this intentionality is the specific literary stance a text develops, since the process of selection determines to a large part the nature of the established world–text relation. Intentionality is established by and through the very way in which selection breaks down and reassembles extratextual systems and thereby opens out their determinacy towards the imaginary. Intentionality is thus not a fixed and determined product of the text but rather a process (cf. Iser 7). Instead of determining meaning, it multiplies it, or, as Iser puts it, 'it is the preparation of an imaginary quality for use' (6).

The second fictionalising act is combination. Combination establishes relationships within a text and serves once more to derestrict meaning. This can take various forms but mostly happens through a transgression of the boundaries of lexical meanings, of semantic enclosures within the text or of extratextual conventions. Every established combination changes the elements involved, which gain a new potential of meaning, while at the same time it tacitly evokes the whole breadth of possible combinations which were not realised. Just like selection, combination serves to make the absent present by pointing to what it is not. 'Thus,' Iser asserts, 'the relational process oversteps the inherent limits of each figuration, links them together, but then [. . .] causes the realized link itself to be overstepped by those possibilities that it has included' (8).

Both selection and combination thus open up fields of signification which are indeterminate and which allow for a space of free play of interpretation. They can do so only because what they overstep is always present as an absence within the text. The fictive can only mean, can only be significant in relation to both the real and the imaginary and as the interplay of the actualised and the excluded. As Iser explains:

> While selection unfolds the imaginary as counterplay between the past and present, combination sets off the given against otherness. The play space of selection takes shape as a horizon of possibilities against the background of realities made non-actual; the play space of combination takes shape as the otherness of the given. (232)

As transgressive acts, they both always continue to invoke what they transgress. In their opening out into play, meaning is constituted in the interplay of the determinate and the indeterminate. In their transgression, these fictionalising acts are therefore also always potentially subversive and conservative at the same time.

By provoking contradictions and incompatibilities, selection and combination in fantastic texts expose the modus operandi of the fictive, which Iser describes (with clear resonance to such claims about the fantastic mode as mentioned above) as 'the coexistence of the mutually exclusive' (79). The creation of intentionality in the process of selection is made conspicuous, since the text draws upon both mimetic and marvellous stances, exposing their otherwise tacit role in production and reception. Similarly, the derestriction of meaning and the transformation of referentiality which selection and combination develop is made visible, because 'the fantastic draws attention to its own status as a linguistic system and reveals "reality" to be just another system of linguistic signs' (Horstkotte 20). The semantic opening up of the determinism of the real by its inflection through the imaginary in the fictionalising acts is thus brought to the fore. As neither the mimetic nor the marvellous stance suffices to account for the particular intentionality and combinatory relations of the fantastic text, its meanings become ambiguous, free-floating. Thus, when Rabkin argues that 'the fantastic takes words and reconfigures their semantic ranges, puts them in new contexts, creates new grapholects for them, and in so doing it liberates us' (26), he makes precisely the same argument as Iser does for the derestriction of semantic meaning through the acts of selection and combination, and even approaches Iser's understanding of the fictive's anthropological function.

Iser's third fictionalising act is self-disclosure. The literary text exposes its own fictionality through various means which are governed by a conventional contract between author and reader. This act of self-disclosure happens to a large extent on a paratextual level, that is, it is largely independent of authenticating gestures made within a text. A narrative heralds itself as fiction by being published and marketed as such, notwithstanding any claims to truthfulness that it might assert. Thus the world represented in the text is in a mode of the 'as-if,' or in Iser's words, reality, as it is reproduced in a text, is 'put [. . .] in brackets' (16). It does not represent extratextual reality but refers to a world which only comes into being by this very act of reference. Iser argues that this self-disclosure necessitates a change in the reader, 'that we must and do suspend all natural attitudes adopted towards the "real" world once we are confronted with the represented world' (13). It is in this changed attitude that Iser situates another important anthropological effect of literature, since the 'as-if' forces us into an encounter with the imaginary. In order to accept the 'as-if,' we must overstep the limits of our own reality and enter into a world in which meanings are potentially limitless. Once again the desire for transcendence vies with the desire for closure, as such indeterminancy 'gives rise to a tension that demands to be resolved, but resolution can take place only if what has manifested itself in the event can be made to mean something' (Iser 17).

In fantastic texts, one finds this act of self-disclosure doubled. The text, which has been marked as fictional on the paratextual level, stages yet another self-disclosure on the level of diegesis. In the same way that readers adapt their attitude towards a text on the basis of its fictionality, they are forced to reconsider their stance again when mimesis and the marvellous come into conflict. In light of this, I would like to qualify Iser's argument quoted earlier that when faced with a fictional text we 'suspend all natural attitudes adopted towards the "real" world' (13). While this is certainly true, it fails to take account of the difference in the degree of this suspension. Mimetic texts generally allow us to maintain most of our 'natural attitudes' and assumptions about the way the world works, while the marvellous relies to a much greater extent on a suspension of the everyday.

To sum up, in its contradictory structure the fantastic showcases the two competing literary stances of the mimetic and the marvellous, laying bare the mechanisms of production and reception which in other genres and modes often remain latent and hidden. Thus fantastic hesitation exaggerates and exploits qualities which are in principle shared by all literary texts. As the fantastic integrates two different

and mutually exclusive stances, their juxtaposition casts the reader into doubt as to the adequate approach to interpretation. The textual indeterminacy produced by the fictionalising acts of selection and combination is therefore augmented by an indeterminacy of reception. A general feature of the fictive, namely hesitation resulting from indeterminacy, becomes the conspicuous characteristic of the fantastic since the elements involved stand in an ultimately irresolvable contradiction. Fantastic texts are thus characterised by the staging of the incompatibility of mimesis and the marvellous that obstructs their accommodation of a unified signification and thereby delays the anthropological desire for closure. The interplay between the determinacy of the real and the indeterminacy of the imaginary is fully played out as verisimilitude and imagination themselves become problematical categories. The tension between the urge for closure and determined meaning and the desire to open up towards indeterminacy is therefore accentuated, as interpretative hesitation is prolonged on purpose, even to the point of frustration.

In this, the fantastic is truly dialogic. It does not lend itself easily to a didactic purpose or a clear political agenda, since in its very transgressive nature it must always remain ambiguous and is thus never merely subversive or exclusively reactionary.[11] In the end, the reader is given a choice between different ways of understanding the text. It is thus that the fantastic not only exposes the structural principle of the fictive by pointing to the fictionalising acts, but also brings to the fore the strategies of communication and interpretation which structure our encounter with fictional texts, and through them with the other and with ourselves. As the choice of an appropriate stance of reception is made deliberately problematic, fantastic texts may serve to foreground the mechanisms and ground-rules governing the dynamic processes of the fictive, not only in its constitution but also in its effect. As readers are forced to become aware of and question their approach to a textual representation, reception may become a conscious act of taking readerly responsibility.

Embedded fantasy

While such considerations have arguably always influenced the various variants of the fantastic mode at least implicitly, it would seem that they have become explicit and central in recent reconstructive literature. This shift in focus is achieved primarily by the introduction of yet another *mise en abyme*, by taking literally the strategy of 'double framing' which Raoul Eshelman has emphasised repeatedly in his attempt

to characterise the current literary mood-shift (*Performatism* 2). In my literary case studies, the fantastic is bracketed once again in a further, now metadiegetic, act of fictionalising self-disclosure.

Since Iser speaks about fiction in general, he does not differentiate between different types of self-disclosure. But the frame that, according to Iser, 'puts the world represented in brackets' (16) not only delimits the aesthetic space but also negotiates its relation to reality, since it determines the nature of the boundary it designates. While the frame is the marker of fictionality, it is at the same time the primary site for the establishment of textual truth claims, as it determines and characterises ontological boundaries. To a significant extent then, a text's truth claims are negotiated within its frame. These negotiations happen not only explicitly by establishing truth claims about the inserted narratives, but also on the basis of genre conventions which are invoked in the frame. The importance of the frame to negotiate a text's relation to reality therefore also identifies it as the crucial location of the contradictory impulses of the fantastic in general. Broadly speaking, marvellous texts revel in the freedom that a distinct boundary affords the imagination, unfettered from the need to adhere to the basic rules governing the extratextual world, while mimetic texts aim to make the frame transparent and permeable, to merge the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic space. Fantastic texts, in contrast, derive their effect from the paradoxical move to make the frame both transparent and conspicuous. They tend to deny the existence of a boundary, while capitalising on the imaginative freedom the separateness of the fictive space affords.

Nonetheless, the effect of the fantastic, I argue, depends as much on the possibility to perceive ontological boundaries as it does on their transgression, a fact that gains relevance in reconstructive usages of the mode. Indeed, departing from a postmodernist tendency to transgress and blur boundaries, the novels discussed in this study all sooner or later clearly expose their embedded stories as fictional within the frame narrative, thus firmly establishing ontological boundaries and effectively foregoing the traditional truth claims. To the extent that the inserted stories still call upon the mimetic stance, they do so in an explicit appeal for suspension of disbelief. By juxtaposing different levels of verisimilitude in frame and metadiegesis as well as by directly addressing the fictionality of the latter, the distinction between fact and fiction, which has become so fuzzy in postmodernism, is therefore contained within the fictions themselves. While the postmodernist use of the fantastic mode strove to dissolve the difference between fiction and reality (cf. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 81; Hoffmann 268; Wolf

689–92), my recent literary examples reintroduce and reinforce their separation. They do this not by an anachronistic return to a naïve confidence in the possibility of a clear distinction and separation of these realms. Rather, the contrast is doubled and externalised in the introduction of a juxtaposition of metadiegesis and diegesis, between what pretends to be fact and what admits to be fiction. Instead of a generalisation of the fantastic, this amounts to a process of enclosure and containment.

At the same time, the effect of this strategy is not a straightforward reinforcement of the mimetic truth claims conditioning the frame narrative. Rather, the multiplication of narrative instances simultaneously widens the distance between the inset story and the experiential reality of the reader *and* exposes its mediation by introducing an additional level of transmission. Since they tell stories about narration, the multiple narrative levels also expose their own status *as* narratives. There is always, in the novels at hand, a kind of ontological backlash, in which the framing narrative, notwithstanding its mimetic stance, is itself clearly declared fictional.

By foregrounding the interplay of literary stances that constitutes the fantastic, the novels offer a scenario of possible narrative choices, interrogating the nature, responsibility and power of narration. The fantastic mode no longer serves solely or even primarily the purpose of 'rejecting any definitive version of "reality" or "truth"' (Olsen, *Ellipse* 20). What increasingly comes to the foreground instead, once the fantastic is no longer exclusively seen as 'a mode whose premise is a will to deconstruct' (Olsen, *Ellipse* 22), is its potential to reflect on the communicative process of the fictive as such. The novels to which I will shortly turn in more detail use the paradigmatic fictionality of the fantastic in order to bring pragmatic aspects to centre stage. Since the fantastic mode foregrounds the processes and mechanisms of fictionalising acts and exemplifies the never-ending debates about mimesis and the marvellous, subversion and escape, engagement and entertainment that directly concern literary production in general, it is well suited to the novels' meditations on the potentials, limits and responsibilities of the fictive. As fantastic hesitation shifts from the ontological and epistemological to a pragmatic level, the processes underlying fictive communication, both in production and in reception, are highlighted and ultimately readers are confronted with interpretative choices that involve agency and responsibility. This is a fantastic beyond subversion, a fantastic that is no longer driven solely by the need to deconstruct but by a desire for reconstruction.

However, this shift has to be perceived against the background of postmodernism and its use and interpretation of the fantastic. Highly aware of theoretical discourses and academic debates, the novels I discuss in Part II employ the fantastic in a dialogue with postmodernism, projecting their use of the mode against a postmodernist backdrop. In this, postmodernist insights always serve as the touchstone and foundational premise for any tentative exploration of reconstructive possibilities. Moving beyond subversion, these novels attempt to leave postmodernist ground and search for alternative ways to understand fiction's ethical and aesthetic potential. That our reality is largely fictive is a realisation postmodernism has tirelessly insisted on. That this makes us responsible for the kind of fictions our reality is composed of, and that it does not make it less but ever more important to learn to judge and value them, is the realisation that has followed. Beyond postmodernism, this may be, as Benton et al. suggested in their manifesto of reconstruction, a renewed kind of 'humanist subtext,' a sense of creative responsibility that establishes its validity on the premise of its contingency.

Part II
Reconstructive Readings

3

Leaving the Postmodernist Labyrinth: Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

Mark Z. Danielewski's highly ambitious novel *House of Leaves* serves as a convenient entry point into the discussion of the reconstructive shift because it seems to hover perfectly in between postmodernism and the reconstructive impulse that hopes to go beyond it. The novel is obviously and explicitly indebted to both postmodernist thought and aesthetics. Nevertheless, as I will argue, it suggests venues for thinking (and living) which continue to take postmodernist insights into account while searching out new communicative and communal connections and meanings. The introduction of a fantastic story as its narrative core is, I claim, essential to this negotiation, since the central fantastic device the novel introduces comes to stand for postmodernism in its nihilistic, solipsistic and destructive (not deconstructive!) extreme. At the same time, the implications and functions of the fantastic shift along the lines of the novel's multiple narrative levels. To give readers some guidance through this labyrinthine text, my discussion will approach its highly complex narrative structure successively, level after level, teasing out the shifting role of the fantastic mode. By means of the introduction of multiple narrative frames in which narrative authority becomes increasingly questionable, the function of the fantastic in *House of Leaves* incrementally shifts in focus from epistemological and ontological considerations towards pragmatic ones. While the novel starts out from a deeply postmodernist scenario, developing a labyrinthine textual fabric of deferred meanings, impossible references and uncertain boundaries, it eventually leaves the solipsism of its postmodernist house to reconstruct a past, a family and a home.

Inhabiting the postmodernist house

Imagine the unthinkable: a structure without a centre, in which no delimitation, however permanent it might seem to be, remains stable and fixed; a structure which is subject to constant shifts and deferrals, entropy and erasure. Imagine this as a house, your house, its shifting instability, its inhuman denial of determined meaning opening up at the very heart of the place you depend on for security and support. A major part of postmodernist poststructuralist and deconstructive critical impetus is based on such a premise. Precisely such a structure is the central conceit of *House of Leaves*. At the heart of the story stands a concrete embodiment of abstract poststructuralist ideas about structure, language and meaning: a mysterious house which is impossibly larger on the inside than on the outside, opening up to a labyrinth of endless, ever-changing passageways and doors. It is a structure without a centre, an empty signifier that violently resists any ascription of meaning:

> The walls are endlessly bare. Nothing hangs on them, nothing defines them. They are without texture. Even to the keenest eye or most sentient fingertip, they remain unreadable. You will never find a mark there. No trace survives. The walls obliterate everything. They are permanently absolved of all record. Oblique, forever obscure and unwritten. Behold the perfect pantheon of absence. (*HoL* 423)

The house thus combines the apparent concreteness of architecture, the stability and materiality implied by walls with the endless deferral of meaning and the absence of fixed certainties and structures that post-structuralism has postulated for language. At the same time, it drives these postulates to their nihilistic extremes, denying even the survival of the trace which poststructuralism continues to hold on to.

House of Leaves explicitly signals its indebtedness to postmodernist and especially poststructuralist discourse not only on a thematic level but also engages with the language of theory itself. A large portion of this highly complex and programmatically labyrinthine text presents itself as an academic treatise, complete with over 400 footnotes referring to both real and fictitious secondary literature. Thus the novel enters into a dialogue with theory on the level of content, explicitly quoting such trade-mark names as Jaques Derrida, Susan Sontag or Harold Bloom, but goes even further in appropriating theory's very language and style.

Moreover, the novel draws connections between the house as its central conceit and poststructuralist philosophy on more than a purely

metaphorical level. In order to gain some conception of the nature of the house, a footnote to the text explicitly refers the reader to two central passages from Derrida's *L'écriture et la différance*, which discuss the paradox of structure and centre. Derrida here argues that although '[t]he center is not the center,' lying both inside and outside of a totality, meaning always necessarily claims and implies a centre. Thus 'the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself' (quoted in *HoL* 112). Although allegedly included here '[s]trictly as an aside' (*HoL* 111), this is, of course, by no means merely an incidental comment. Quite the contrary, it is indubitably central (pun intended), and quite literally takes up a key position in the text. In one of the many instances of inventive use of typeface to be found in the novel, the short passage this footnote refers to is surrounded by text that has been arranged in the form of a red key. The heavy debt the whole idea of the house owes to Derridean poststructuralism and deconstruction is therewith openly acknowledged. As Will Slocombe suggests with the title of an article, the novel's central conceit could indeed be appropriately called a "House that Jacques Built."

However, as I have indicated before, while poststructuralism and deconstruction supply the basic nature of the house, the novel drives their propositions to nihilistic extremes. In spite of his title, Slocombe therefore acknowledges Derrida's influence on the novel only to point out that the house eventually supersedes it. The house, he argues, must be understood as 'a figure of impossibility, not deconstructive deferral or postmodern play, but a nihilistic void that the text, through language, continually pretends is not there' (100). By focusing on the nihilistic void that lurks at the heart of deconstruction, Slocombe avers, the novel 'is an attempt to bring forth nothingness into literature, not writing about it, but by such literature destroying its own literariness from within' (105). From this perspective, *House of Leaves* seems to offer not a move beyond but a pessimistic culmination of postmodernism. It no longer foregrounds the arbitrariness and the hopeful free play of meaning but negates meaning entirely. It is no longer deconstructive but destructive, its 'entire raison d'être [being] its own erasure' (Slocombe 106).

Meanwhile, in figuring as a material manifestation of postmodernist nihilism, the house is also portrayed as a radically inhuman space. If 'house' is understood to mean a human construction, built to provide shelter, 'a building for human habitation' as the OED has it, the house in the novel doubly defies the fundamental logic of houses: it is a building without a builder, a habitation that remains 'necessarily

uninhabited' (*HoL* 120). Its interior is starkly inhospitable, an epitome of absence as it were, with no light, complete silence, no air movement, no magnetic field and temperature at 32°F, or 0°C (cf. *HoL* 121). The house bears no relation to anything human hands have ever created; it is, emphatically, 'a lifeless, objectless, soulless place. Godless too' (*HoL* 359). Considering the connection of house and central postmodernist ideas, what picture of postmodernism does this render? Clearly the implication is that postmodernism's philosophical credos, when taken to nihilistic extremes, are inimical to human life. Meaning is necessarily established by the human being as *homo interpretans*. While the lack of stable centres or origins (one of the central tenets of postmodernist philosophy) can be acknowledged, it appears that it cannot be inhabited in its final conclusions. Envisioning a radically postmodernist space with all its implications, the house in Danielewski's novel poses precisely this problem. A truly postmodernist house cannot be inhabited.

Accordingly, the radical inhospitality and alterity of the house becomes a deadly threat and danger in the novel, a fantastic intrusion into the everyday that is both horrifying and aggressively hostile, and which has to be overcome in order for life to continue. No longer just a philosophical paradox and critical position but an unsettling reality, poststructuralism driven to nihilistic extremes turns into an almost demonic force. In this sense, the novel's use of the fantastic could be understood in Rosemary Jackson's terms as a manifestation and mastering of desire. Fantasy, she explains, 'can expel desire, when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity' (4). Nihilistic poststructuralism has here been turned into a hostile force that evokes a strong fascination and challenge, but dangerously threatens personal and cultural stability with narcissistic solipsism and the dissolution of all meaning, and therefore has to be overcome.

Among the literary examples discussed in this study, *House of Leaves* offers the most direct and explicit engagement with deconstructive postmodernism and its implications. Still, I beg to differ with Slocombe's conclusion that the novel, dark though it might appear to be, celebrates nihilism. The house's inhospitality, its silence and (self-)destructive nature, are not portrayed as the only possible venue and outcome, the unavoidable final destiny of life (or literature, meaning and so on) after the lessons of postmodernism. Instead, in imagining a house that resists the very logic of habitation, Danielewski's debut novel quite literally asks how it might be possible to reconcile a radical postmodernism with a renewed concern for the pragmatics of the everyday, for the ways in which we still try to live, to communicate and to make sense of

ourselves and our world. It enquires into ways to inhabit the uninhabitable space of the postmodernist house, to deal with its inhospitality to anything human from a decidedly human, perhaps even humanist, perspective. While postmodernist thought here serves as underlying premise, as central motif and as primary aesthetic inspiration, the novel eventually leaves its postmodernist 'un-homely' and uncanny home and takes first steps beyond that are indicative of the attempts of an emergent reconstructive aesthetic to understand its relation to its predecessors, to find new directions and to come into its own.

This trajectory, which I will trace throughout this chapter, from the nihilistic version of poststructuralist insights incorporated by the house towards a reconstructive potential, can be aptly exemplified even at the very point in which the novel explicitly evokes Derrida's theory in the footnote mentioned earlier. Central as Derrida's ideas are to an understanding of the house, the novel does not leave them uncontested but juxtaposes them with numerous other voices, which contradict or complement its claims. Thus, in a footnote to the footnote, a quotation from Christian Norberg-Schulz serves as a reminder of the anthropological need for centres to anchor meaning: 'This need is so strong that man since remote times has thought of the whole world as being centralized,' this being the main function of religion and myth (qtd. in *HoL* 113). From this perspective, centres are presented as both subjectively established and intersubjectively externalised to satisfy a need for order and stability. Even though centres might not objectively exist, as Derrida claims, Norberg-Schulz points out that they are subjectively necessary, or in other words, that precisely *because* they do not exist, they have to be created. This process of creation, of projecting a centre by searching for it, is what is called life.

But this is not where it ends. Yet another footnote on this footnote approaches the question from a more materialistic point of view, juxtaposing claims about absence and subjectivity with the undeniably centring force of gravity, which 'has had as much to say about humanity's sense of centre as Derrida and Norberg-Schulz' (*HoL* 113). As human beings, our perceptions are centred, not only in that we necessarily are the centre of our experiences, but also in that our biological setup gives us a fundamental sense of such ordering categories as 'above' and 'below' in relation to our environment. Thus deconstruction's emphasis on language is qualified by the fact that 'gravity speaks a language comprehensible long before the words describing it are ever spoken or learned' (*HoL* 113). This goes beyond a mere reminder of basic material facts. If the footnote on Derrida suggests the absence of centres, and

the one on Norberg-Schulz both their necessity and their subjectivity, the footnote on gravity reveals the necessary ordering of the world to be relational. After all, gravitation is not unidirectional but serves as a reminder that 'between any two particles of matter exists an attractive force' (*HoL* 113).

After the footnotes have thus traversed, as it were, the fields of postmodernist philosophy, which questions the existence of a centre, of religion which believes in it, and of the natural sciences which confirm and describe it, a final footnote in this series returns us to the realm of the imagination, in which centres can be created in their very impossibility. The house eventually defies even gravity and therefore we are finally referred to the artworks of M. C. Escher and El Lissitzky. As Derrida has been quoted to argue, a structure without a centre represents the unthinkable and unrepresentable. It has no place in the realities of human life, in the quotidian necessities of ordering, signifying, interpreting, living. Coming at last full circle, we are back where we started: the house, as an impossible space, as the unthinkable whose place and power lie in the realm of the imagination.

This, I would argue, is a far cry from the nihilism Slocombe diagnosed. Certainly, the house poses an existential threat and problem to the characters in the novel. After all, 'there is no hope of survival there. Life is impossible' (*HoL* 387). But precisely this realisation gives rise to attempts to come to terms with the house. Herein indeed, 'lies the lesson of the house, spoken in syllables of absolute silence, resounding within [. . .] like a faint and uncertain echo . . . *If we desire to live, we can only do so in the margins of that place*' (*HoL* 387–8, original emphasis).[1] Life in the house might be impossible but the question the novel repeatedly asks is how to live with and in spite of it, how to accept the insights of poststructuralism that have so deeply influenced postmodernism without being driven into isolated solipsism, silence, madness or suicide, all of which are dangers the characters face and act out. As the series of footnotes discussed above suggests, it is not nihilism, silence, and the unrepresentable that ultimately turns out to have the last word, but the power of imagination.

The absence of the centre deconstructs stable signification, but at the same time it is the prerequisite and the trigger for processes of meaning-making. In his analysis of the novel, Slocombe himself mentions that absence continually gives rise to a proliferation of language: 'The entire "house of leaves" is concerned with the attempt, by both language and culture, to overcome nothingness' (100). Precisely because the house resists conclusive meanings it becomes a space that gives rise to an

excess of meaning-making in everyone who encounters it, both directly and indirectly. In Slocombe's opinion, all these attempts are failures that ultimately fall prey to the house's self-erasure. He chooses not to focus on the numerous ways in which the text resists this erasure. Even though it features several explicit instances of textual destruction, of struck passages, missing materials, and obliterated pages, it also collects large amounts of apparently peripheral material, piles stories on stories, follows vague associations and indulges in digressions, both personal and scholarly. While Slocombe may be right in his claim that these add up to nothing, it is the very process of their telling that provides sustenance and substance in the face of absence. While language's limitations and insufficiencies are repeatedly exposed, it still provides the only means by which the impossible existence of the house can be in any way communicated. In that sense, the novel is at least as much a celebration of the possibilities of language and imagination as it is an exploration and exposition of its limits.

While the novel has thus turned a concrete embodiment of poststructuralist ideas into its core horror scenario – a hostile space of all-engulfing radical absence at the heart of house, home, family and self – and in spite of the text's persistent self-erasing tendencies, the novel resists its own pessimism and nihilism even as they are acted out. After all, after more than fifty years of postmodernism, the emptiness of the house is also 'endlessly familiar, endlessly repetitive' (*HoL* 359). In that sense, the house can be understood as the culmination and radicalisation of nihilistic tendencies embedded in postmodernist philosophy, even while acknowledging the pragmatic limits of this nihilism. It is in this complex interplay between deconstruction, nihilism and the impulse for reconstruction through the creative force of the imagination that the text's move beyond postmodernism unfolds. Its presentation of various strategies to deal and live with the existence of the house and its threat of eradication and meaningless void provide a glimpse of the novel's specific forays into reconstruction. Its tentative optimism emerges not only on the narrative plot-level, but further unfolds in the complex dialogue between its narrative layers, in the attention it pays to questions of representation and authenticity as well as to processes of reading and writing, and in its acute awareness of its own textual and physical materiality.

In the following, I will trace the movement from a postmodernist premise towards reconstructive tendencies as it manifests again and again throughout the various layers of the novel's complex narrative setup, taking into special consideration the different ways in which

each individual narrative level engages with the central fantastic conceit. I will therefore look at each of these layers in isolation before later taking their interconnection into due consideration. As the narrative perspective and mode shift from layer to layer, the novel harnesses different forms of fantastic hesitation and different literary modes to develop a reconstructive perspective on questions about representation, truth and meaning, which have been at the heart of postmodernist concerns. Escaping from nihilistic pessimism, it combines poststructuralist insights with a yearning for meaning, communication and love.

Bringing the light of love into nihilistic darkness: Will Navidson's film

With its central plot, *House of Leaves* unambiguously inscribes itself into a gothic horror tradition, even to the point of being conventional to a fault. For the prize-winning photo-journalist Will Navidson and his partner Karen Green the rural domestic peace they had been looking for quickly turns into a nightmare: the house they have moved into on Ash Tree Lane, somewhere in rural Virginia, appears to be larger on the inside than the outside. While this difference initially appears to amount to no more than a quarter-inch, the house gradually opens up to an endless labyrinth of utter absence. The fantastic intrusion here quite literally erupts through the surfaces of everyday life. The very walls that should lend stability and security to home and family suddenly open up towards the unfamiliar and unknown. At the heart of what is supposed to be the most familiar and comforting space, inexplicable darkness intrudes in a violent breach of both basic physical rules and psychological securities.

This disruption of the explicitly banal and emphatically inartificial also finds expression on a level of mediation. After all, this metadiegetic narrative takes the form of a home-video documentary. Navidson, who is loath to give up his profession as a photographer, has decided to film the family's move into their new home.[2] Thus an emphatically realist authenticating frame is established. Into this setting the initial fantastic intrusion occurs in a manner that is very true to the nature of the house: it manifests on the video precisely as an inexplicable conjuncture of presence and absence. Somehow an additional room, like a walk-in closet, has appeared in the house while the family was away for a week without the motion sensors of the cameras, which Navidson had set up in every room, ever having been triggered: 'Virtually a week seamlessly elided, showing us the family as they depart from a house without that

strange interior space present only to return a fraction of a second later to find it already in place, almost as if it had been there all along' (*HoL* 28). Putting a contemporary twist on the epistemological doubt typical for the classical gothic form of the mode, it is no longer the senses themselves that have become unreliable but those technologies of measurement and representation we have come to rely on.

The narrative faithfully follows genre stereotypes even in its plot-development, its character structure and its gender roles, self-consciously presenting a 'supreme gothic tale' (*HoL* 147). Nevertheless, the fantastic other that lies at the heart of this emphatically conventional story is deliberately atypical in one decisive feature:

> Unlike *The Twilight Zone*, however, or some other like cousin where understanding comes neat and fast (i.e. This is clearly a door to another dimension! or This is a passage to another world – with directions!) the hallway offers no answers. The monolith in *2001* seems the most appropriate cinematic analog, incontrovertibly there but virtually inviolate to interpretation. (*HoL* 60)

Nevertheless, it is precisely in resisting such definitive inscriptions that the house, in fact, becomes a paradigmatic fantastic other, a radical implementation of what Rosemary Jackson calls fantastic 'non-signification.' 'The fantastic,' Jackson explains, 'traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made "absent"' (4). The house is the unseen and unsaid, the absent as such. It is the projection screen for all the characters' wishes, fears, and anxieties, an empty blank that can be filled with whatever they most fear or desire. Moreover, the house also provides the basic blueprint for creating fantastic others (indicated also by the blue print used consistently for the word 'house' throughout the text). Thus it supplies the underlying structure, laying out the basic features, while the blue screen, that blank projection space of cinematic production that can be filled at discretion, itself constitutes the intrusive, unsettling absence: read 'house' as 'Insert monster here' (cf. Hayles 792; Brick).[3]

As the novel suggests, the house functions as a 'solipsistic heightener': 'the house, the halls, and the rooms all become the self – collapsing, expanding, tilting, closing, but always in perfect relation to the mental state of the individual' (*HoL* 165).[4] While psychoanalytical interpretations of the fantastic as a field of projection of repressed desires and fears are common, the fantastic alterity of the house becomes more specifically postmodernist since the dilemma it poses lies precisely in its

ultimate resistance to, or rather its excess of, any single interpretation. The house both is and is not a mirror of Navidson's psyche. It is and is not a manifestation of the alienation at the heart of the family, literally stretching out immense distances separating each from the others. It is and is not the explorer's ultimate challenge, the never-before conquered Mount Everest that lures the professional adventurer Holloway with the promise of fame and fortune only to bring him face to face with his own insignificance. It is, and is not, the home of a Minotaur. In its postmodernist resistance to stable meaning, it encompasses every interpretation, only to continually defer and exceed them all. Its walls can endlessly be inscribed upon, but the marks will never stay long. They fail to serve as a means of communication with others, with everyone essentially facing the shifting passageways on their own. Ultimately then the house confronts characters not so much with their unspoken desires, or their fears, but threatens them with the realisation of their own inability to signify and with the impossibility of establishing meaning in a solipsistic space. If this is the threat a postmodernist nihilism poses, it is dire indeed: the explorer Holloway is driven into madness, murder and suicide; Navidson loses his twin Tom to his own egocentric ambition, and the family is being ripped apart both emotionally and physically.

However, as in most typical exemplars of the gothic genre, order is eventually restored and the fantastic intrusion is finally overcome. Indeed, the novel closes this plotline with a happy ending: Karen, overcoming all her fears in an act of unconditional commitment and love, enters the labyrinth to rescue Navidson, who lies close to death in utter darkness and cold. The light of Karen's flashlight appears to him like a miracle in the midst of a bottomless, featureless void, in which even the walls of the labyrinth have disappeared (cf. *HoL* 487, 522). As the couple is finally reunited, the hallway simply dissolves around them, returning them to their front lawn. The family thus escapes the house and, with an openly ironic nod at convention, Karen and Navidson finally get married.

If then, as Yale-graduate Danielewski explicitly states in an interview, 'all the theoretical concepts that I have been wrestling with *are represented in this house*' (McCaffery and Gregory 105; original emphasis), the novel presents itself, on this level, as a kind of exorcism of postmodernist theory, apparently celebrating a return to values like family, marriage and love that threatens to drift into blatant sentimentalism. Within the genre framework of the classical fantastic, the house as an epitome of postmodernist nihilism is cast as the intruding fantastic antagonist, whose threat is finally successfully overcome in a turn to community

and responsibility. Against the solipsism and the darkness of the house, the novel glaringly pitches the light of love. The solipsistic space of the house, so it seems, can only be escaped by an unconditional sacrifice of opening up to the other – a point already hinted at when a footnote to the interpretation of the house as a solipsistic heightener promptly raises the question, 'why the house never opens into what is necessarily outside of itself' (*HoL* 165). Having barely made it through the abyss of postmodernist nihilism and isolating solipsism, Navidson thus comes out at the other end somewhat the worse for wear, having lost a hand and an eye, but a wiser man finally able to assume the role of father and husband.

But the novel's reconstructive answer to postmodernism is more complex than this rather saccharine declaration of the power of love. Meaning in spite of meaninglessness is not simply to be found in love. Instead, love itself is nothing else but the continual endeavour to establish meaningful connections in full knowledge of the absence they are built upon. Love does not fill or negate absence. It does not endeavour to master the house by containing its threat in an explanation. All attempts at such mastery end disastrously in the novel, most obviously in the case of the explorer Holloway's suicide. The escape Navidson and Karen find from the house's isolating void, however, is based on intersubjective understanding. Meaning is derived from dialogic agreement that has to remain open for reinterpretation and that is found beyond and in spite of the fundamental meaninglessness the house stands for. While the house itself violently resists and erases meaning, the creation of meaning becomes the ultimate labour of love.

The novel states this most explicitly as the metaphoric light of love merges with the actual light of the film-projector in Karen's short film-clip 'A Brief History of Who I Love' (*HoL* 367). Created by Karen during the time of her separation from Navidson after their flight from the house and the catastrophe of Tom's death, it is a collage of photographs, telling Navidson's life through family pictures and his own photographic work. Even though it is an act of interpretation, providing a narrative trajectory for Navidson's life, the work on this film enables Karen for the first time to face Navidson as other, to allow him to exceed her own expectations for him. Quite paradoxically, it is by projecting Navidson's image on a screen that Karen is finally able to see him directly: 'not as a projection of her own insecurities and demons but just as Will Navidson, in flickering light, flung up by a 16mm projector on a paint-white wall' (*HoL* 352). This is a revaluation of love as an act of creative projection, one that necessarily circumscribes and defines

the loved object but also gives it meaning *as other*, not only as an aspect of the self. Love here turns into an act of creative interpretation, as Karen creates her own 'labour of love' while also providing a platform for the voice of the loved one, '[w]isely [. . .] let[ting] Navidson's work speak for itself' (*HoL* 367).

The images of Karen's clip thus achieve precisely what the solipsistic space of the house's nihilism can never do: they open up to what is outside. Through Navidson's profession as photo-journalist, this short-clip provides a private history of the loved one, but also directs its gaze towards others, with a decidedly humanistic proclamation:

> The world around only mattered because people lived there and sometimes, in spite of the pain, tragedy, and degradation, even managed to triumph there. [. . .] Each of Navidson's photographs consistently reveals how vehemently he despised life's destruction and how desperately he sought to preserve its fleeting beauties, no matter the circumstances. (*HoL* 367)

This amounts to a love-declaration to mankind, to human relations and to the ability to capture and create moments of beauty in spite of the darkness they necessarily emerge from, both figuratively and literally. Thus the frames of Karen's film

> serve as the perfect counterpoint to that infinite stretch of hallways, rooms and stairs. The house is empty, her piece is full. The house is dark, her film glows. [. . .] On Ash Tree Lane stands a house of darkness, cold, and emptiness. In 16mm stands a house of light, love and colour.
>
> By following her heart, Karen made sense of what that place was not. (*HoL* 369)

The act of creation, of interpretation, of making sense is here celebrated as the necessary basis of life and love and as everything the house is not. While the house itself resists meaning and threatens life, it becomes the background against which the creation of sense is cast into relief. As an act of creation pitched against the house's threat of nihilism, Karen's short film is not only a 'History of Who I Love,' but also, as the novel suggests in a telling misspelling of the title in the appendix, 'A Brief History of How [*sic*] I Love' (*HoL* 539; original insertion).

Consequently, the house's tendency to erase itself, 'to undo the violent hierarchy of its own existence' (Slocombe 92), is constantly

counterbalanced by the labour of loving creation. In fact, the presence of these two currents, nihilism and reconstruction, is acknowledged in the novel from the outset. After all, the ending of the film-plot reinstates and confirms Navidson's original project: to document the creation of a home. But even the house's darkness itself, while impossible to capture and resistant to meaning, gives rise to creation and is turned into a thing of beauty by Navidson, who uses all his skills as a photographer in the attempt to communicate some of its immensity. Out of the darkness and nihilism of the house arises a film (and thus a product of light) that does not resist but constantly opens up to meaning and does so precisely because of its fantastic impossibility and incomprehensibility. While one cannot entirely escape the nihilistic postmodernist space of the house, the novel clearly offers hope and a mode of living by setting its stake in a continual endeavour to establish meaningful connections. The redeeming act of love turns into an act of continual creative interpretation.

In its metadiegetic gothic fantastic plot, the novel thus engages critically with a nihilistically extreme postmodernism, portraying it not as liberating and progressive but as life-threatening and destructive. Nevertheless, its happy ending eventually suggests not a defeat and annulment of postmodernist philosophical insights – after all, the house 'is still there. And will always be there' (*HoL* 527) – but a return to the pragmatic exigencies of everyday life, of family and mutual commitment.

However, this is not the whole story, not by far. Navidson's documentary may be the central narrative in the sense that everything else revolves around it, but it is, eventually, only one among several interweaving threads. Even though the house itself indubitably stands both at the centre of the text and embodies the novel itself in a series of metaleptic *mises en abyme*, the novel's main topic and concern can be located at least as much in those infinite acts of creation the house continually gives rise to. The tension between a nihilistic threat of erasure and a creative proliferation of meaning and interpretation that is reified in the family's struggle with their house reverberates on all the other levels of the novel's complex narrative setup. At the level of the central metadiegetic narrative this tension plays out as an ontological and existential threat, while the further narrative levels serve to cast it in increasingly pragmatic terms. The novel is at its most reconstructive as a consideration of the merits and dangers of acts of fictional creation and interpretation and in its repeated insistence on the desire and the need for communication and intersubjective connection.

The ghost knocking at the door of fiction is truth: Zampanò's manuscript

As the introduction to the novel tells us, Navidson's documentary *The Navidson Report* is the object of an elaborate and detailed academic treatise written by the mysterious old man Zampanò. This academic report takes up the main part of the novel and constitutes the sole way of access to and source of knowledge about the documentary for the reader. If the plot of the film *The Navidson Report* itself could, with Todorov, be called fantastic-marvellous, since the house's reality is, at this level of narrative, established without a doubt, Zampanò's manuscript shifts in genre towards Todorov's pure fantastic of continual hesitation.

Fantastic hesitation arises explicitly from an incongruence between form and content. A full-fledged academic treatise implies the reality of a film which recounts entirely unbelievable events. Even while Zampanò's discussion coyly dismisses the question of the reality of the house as irrelevant from the outset, he repeatedly returns to it both explicitly and implicitly. Opening his discussion with an excursus on authenticity, he inscribes his own subject into a line of famous controversies ranging from the Cottingley fairies to Billy Meyer's UFO sightings. Moreover, while this effectively serves as a reminder that authenticity of representation has been a contested field for the longest time, a contemporary twist is added to the discussion when Zampanò enters into a lengthy digression about the objectivity of documentaries and the ethics of truthful representation in photojournalism in an age of digital manipulation (cf. *HoL* 134–46).

Consequently, fantastic hesitation on this narrative level predominantly concerns representation. The question of the actual existence of the house is always posed in terms of a question about the authenticity of the film, while doubt enters on multiple levels: about the reality of the house, about the sincerity of Navidson's filmic representation, about the precision of Zampanò's description of this representation and about Zampanò's own understanding of the house as glimpsed in a film characterised by 'constant destruction of continuity, frequent jump cuts prohibiting any sort of accurate mapmaking' (*HoL* 109). Fantastic hesitation is thus effectively coupled with a postmodernist mistrust of representation and an acknowledgement of the constructedness of truth.

Moreover, in a familiar postmodernist twist, this epistemological doubt reaches even deeper than the questions of the authenticity, sincerity or inaccuracy of representation towards limits of representational possibilities as such. After all, the house itself is quite impossible to

comprehensively represent, ever-changing and endless as it is. Since 'no one ever sees that labyrinth in its entirety' it can never be encompassed or depicted (*HoL* 114). But the challenge it poses extends also to the merest glimpses, as its basic nihilistic nature is antithetical to representation, which necessarily brings something into existence. The filmic representation of its immense darkness remains two-dimensional for lack of depth cues, since artificial light-sources 'barely illuminate the size of that bore' (*HoL* 87). The only adequate representation of such absence, the novel suggests, is one in which the 'strongest gaze will be absorbed and utterly disappear' (*HoL* 90) – a complete denial of representation which, however, would risk being utterly uninteresting. Just such a radical denial eventually does find its way into the film towards its end, which features almost six minutes of completely dark screen (cf. *HoL* 468). In the novel's literalisation of a postmodernist fascination with gaps, silence and the silenced, the absent and repressed, the logical climax amounts to nothing less than a complete breakdown of representation itself. After all, for some, 'six minutes of nothing spelled the end of cinema' (*HoL* 468).

Nevertheless, fantastic hesitation and epistemological doubt are in the end not the main concern of Zampanò's treatise. Instead, it focuses on the process of signification and its pragmatic and communicative consequences: 'Though many continue to devote substantial time and energy to the antinomies of fact or fiction, representation or artifice, document or prank, as of late the more interesting material,' Zampanò says, 'dwells exclusively on the interpretation of events within the film' (*HoL* 3). Thus we see the main questions raised by the fantastic occurrence shifting and changing from one narrative level to the other. Instead of attempting to find answers to the ontological questions raised on the metadiegetic level about the house's material existence, or foregrounding the epistemological doubts that arise concerning the film, Zampanò's treatise constantly suggests a whole plethora of symbolic interpretations, not only of the house but of all aspects of the film, its characters, its aesthetics and its plot. Ontological and epistemological questions are here explicitly supplemented with pragmatic ones, as the challenge of the unknown extends from the nature of the house to its existence in and beyond representation, to its meaning.

In this shift towards interpretation, Zampanò's treatise becomes truly polyphonic, opening up to a whole cacophony of divergent and often contradictory voices. This proliferation of meaning arises directly from the house's resistance to signification, since it can never be conclusively contained within a single one. Truth remains forever elusive, as one

voice gainsays the other and critical consensus is never found.[5] '[T]he language of objectivity can never adequately address the reality of that place on Ash Tree Lane' (*HoL* 379), and truth can only be constructed in a process of mutual understanding. No longer singular, truth is always 'Truth & Truth' (*HoL* 144), 'the bifurcation of truth, with an ampersand tossed in for unity. [. . .] The articulation of conflict may very well be a better thing upon which to stand' (*HoL* 145).

Nevertheless, this is not an attempt to get rid of the concept of truth altogether. Quite the contrary, the footnote on Truth & Truth takes the form of a keyhole in the novel, strongly asserting therewith the revived importance of truth, not as a given, but as a necessary and valuable social and intersubjective construct. After all, if the medium of representation itself (both word and image) has turned out to be essentially unreliable, the truth claims it constructs and the effects of the specific form it takes become ever more important to consider. Truth claims are therefore neither avoided nor delegitimised. Instead, they are acknowledged as always dubitable, but no less necessary for all that. Even while 'what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here' (*HoL* xx), 'the ghost haunting *The Navidson Record* [referring here coyly both to the film and to Zampanò's treatise by the same title], continually bashing against the door, is none other than the recurring threat of its own reality' (*HoL* 149). In a postmodernist setting, in which representation has been cast into doubt, truth claims have been deconstructed and the border between reality and fiction has become increasingly blurred, reality itself is the ghost that always continues insistently to haunt fiction.

Just as Karen and Navidson had to come to terms with the impossibility of understanding or representing the house, reclaiming meaning for themselves in spite of its nihilistic vertigo, Zampanò's treatise explicitly turns towards dialogue and processes of deliberate signification, of making and creating sense. With science failing and the photographic image dethroned from its position of alleged eye-witness objectivity, thus it is prophesied in the novel, '[t]ruth will once again revert to the shady territories of the word and humanity's abilities to judge its peculiar modalities' (*HoL* 145). Starting from the premise of deconstructive openness, the novel turns to a reconstruction of meaning as an ongoing, communal act of communication and interpretation that is neither entirely arbitrary nor devalued by its inconclusiveness, but endorsed as necessary and even seductive.

This construction of meaning has to be understood even more literally than the mere process of interpretation. After all, there is another twist to the story, another narrative level to consider. In a reversal of

the authenticating stance typically assumed in the literary 'topos of editorial ministration' (Williams 114), the introductory pages of *House of Leaves* immediately reveal the gothic horror-tale at its core to be purely imaginary, a fiction within a fiction. After Zampanò's demise, his manuscript – nothing more but a trunk stuffed to the brim with scattered pieces of paper – is found by a most unlikely candidate for its assemblage: twenty-something tattoo-parlour employee, LA party-boy and drug addict Johnny Truant. In his introduction, Johnny immediately tells the reader that the documentary *The Navidson Record* does not exist and neither do many of the critical discussions and other references Zampanò uses so copiously. Even more poignantly, the old man turns out to have been 'blind as a bat' (*HoL* xxi) for decades before the alleged release of the documentary in 1993. Zampanò himself has apparently imaginatively created not only the fictional object of his study but the entire multitude of voices and interpretations with which he surrounds it.

By its very existence, Zampanò's treatise can therefore be understood to effectively counteract the absence the house represents even as it evokes it, herein echoing Karen's creative labour of love. Against the house's resistance to meaning and inscription it unfolds its proliferation of interpretation and communication. Against the darkness and monotony of the house it sets its loving description of the film, that artform of light, evoking again and again its aesthetic beauty, and particularly its use of light cues. Against the apparent solitude of Zampanò's life and the darkness of his failed eye-sight it sets a story of family, love and light.

The labour of reconstruction: Johnny's editorial efforts

With Johnny's revelation that the film is a mere product of Zampanò's imagination, any consideration of the nature and status of the fantastic in the text necessarily changes once again. As the incredible circumstances narrated in the film are declared to be purely imaginative, no more than an elaborate hoax, the genre of the text shifts into the Todorovian fantastic-uncanny, that is, the supernatural occurrences find a rational explanation. At the same time, the questions raised by the use of the mode once again pose themselves differently, in a further shift towards the pragmatic.

If the internal narrative levels raise doubts concerning the nature, reality and meaning of the house and the documentary respectively, Johnny's inquiry addresses the nature and purpose of Zampanò's treatise.

No more than loose pieces of assorted and scattered paper filling a large black trunk, 'endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all' (*HoL* xvii), the state Zampanò's work is in when Johnny finds it amounts to a postmodernist topos: it is fragmented and heterogeneous; it resists order and chronology; every piece connects to multiple others in infinite chains of signification and its final nature or aim remains an open question. Johnny's own task in face of this becomes literally reconstructive. He pieces Zampanò's words and meaning back together, brings order into fragmented chaos, creates connections and coherence. Consequently, Johnny is not only forced to struggle with the purpose and meaning of Zampanò's manuscript but also, even more basically, with its very materiality. In view of this, it is striking that, in spite of its complexity in references and digression and occasional hints at incompleteness, like empty footnotes and missing references, most of Zampanò's treatise, as the novel eventually presents it to its readers, actually shows fairly little signs of fragmentation. On the contrary, it proceeds most chronologically in its narration and discussion of the film and repeatedly combines form and content in ingenious ways. In face of the fragmented status of the manuscript, the questions raised by this further narrative frame thus extend to include Johnny's own role, the reasons for his engagement with and absorption in Zampanò's work, and the extent of his own agency in the compilation of the final text.

It is hardly surprising in the logic of the novel that Johnny, for his part, turns out to be not a very trustworthy narrative mediator. The first paragraphs of the introduction in which we learn that Johnny frequently suffers from nightmares and hallucinations and takes large quantities of drugs and tranquilisers, amount to the narrative equivalent of a flashing red neon-sign proclaiming unreliability. Later on, he admits to being someone who enjoys inventing stories about himself (employed mostly, so it seems, as a ruse to seduce women), and frequently revokes the very events he has just narrated, even gleefully so (for typical examples see page 43 or 509). Furthermore, Johnny not only reassembles the manuscript but also openly admits to changing it (cf. *HoL* 16), cutting parts (cf. *HoL* 31) and reinserting bits Zampanò had erased (cf. *HoL* 111). He thus draws attention to his own investment in the narrative. Moreover, he often digresses extensively into a narrative of his life in his footnotes without even pretending to comment on the main text. Though structurally derivative, Johnny's own narrative gradually establishes itself as coequal to Zampanò's treatise, going far beyond the scarce editorial intrusions typical for the literary topos. In effect, Johnny turns from a mere editorial mediator into one

of the novel's main protagonists, and his engagement with Zampanò's manuscript constitutes one of its central themes. The degree of Johnny's influence and his stakes in Zampanò's manuscript therefore turn into a central interpretative concern.

By means of its diegetic frame, in which the ontological and epistemological questions raised by the fantastic are, at least to a degree, pre-emptively settled, the novel thus highlights the pragmatic aspects of the narrative: its consequences. The nature, function and motivation for the various acts of creation which the novel traces (Navidson's film, Zampanò's manuscript, Johnny's publication) become at least as important as the question about the nature, function and reality of the house. With Johnny's narrative frame, the focus shifts decisively from the disturbing and disruptive fantastic event to the disturbing and disruptive fiction, from the challenge to the fabric of reason and reality to the challenge to individual sense-making and living, from the struggle to represent and explain the inexplicable to the struggle to communicate and come to terms with the unspeakable. Eventually then, this is not so much about rethinking or subverting our concepts of reality but about exploring the reality and power of fiction. While the challenge the house poses to Navidson is first and foremost one of representation (which is impossible) and to Zampanò one of interpretation (which is endless), Johnny's challenge is one of reconstruction (which, though necessarily incomplete and faulty, is neither impossible nor endless). His task in reassembling the manuscript is a very un-postmodernist one of recreating and tracing meanings, of piecing fragments together again to a unified whole (albeit one that is not without gaps). Fittingly, then, in Johnny's narrative the house is eventually even given a definitive meaning, as it comes to stand for a traumatic loss hidden in his past. Out of the postmodernist indefiniteness and Zampanò's open dialogue, Johnny's story thus develops a *Bildungsroman* trajectory of increasing self-knowledge and maturity.

The focus shifts even further away from the house if one takes into account one of the novel's appendices, which compiles a number of letters from Johnny's institutionalised mother Pelafina. At this point, the narrative turns from a fantastic story into a tale of the struggle of a young adult to come to terms with the loss of his father, the institutionalisation of his mother after she had, or had not, attempted to strangle him, his resulting difficult childhood full of abuse and trauma, as well as his unmoored and lonely life in general. Beyond any uncanny effect of the manuscript, Johnny's paranoia, his panic attacks and hallucinations, his loss of weight, his insomnia and increasing inability to leave the house, can simply be ascribed to the side effects of his excessive

drug abuse and to symptoms of withdrawal. His engagement with the manuscript seems to bring something to the fore that has little direct connection with the house on Ash Tree Lane at all, some aspect of his past that he cannot quite grasp, 'like there's something else, something beyond it all, a greater story still looming in the twilight, which for some reason I'm unable to see' (*HoL* 15). The loss of both his parents, to which topic Johnny's footnotes return repeatedly (albeit these references are often obscured by highly hermetic language), has clearly unmoored him, literally turning him truant. Establishing some form of sincere human connection seems to be both his most basic need and his greatest fear as he delves into ever deeper isolation and locks himself into his apartment. Struggling with the manuscript and with Zampanò's own lonely cry for meaning and connection, Johnny also faces the emptiness of his own life, confronted with the task to escape the dark hallways of meaninglessness. From this perspective, Johnny's work on the manuscript and his record of his own life in his footnotes amount to another labour of love and reconciliation: no more and no less than the attempt to work through his grief, his trauma and his isolation and to reconnect in some way to his past and his dead parents.

The ghost that haunts the text, on this level, turns out to be Johnny's mother Pelafina, as the footnotes enter into an intricate dialogue with her letters. Indeed, though the letters allegedly precede the narrative present of Johnny's work on the manuscript by several years, they occasionally seem to stand in direct communication with Johnny's words. To mention just a few among numerous examples, Pelafina asks Johnny in one of her letters to add a check-mark at the bottom of his next response, a mark which we dutifully find at the beginning of chapter VIII (cf. *HoL* 97, 609). In another, she comments on Johnny's beautiful words and his use of the word 'changeling,' the only other occurrence of which can be found in one of Johnny's highly poetic evocations of the cardiac attack that prevented his father from further pursuing his passion and profession as a pilot (cf. *HoL* 49, 594). Meanwhile, Johnny's frequent use of the direct address sometimes seems to slip from an address to the reader into an address to his mother, while at the same time pointing back to himself. One of the most striking instances of this slippage is the following passage:

> With a little luck, you'll dismiss this labor, react as Zampanò had hoped, call it needlessly complicated, pointlessly obtuse, prolix – *your word* – ridiculously conceived, and you'll believe all you've said, and then you'll put it aside [. . .]. (*HoL* xxii; my emphasis)

The word 'prolix' does turn up in one of Pelafina's letters, one that is indeed 'needlessly complicated, pointlessly obtuse,' making, in fact, no easily discernible sense at all. The 'you' in Johnny's words therefore addresses not only the implied reader, but that reader is also identified with his mother. In addition, Johnny himself often calls Zampanò's work needlessly complicated and pointlessly obtuse, and his words thus effectively point back to his own engagement with the manuscript.

Pelafina's governing presence is finally made explicit as Johnny's narrative draws to a close in chapter XXI. This is the only chapter apart from the introduction in which his narrative escapes the footnotes and takes over the main text. However, it is not the last chapter of the novel, closing the narrative frame as one might expect, but is followed by two final chapters of Zampanò's manuscript. Johnny's journey East on a search for the house on Ash Tree Lane, which is narrated in this chapter, turns into a trip to his own past, to his former home and the asylum his mother spent her last years in. At this point, finally, Johnny admits openly to the traumatic undercurrent of his narrative, realising himself what his readers might have picked up already:

> I cannot tell you why I didn't see her until now. [. . .] Maybe you saw her first? Caught a glimpse, between the lines, between the letters, like a ghost in the mirror, a ghost in the wings?
>
> My mother is right before me now, right before you. There as the docent, as the interpreter, maybe even as this strange and tangled countryside. Her shallow face, the dark lyric in her eyes and of course her words, in those far reaching letters she used to send me when I was young. (*HoL* 502)

While very postmodernist (or, more specifically, poststructuralist) in its imagery of letters and ghosts, this ghost does not stand for a deferral of meaning, which remains ungraspable, but provides an explanatory structure. The traumatic relation to Johnny's mother is offered as an answer to all questions concerning the house. Even Johnny's hallucinatory panic attacks translate easily into a version of repetition compulsion once one takes into account the letter in which Pelafina recounts her attempt to kill her son. Pelafina is the cause, the interpreter and even the entire landscape unfolding in Johnny's words. Thus, Johnny's pessimistic introductory comments, in which he invokes the text's ability to dismantle and disrupt (cf. *HoL* xxii–xxiii), are counter-balanced by an image of reconciliation, as his engagement

with Zampanò's manuscript finally enables him to turn and face the trauma he dreads.

At this stage then, almost at its conclusion, the text briefly returns to questions which explicitly take poststructuralist tenets to a *laissez-faire* extreme:

> What's the difference, especially in *differance*, what's read what's left in what's left out what's invented what's remembered what's forgotten what's written what's found what's lost what's done?
>
> What's not done?
>
> What's the difference? (*HoL* 515; my emphasis)

But instead of closing on this note and thus foregrounding its postmodernist tendencies, the narrative proceeds to provide answers. Johnny manages to break out of his isolation back into the world, he refrains from violence and he is finally able to recall his 'own dark hallway' (*HoL* 516). Watching the sunset in a final scene of reconciliatory peace, Johnny sees '[r]eds finally marrying blues' (*HoL* 516). The repressed – symbolised in the novel's struck passages, which are all printed in red – can here, in a romanticised concluding scene, finally be reconciled with the terrifying emptiness of the house (always printed in blue), merging in the purple print of the struck words: 'what I'm remembering now' (*HoL* 518). Even though nightfall is imminent and darkness approaches, Johnny realises that in thinking Navidson's and Zampanò's point was that darkness is nothingness, he might have 'misconstrued it all' (*HoL* 516). Instead, he finds his own, very personal meaning in Zampanò's words and Navidson's film. Furthermore, as if this point needed to be driven home, the final two chapters of the novel return us once again to Zampanò and Navidson, and it is within these last pages that Karen and Navidson's reconciliation and escape from the house are narrated, providing their own answer to the nihilistic questions above.

Meaning, therefore, is not impossible. If it is established as a joint project of creation in the documentary, and found to be multi-faceted and based on an open dialogue in Zampanò's manuscript, then in Johnny's case it is the aim and outcome of personal identification and reconnection. Though the labyrinth cannot be grasped in its entirety, an Ariadne's thread of meaning winding through all of the narrative levels can be found in an endeavour to reach out towards the other. Or, to put it even more daringly and bluntly: meaning, finally, can only be encountered in love.

Instead of letting his trauma and the meaninglessness of his life destroy him, Johnny finally reclaims for himself the reconstructive power of stories. In face of the threatening power of the trauma he struggles to deal with, he eventually comes to believe that 'while the dead may still hunt their young, the young can still turn and in that turning learn how the very definition of whim prevents the killing' (*HoL* 516). Whim here is not just a lucky escape, the killer suddenly refusing to strike by mere passing fancy. The 'School of Whim,' previously defined by Johnny in a series of reversed acronyms as 'Where Have I Moved? What Have I Muttered? Who Have I Met?' (*HoL* 77), essentially amounts to no less than the elemental origin of stories, both personal and communal. Eventually, Johnny finds peace by invoking the potential of that kind of turning which fuels narrative – since, as he says earlier on, 'tropos is at the center of "trope" and it means "turn"' (*HoL* 150; original emphasis). Thus, he juxtaposes the traumatic scene of his mother's attempt to strangle him, which had haunted him all these years, with his own version of events: 'Her letter had been hopelessly wrong. Maybe an invention to make it easier for me to dismiss her. Or maybe something else. I've no idea. But I do know that her fingers never closed around my throat. They only tried to wipe the tears from my face' (*HoL* 517). Whether this is the true story and therefore constitutes a turning to or from is anyone's guess. In the end, of course, as Johnny has told us from the very beginning, 'what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the same' (*HoL* xx).

Johnny's final realisation, then, is comforting and reconciliatory, sounding almost Wordsworthian in its evocation of some transcendent meaning behind the lurking darkness:

> Of course there always will be darkness but I realize now something inhabits it. [. . .] a Voice, which though invisible to the eye and frequently unheard by even the ear still continues, day and night, year after year, to sweep through us all.
>
> Just as you have swept through me.
>
> Just as I now sweep through you. (*HoL* 518)

Far from a nihilistic stance, this also sounds scarcely postmodernist anymore. Instead, it foregrounds the attempt to tease out meaning from the nothingness of darkness, a meaning that is explicitly ideated as an act of communication or even communion and cast in terms of reading and writing. In the last two sentences of the passage the initial tone reminiscent of religious epiphany turns into a metafictional evocation. With

the addressee slippery as always, oscillating between Pelafina, Johnny, Zampanò, the reader and the personified voice of the book itself, the capitalised Voice comes to stand for the stories and connections that inhabit and emerge from the very darkness that seems to swallow them.

With a focus on Johnny's narrative we have thus moved decidedly away from the typical epistemological and ontological concerns of the fantastic mode. Instead, the fantastic aspects of the narrative become the focal points of pragmatic considerations about the meaning- and world-creating functions of fictions. As Johnny's story unfolds in a Bildungsroman trajectory towards greater self-knowledge, maturity and responsibility, the ways in which the negotiation between the real and the imaginary in the fictive allow for an encounter with the other and with the self as other are brought to the fore. At the same time, the fantastic hesitation increasingly turns towards a doubt about the interpretation, meaning and motivation of negotiation of mimesis and the marvellous played out in the fantastic mode. Eventually this hesitation extends further to encompass all of the various narrative voices which are introduced into the novel.

Contested authorship

The elusiveness of the addressee's identity in the novel's frequent use of personal pronouns, which I have referred to above, gains additional complexity as narrative boundaries gradually turn out to be highly unstable. As my argument has traced it so far, the narrative structure seems to suggest that Johnny's voice, although it initially pretends to be marginal, relegated to mere footnotes, eventually turns out to be the story's 'source, the one who feeds it' (*HoL* 326), giving it both life and meaning. After all, if his name is any indication, the character of Zampanò himself seems to have sprung directly from a Fellini film and would easily be conceivable as a fictional persona within the novel's diegetic world, just another pseudonym for whoever Johnny Truant is. That would suggest that Johnny's use of narration and meaning as a means to come to terms with a personal traumatic reality, to give shape and ideation to some unspeakable past, is the privileged approach to this fiction and that his interpretation of the house eventually provides the solution to all its riddles.

This, however, is not the case, or rather, it is just one possibility among many. The seemingly clear division between the various narrative levels repeatedly breaks down on closer inspection. One of the most obvious instances is chapter XXI already mentioned above, which is special in that it consists entirely of Johnny's narrative. Though the

logic of the narrative structure would suggest that Zampanò, who never even met Johnny in person, cannot possibly know of the existence of this chapter, it is included in Zampanò's list of chapter titles added as an appendix. Zampanò also once refers to *The Pelican Poems* (cf. *HoL* 138), whose author, judging from the information provided by the narrative, must be assumed to be Johnny. Furthermore, strikingly, the song that comes to Navidson's mind on the brink of death is 'When Johnny comes marching home' (*HoL* 479).

All of this may raise the suspicion that Zampanò, and not Johnny, is the puppet-master holding all the strings. Such a perspective would account for the coherence of the allegedly fragmented manuscript and the incongruity of Johnny's intermittently obvious learnedness and education. The speculations seem to find confirmation in a journal entry by Zampanò, included in the appendix:

> Perhaps in the margins of darkness, I could create a son who is not missing; who lives beyond even my own imagination and invention; whose lusts, stupidities, and strengths carry him farther than even he or I can anticipate; who sees the world for what it is; and consequently bears the burden of everyone's tomorrow with unprecedented wisdom and honor because he is one of the very few who has successfully interrogated his own nature. His shields are instantly available though seldom used. Those who value him shall prosper while those who would destroy him shall perish. He will fulfill a promise I made years ago but failed to keep. (*HoL* 543)

Is it Johnny about whom Zampanò is talking here? And is it thus Zampanò, the old man, who has invented and impersonated Johnny, the youth, just as he has made up Navidson, the father, and Chad, the child, as aspects of himself in his own attempt to deal with his past and to redeem his life (and therefore the rhetoric of redemption in the passage above)? Or – another possibility – might Johnny serve as a shield for Zampanò, distancing him both from the reader and from the house itself, since, after all, it is Johnny who says that it does not exist? The fantastic presence thus may be returning through the back door. 'Those who value him shall prosper,' because they will dismiss the existence of the house and continue to live happy, ignorant lives, and 'those who would destroy him shall perish,' because, disbelieving Johnny, they will be faced with the house itself.

Apart from Zampanò and Johnny, yet another candidate for the role of controlling narrative voice suggests itself upon the discovery of

the coded question, 'my dear Zampanò who did you lose?' in one of Pelafina's letters (*HoL* 615; here and elsewhere in the novel, the words are hidden in a code which uses the first letters of successive words. In this instance, the coded passage starts with 'many years destroyed'). Not only does Pelafina's story strangely echo details in the film itself, as in the pink ribbon which both Pelafina and Karen wear in their hair, but her letters also seem to anachronistically answer back to Johnny's narrative. How else to understand her assertion about Johnny in a rhymed letter that 'God knows how he's sinned / 'Cause in Latin he's practically fluent' (*HoL* 631) but as a direct rejoinder to Johnny's own assertion that 'Latin's way out of my league' (*HoL* 34)? And when she tells him in another letter that 'as leaves are to limbs, so are your words to your soul,' could she be pointing to Johnny's merely textual existence, the pages of the book being his limbs and the words inscribed on them his soul (*HoL* 601)?

Is it Pelafina, then, who holds all the strings in her hands? After all, in her very last letter she calls herself Sybil of Cumae, the ancient prophetess, who Aeneas implores in book VI of Vergil's Æneid (incidentally the source of one of Zampanò's chapter epigraphs) not to write her prophecy for him on leaves, easily scattered by the wind, as was her custom according to myth, but to speak it to him directly.[6] Is it Pelafina, then, who built that whole house of leaves, whose perspective and words can serve as a guide through the text? It is the Sybil, after all, who leads Aeneas, the homeless (truant?), through the underworld to see his father? Pelafina's letters similarly hint at her governing agency when she implies another mythic connection, this time between herself and Yggdrasil, the ash tree of Norse myth which encompasses the world: 'My hands resemble some ancient tree: the roots that bind up the earth, the rock and the ceaseless nibbling worms' (*HoL* 623). This reference to the mythic ash tree does not only refer back to the house on Ash Tree Lane. Strikingly, the book also features a short poem about Yggdrasil on its very last page, placed even after the copyright acknowledgements. The poem thus takes up an almost paratextual position and authority.

Approached from this perspective, the whole novel would appear to arise from Pelafina's attempt to address her guilt in some roundabout way; to reconnect and be granted forgiveness by the son whom she has lost. Such a perspective also throws a new light on the queer and seemingly unrelated story with which Johnny's narrative closes: the story of a mother, who seems to keep her new-born son alive for several days by the sheer power of her love, even though, fragmentary like the narrative itself, he 'has holes in his brain' (*HoL* 519). Though initially the story of

a miracle, it ends on a note of sorrowful but reconciled realism as the mother, after four days, kisses her son goodbye. In Johnny's very last words as a narrator, he takes leave together with the child in that story: '"You can go now," she says tenderly. And right before everyone's eyes, long before Dr. Nowell or anyone else can turn a dial or touch a switch, the EKG flatlines. Asystole. The child is gone' (*HoL* 521).

Clearly, at this stage the novel has moved quite a stretch away from ontological and epistemological hesitation arising from the supernatural occurrence at its centre. While even Johnny's narrative still contains fantastic features and he exhibits enough doubts about the existence of the house to go on a trip in order to try and find it, at this stage the question of the reality of the house beyond a literary trope has entirely receded into the background. The quandary that poses itself to the reader here is rather whose narrative lead to follow, or in other words, the question of authorship. The straightforward answer 'Mark Z. Danielewski,' however, cannot serve to satisfy the question that is at stake here. After all, the problem is essentially not an empirical one, but one of interpretation. Depending on which angle readers choose to take and on how many layers of the narrative they decide to peel, their understanding of the novel will necessarily change. Ultimately, none of the possible venues of interpretation I have sketched above can assert absolute validity. They are, in effect, all equally plausible or implausible. Nevertheless, this does not amount to a denial of the possibility of truth, or a breakdown of meaning. Indeed, the common factor of the interpretations is precisely the power of fiction to help address and learn to deal with loss, silence, the absence of meaning, the darkness of the house. Regardless of whether Johnny, Pelafina or Zampanò is understood to be the governing narrative voice, or whether the narrative structure is taken at face value, we are presented with the story of someone who reverts to fiction in order to reach out to others from the heart of his or her loneliness. Thus, once more, 'what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the same' (*HoL* xx).

As the narrative thus evolves in its various layers, the ontological and epistemological questions governing its fantastic core recede ever more to the background. This could be read, with some justification, as a return to the real, a diffusion of the nihilistic threat posed by the deconstructive space embodied by the house, denying its existential relevance by denying its material existence. After all, the novel's narrative frame effectively banishes the challenges posed by the house (and by implication nihilistic postmodernism) to a level of pure speculation or – perhaps an even worse condemnation – an entertainment stunt.

The point the novel repeatedly makes, however, is that this does not invalidate them. Fantastic uncertainty, the fear of the uncanny and the unsettling potential of the mode are still in full effect. But they are augmented by pragmatic considerations that enquire after narrative control, responsibility and motivation, and that ponder the nature of those consequences Johnny mentions. It is by highlighting such considerations that the novel's reconstructive thrust manifests most clearly, in the exploration of the potential of the fictive to reconstruct meaning in terms of intersubjective relations, in community and responsibility towards the other.

Reconstructive paths through the labyrinth

Progressively tracing the narrative build-up from its fantastic core to its editorial conundrums, the governing question thus shifts ever more insistently away from the nature of the house towards the nature of the text. Or rather, it becomes ever more obvious that these two questions are essentially the same. With this metafictional twist we have finally arrived at the outermost level of literary communication that has to be considered here: with the novel as a whole as the reader engages with it. After all, one of the central structural principles of *House of Leaves* is the *mise en abyme*. The labyrinth of the house is not only mirrored in the structure of the text, which inventively uses typography to reproduce the labyrinthine and disorienting features of the house, or to echo its spatial contortions and rapid changes. In many ways, the novel itself could indeed be said to *be* the house.

On a very mundane level, the house is, of course, created out of language, constructed by words on paper, a house of leaves in the literal sense. It is the blank white of paper that constitutes those ashen and bare walls of the house which resist inscription. This can clearly be seen on those pages whose layout imitate the immediate spatial conditions encountered in the house, on which text is sometimes reduced to single words, or even single letters on otherwise completely blank paper (cf. for example chapter XX, especially p. 487, in which a tiny spot of light in the darkness is portrayed by an asterisk on an otherwise nearly blank page). The house and the novel are, in effect, photographic negatives of each other. The space of the house is thus emblematised by the blank page, its threat of silence and erasure manifested visually by the increasing scarcity of letters on the paper. As its walls resist any permanent inscription, it becomes a violent and nihilistic manifestation of postmodernism, the apotheosis of absence, unreadability and

unrepresentability: just like the film which annuls itself in six minutes of darkness, in its last consequence the house is to be imagined as a book without text, a volume of blank pages. But what resists this silence and absence is, precisely, a human need to perceive, to represent and to interpret. Human actors experiencing the space of the house, being challenged and threatened by it, continue to literally inscribe on it. Even on those pages that are almost empty, text always clings on to the margins (cf. *HoL* 469–90). The blank page, as much as it represents silence, also evokes the challenge and the temptation to be filled.

This challenge of the house, which characters on all narrative levels are facing, also poses itself for readers of the novel. The labyrinthine text offers multiple points of entry and possible interpretative trajectories to follow, not only in its obfuscation of the question of narrative authority but also in its many riddles and codes, in its countless intertextual and intermedial references or in its various thematic undercurrents and echoes. At the same time, the novel, just like the house itself, resists permanence: its meanings and structures are constantly shifting as each narrative voice in turn is undermined, references are often multiple, circular or dead-ends and narrative levels are frequently breached in metaleptic moments which eventually render it impossible to establish stable narrative hierarchies. Finding a path through the labyrinth is thus a task the text not only poses for its central characters but also for its readers, whether diegetic, implied or real, continually equating both processes:

> If the work demanded by any labyrinth means penetrating or escaping it, the question of process becomes extremely relevant. [. . .] In order to escape [. . .], we have to remember we cannot ponder all paths but must decode only those necessary to get out. [. . .] Unfortunately, the anfractuosity of some labyrinths may actually prohibit a permanent solution. More confounding still, its complexity may exceed the imagination of even the designer. Therefore anyone lost within must recognize that no one, not even a god or an Other, comprehends the entire maze and so therefore can never offer a definitive answer. [. . .] All solutions are necessarily personal. (*HoL* 115)

If solutions are personal they are nonetheless valid and necessary. What comes to the fore is the reader's freedom to collaborate with and to appropriate a text, with every individual relating to it differently. Its focus turns on the process of reading and interpretation, a process

which, while it is never conclusive or unassailable, still unfolds as a continual act of determination and creation of meaning.

Accordingly, the involvement of readers and the way they appropriate and relate to a text stands at the centre of another of the reconstructive and even redemptive episodes in the novel. In the chronologically last passage of the text, Johnny encounters a band of musicians, who turn out to be avid fans of the very novel readers hold in their hands, having read its first edition on the internet. On this further level of narrative communication, the novel once again triggers constructions of signification, but this time they are emphatically cast as both personal *and* communal. While Johnny's engagement with the manuscript drove him into increasingly solipsistic isolation, the novel itself becomes a catalyst for social interaction and dialogue. The musicians 'had spent many hours with complete strangers shooting the shit about Zampanò's work.' They had engaged intensively with the novel, figuring out its codes, wondering about its protagonists and relating to it personally: 'virtually every [page] marked, stained and redlined with inquiring and [. . .] frequently inspired comments. In a few of the margins, there were even some pretty stunning personal riffs about the lives of the musicians themselves' (*HoL* 514). Johnny is strongly affected by this encounter and the scene ends on a decidedly reconciliatory note, even adding an element of home-coming and rest for the vagrant Truant, as he lies down beneath an old ash tree (!) to finally get some rest: 'I don't need to leave yet. Not yet. There's time now. Plenty of time. And somehow I know it's going to be okay. It's going to be alright. It's going to be alright' (*HoL* 515).[7]

Once again, the novel here resists nihilistic erasure and gives rise to creation. Indeed, it has done so very literally. The novel's resistance to the threat and bore of nothingness is enacted not only in its plot, its discourse and its materiality as a book, but also in its very real impact as a novel. The novel has spawned an active fan-community which discusses various aspects of this enigmatic text in a web forum that is currently being conducted in eight different languages with more than four thousand threads and over fifty thousand individual posts.[8] Again, it is precisely the novel's resistance to stable explanations – the fact that it seems to offer endless venues for further exploration and interpretation, none of which can grasp it in its entirety – that provokes processes of meaning-making, each telling a story to fill the underlying absence. Arguably, this is also, quite simply, a central quality of the literary as such. In discordance with Slocombe's claim that the novel 'destroy[s] its own literariness from within' (105), the novel has, in fact,

been celebrated for 'render[ing] any [. . .] commentary about the irrelevance and obsolescence of the novel instantly irrelevant and obsolete' (McCaffery and Gregory 99).

On every narrative level of the novel (even including the critical reactions it has triggered), *House of Leaves* can thus be seen as a truly metafictional text, which explicitly exemplifies the fictionalising processes Iser has described. In particular, it employs its fantastic aspects to foreground the tension between determination and formlessness, creation and erasure, which arises from the interplay of the real and the imaginary in the fictionalising acts of selection, combination and self-disclosure. In its essential indeterminacy, the house here serves as an apt figure for the imaginary, which, as Iser insists, 'even when compelled to take on form [. . .] can never fully be grasped, and so in itself is a kind of "nothingness"' (234). The novel thus thematically foregrounds the 'nullifying operations' of the imaginary in fiction, which Iser defines as 'cancellation, derestriction and irrealization' (234). Nevertheless, as the story unfolds in a proliferation of fiction, the novel simultaneously emphasises the creative force that arises from precisely this decomposing tendency of the imaginary, which is called into form in a dialogue with the real in the fictionalising process of inscription. '[N]ullification and enabling,' Iser reminds us, 'go hand in hand' (234). The way in which the house elicits multiple processes of interpretation and signification while at the same time eluding and undermining them all can serve as a perfect illustration of Iser's insight that 'the fictive unfolds the imaginary as a dual countering of simultaneous decomposing and enabling' (234).

As we have seen, Iser assigns anthropological relevance to this process of dual countering because the 'constant alternation of composing and decomposing fabricated worlds' opens up towards the plethora of human possibility, as a 'transcendental condition, allowing perceptibility of something intangible and simultaneously providing an experience of something that is unknowable' (236). Precisely such processes of self-unfolding and self-confrontation through an engagement with difference and the other are acted out in the trajectory of Johnny's narrative. But while Iser limits his discussion to the individual and isolated engagement with the fictive, in *House of Leaves* these processes are also developed as communal and communicative. Although '[a]ll solutions are necessarily personal' (*HoL* 115) they give rise to continual dialogue and interaction.

As a metafictional text, the novel thus no longer follows primarily a typical postmodernist agenda of exposing fictional illusion, criticising

narrative conventions or deconstructing representation.[9] While all of these typical aspects of metafiction are still present in the text, it shifts towards a reconstructive perspective precisely in its focus on the duality of the process of the fictive which Iser stresses. *House of Leaves* is thus truly metafictional in that it not only exposes its own fictionality and foregrounds its relation to a reality constructed through discourse, but also focuses on the processes of fictionalising acts as well as on the pragmatic effects and consequences of fictional communication. Simplifying somewhat, one could say that postmodernism focused predominantly on the deresticting and nullifying processes of the imaginary, celebrating them as liberating and ex-centric in their ability to give voice to the unspoken and unspeakable, whereas reconstruction turns its focus on the fictive as a necessarily dual process of liberation *and* restriction, the imaginary *and* the real.

It is in this sense that *House of Leaves* can be said to start off from and work through the fantastic, while eventually turning back towards the mimetic in its development of a reconstructive outlook. Accepting postmodernist insights about the inaccessibility of reality and the endless deferral of meaning, a reconstructive perspective develops a position of the 'in spite of' and stresses the necessity to continue to construct meanings and reality in precisely that human desire evoked by the novel to '*live* [. . .] *in the margins of that place*' (*HoL* 388; original emphasis). The nihilistic threat of the house's disturbance is not negligible or banalised, nor is it made harmless by the exposure of its fictionality. Nevertheless, the creative force of fiction asserts itself not only as an answer to, but indeed, as a product of this very threat. Meaning, arising from the nihilistic absence, cannot be discovered, only created. The novel's move beyond postmodernism thus lies primarily in what Hansen calls its 'ontological indifference,' which marks 'a definitive departure [. . .] away from the tired postmodern agonies bound up with the figure of simulation.' 'It is,' thus Hansen says, 'as if mediation has become so ubiquitous and inexorable in the world of the novel (which is, after all, our world too) as simply to *be* reality, to be the bedrock upon which our investment and belief in the real can be built' (601; original emphasis).

While postmodernist theory and aesthetics therefore are indubitably central to the novel and seem to dominate it in the form of their distilled embodiment in the house, the novel subtly combines and counters nihilistic tendencies with a symbol of world-creation and -sustaining. This, finally, brings us back to the series of footnotes about structure and centre with which I began my discussion of the novel

and which, readers are wryly being told, 'may prove useful when considering the meaning of "play," "origins," and "ends" – especially when applied to the Navidson house' (*HoL* 112). While Derrida's insight into the inconceivability and paradox of centres is acknowledged, Norberg-Schulz' comment goes on to remind us that human need for stability continually manifests itself, adding that '[i]n many legends the "centre of the world" is concretized as a tree or pillar symbolizing a vertical *axis mundi*' (*HoL* 113). And indeed it is a mythological world tree, Yggdrasil, the ash tree bearing the world in Nordic mythology, which the novel evokes as a counter-image to the house, another house of leaves: one that does not destroy meaning and resist habitation but instead supports a world.

Nevertheless, the ash tree under whose leaves Johnny eventually finds rest does not stand in opposition to the house, but is its necessary counterpart. After all, the house stands on Ash Tree Lane and a photograph of a model of the house included in the appendix features a tree which seems to grow out of the heart of the labyrinth (cf. *HoL* 661). House and tree are flip sides of a coin, which is essentially the novel itself. In the novel's title, house, tree, and by extension the book itself are inextricably linked, each a house of leaves in its own sense.

On the one hand, then, the novel mirrors the labyrinthine and nihilistic house, giving voice to the insecurity and desolation that find expression in one of the poems included in the appendices, in which the world seems to the grieving mind like a fragile 'house of leaves / moments before the wind' (*HoL* 563). Offering no solace but only the realisation of uncertainty and evanescence, the world is here imagined as precariously poised on the brink of annihilation and meaninglessness. But on the other hand, the whole novel closes with another poem, one evoking that other house of leaves, Yggdrasil. This final poem strikes a far more optimistic and constructive note, hailing the giant tree as a 'miracle,' which stands although it 'doesn't reach the ground,' and whose 'roots must hold the sky' (*HoL* 709). Just as the labyrinth and the spiral staircase at its heart are bottomless, the tree reaches towards the sky, with both merging once again as the very categories of above and below become interchangeable. Both the house and the tree are inscrutable and miraculous. Both are imaginary. But the house's nullification is countered by the tree's creative and sustaining power.

For all its nihilistic tendencies, for all the darkness at its heart, the novel thus also strikes a carefully optimistic, reconstructive note. It evokes a reconciliation with uncertainty, the construction of stability

in face of instability as a communal and intersubjective construct that is both a pragmatic necessity and a chance to reconstruct and create. Meanwhile, neither of these two tendencies annuls the other. Just as light and darkness bring each other forth, are combined and become interchangeable in photography as negative and positive, *House of Leaves* foregrounds how nullification and determination necessarily come together in the fictive. While Slocombe's way through this particular textual labyrinth, strongly influenced by postmodernism's focus on absences, silence and gaps, foregrounds nullification and closes on the sombre note of all-encompassing nothingness, the reconstructive path I have chosen in my reading concludes on a decidedly brighter note: 'They both live. They even get married. It's a happy ending' (*HoL* 526).

4
The Quest for Narrative Reconstruction: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*

A tactless bag of tired postmodernist tricks?

The hopeful reconstructive note on which *House of Leaves*, in spite of its dark and pessimistic immediate appearance, has been seen to conclude becomes much more pronounced in *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer. The move beyond postmodernism in *House of Leaves* simultaneously explores two possibilities between which the novel hovers: an extreme postmodernism which results in nihilism on the one hand, and an increased commitment in community and communication which gives expression to a reconstructive hopefulness on the other. While by no means unambiguous about its own project, *Everything is Illuminated*, in contrast, is much more decisive in its investment in reconstructive optimism. Meanwhile, it pitches itself not so much against those postmodernist existential doubts Danielewski's novel was concerned with, but focuses more on ethical questions posed by a postmodernist celebration of ambiguity and subversion. Combining two storylines – one relying on a mimetic stance, the other developing a fantastic narrative that explicitly leans towards the marvellous – the novel increasingly shifts its attention from the possibility or impossibility of representation towards the responsibilities of fictions, to their communicative value and their creative power.

Another debut novel, *Everything is Illuminated* draws no less upon a broad stock of typically postmodernist elements than *House of Leaves* does. As Brian Myers writes in a scathing review polemically entitled "A Bag of Tired Tricks. Blank Pages? Photos of Mating Tortoises? The Death Throes of the Postmodern Novel": 'The disjointed story narrated in different "voices," the author turning up under his own name as a character writing a novel, the final chapter ending in mid-sentence,

idiosyncratic punctuation and eye-catching TYPOGRAPHY – need I go on?' This list, as Myers implies, could easily be extended. It may serve as an apt illustration of the capaciousness of the concept of postmodernism that Foer's and Danielewski's novels should nevertheless be so radically different in many ways. And it is precisely because they each engage with significantly divergent aspects of postmodernist thought and aesthetics that the similarities which can be found in their reconstructive endeavours become all the more striking. Whereas Danielewski's novel engages first and foremost with the philosophy and practice of deconstruction that had such an immense influence on postmodernist discourse, Foer implicitly takes up a scarcely less influential strand of postmodernist thought: one that arguably takes its origin in Jean-François Lyotard's seminal work on *The Postmodern Condition*.

Controversial as the definition of postmodernism is, most agree that it is concerned with

> a contesting of what Lyotard calls the totalizing master narratives of our culture, those systems by which we usually unify and order (and smooth over) any contradictions in order to make them fit. This challenge foregrounds the process of meaning-making in the production and reception of art, but also in broader discursive terms: it foregrounds, for instance, how we make historical 'facts' out of brute 'events' of the past, or, more generally, how our various sign systems grant meaning to our experience. (Hutcheon, *Poetics* x)

The example Linda Hutcheon chooses in this description is not arbitrary. The concern with history and context is central to her particular understanding of postmodernism. Postmodernist scepticism concerning unifying totalities like truth, identity and reality, its emphasis on textuality and the process of enunciation, its exposure and blurring of ontological boundaries and its propensity to genre-mixing frequently join ranks in a struggle against received notions of the historical past. For Hutcheon, then, the most typically postmodernist literary texts are 'those un-innocent paradoxical historiographic metafictions [that] situate themselves within historical discourse, while refusing to surrender their autonomy as fiction' (*Poetics* 124).

The affinities of Foer's novel to such a poetics are obvious. When Jonathan, the fictional persona of the author as protagonist of the novel, is faced with the complete eradication of the Jewish shtetl Trachimbrod, which was the home of his grandfather Safran before the Second World War, he starts to write a story about its inhabitants,

freely imagining the life of his ancestors.[1] Though the narrative meticulously names specific dates and precise geographic locations, it quite obviously does not attempt to depict shtetl life with any historical accuracy. Instead, it draws on features of folk-tales, legends and the tall tale to paint a colourful and humorous picture of shtetl life that stands in stark contrast to the bitter reality of its eradication. Piquantly, the novel evokes such historiographic metafiction in a treatment of a topic whose politics of representation could scarcely be more heavily charged: the eradication of European Jewish life and culture in the midst of the twentieth century. Consequently, some reviewers have raised objections against Foer's employment of postmodernist techniques on the basis of either their inappropriateness to the topic (cf. Reisz), or their apparent superficiality, since they appear to be superimposed on the narrative to give it a postmodernist appearance, while lacking a postmodernist core (cf. Barnacle, "Magic"; Lappin).

Both these critical assessments, so I would suggest, in fact point to main concerns and endeavours of the novel. Indeed, it constantly raises questions regarding the appropriateness of its own narrative strategies and choices as well as concerning the viability of narration as such in the face of horrifying events. At the same time, it truly seems to depart from central postmodernist concerns. Even the association of *Everything is Illuminated* with historiographic metafiction may be rather misleading, despite its affinities to that genre. Or rather, this association should serve to highlight the differences between the latter and the use to which *Everything is Illuminated* puts strategies like magic realism, which are commonly considered typical for historiographic metafiction. Indeed, as I will go on to argue, this novel is not centrally concerned with the past at all. Instead, its main focus lies on the processes, forms and effects of writing (and reading) in the present. Lacking a postmodernist core, the novel develops a reconstructive perspective.

Meanwhile, *Everything is Illuminated* by no means eschews the testimonial entirely. The fantastic story of the shtetl constitutes only one part of the novel's fairly complex narrative structure, which attempts to combine and reconcile the testimonial and the playful, the mimetic and the marvellous. The other main narrative strand of the novel is consequently presented as a travelogue, recounting Jonathan's journey around today's Ukraine in search of the shtetl Trachimbrod as well as for a woman called Augustine, whose family saved his grandfather from the Nazis. While the Trachimbrod chapters tend towards the marvellous in their magic realism, the travelogue is clearly positioned within the strongly mimetic stance of the testimonial, and it is in this storyline

that the novel offers two fictional eye-witness accounts of the horrors committed in the shtetls.

Notwithstanding its autobiographical guise, the travelogue is not narrated by Jonathan himself but instead employs the voice and perspective of the Ukrainian translator Alex, who, along with his grandfather, is hired to accompany Jonathan on his search. In fact, Alex is writing the report of that journey for Jonathan, to whom he sends it in instalments. The letters accompanying these mailings constitute a third narrative strand, which frames the other two. This twist allows for a certain self-ironic distance from the autobiographical pretence and opens a whole range of possibilities for comic effects offered by the introduction of a narrator whose command of English is, in his own words, 'not so premium' (*EiI* 23). But for all the quirkiness of his voice, Alex's tale, with its precise temporal and geographic markers, clearly makes pretence to an appearance of mimetic referentiality. The very idiosyncrasies of Alex's faulty English serve to ostensibly authenticate his voice as that of a non-native speaker, and the fact that this part of the novel is starring the author himself (who has in fact made the corresponding journey) as a fictional character further serves to establish it as an 'authentic' story. The search chapters are thus offered in clear juxtaposition and as a counter-balance to the Trachimbrod chapters, asserting those claims to mimetic truth the latter forego.

While the 'pomo fun fair' (Begley) of the Trachimbrod storyline has been deemed fairly inconsequential by most reviewers, I propose that it is precisely with regard to these chapters and to the antithetical narrative structure of the novel that its reconstructive vein comes most clearly to the fore.[2] Paradoxically, it is thus where the novel seems most postmodernist – in its playfulness, its unreliable narration, its emphasis on the unrepresentable and especially in its use of magic realism – that its reconstructive perspective manifests itself most clearly. A focus on the way the fantastic mode is employed in the Trachimbrod chapters and on the relevance these chapters have within the novel as a whole will show how, notwithstanding its postmodernist surface, *Everything is Illuminated* sets out to move beyond a postmodernist agenda of subversion, irony and scepticism. The novel develops a tentative reconstructive aesthetic of the 'in spite of' in an optimistic profession for meaning and communication in the very face of its impossibility. Such a reconsideration of the role of the fantastic and a focus on the Trachimbrod chapters gives less prominence to the discourses of trauma that have for the most part dominated critical readings of the novel. While loss and absence are certainly central to the novel, I argue that although events

of the past ostensibly form the main subject matter of the novel, its primary focus is not on the possibility or impossibility of their representation and comprehension, but rather on their meaning for the present and on the function fiction can fulfil in a confrontation with the past.

The two functions almost unanimously attributed by critics to the fantastic elements in the novel are, for one, to serve as a means of postmodernist destabilisation, and secondly, to 'widen the gaps and deepen the ambiguities the novel exploits in staging a world that is endlessly (re-)created in the act of its belated fictional (re-)construction' on the other (Amian 168). While I do not mean to invalidate such a perspective, and indeed have argued along similar lines in an earlier article on the novel (cf. Huber "Quest"), one may wonder whether the aim here is really to subvert historical knowledge. After all, even while they draw on magic realist aesthetics, the Trachimbrod chapters never claim historical validity. In a letter from Alex following directly after the Trachimbrod storyline is first introduced, the chapter is declared to be the first instalment of Jonathan's novel. The fantastic story about the shtetl therewith presents itself from the outset as a novel within the novel and thus as a product of Jonathan's imagination. Consequently, it never questions historical narrative, and certainly never offers itself as a subversive alternative to acknowledged facts.

I would therefore disagree with Katrin Amian, who claims that the novel '(re-)opens the past to a Pynchonesque realm of creative guesswork and endless (re-)interpretation, severely shaking what referential foundations the culture of Holocaust remembrance may continue to cherish' (156). Quite on the contrary, I would argue that the central event is forcefully asserted by the novel in its very inability to access it. The past is indeed opened to creative interpretation, but only as long as the latter remains within the self-declared bounds of fiction. This reassertion of the boundary between fiction and reality, and a focus on an exploration of the fictive negotiation of the real and the imaginary, I would claim, lie at the heart of the novel's departure from postmodernist aesthetics. Meanwhile, the re-establishment of this boundary is not naïve but is turned into a conscious ethical move. As I will show, it goes along with an awareness of discursive constructivism and a simultaneous valorisation of the role of the fictive. It is, first and foremost, as an exploration of the (re)constructive and creative possibilities of the fictive that the novel employs its fantastic strategies.

Therewith, I suggest that the novel's use of the fantastic is not gauged by pointing to its subversion of historical positivism. Instead, its focus lies in ethical questions concerning the adequacy of its own narrative

approach to its historical subject. It is precisely in facing these questions that the novel draws on the potential of the fantastic as a paradigm for the fictive. By making use of the paradigmatic fictionality of the fantastic mode, the novel foregrounds the potentials and responsibilities of the fictive in face of the ethical quandaries and the 'moral imperative' (Friedlander 53) involved in the representation of utter destruction, of hideous crimes and mass death. Again and again, *Everything is Illuminated* poses such quandaries both explicitly and implicitly in a continual self-criticism and self-interrogation of its own aesthetic strategies. This continuous self-critique finds perhaps its most illustrative image in the festive floats that pass down the river on the Trachimday festival, each of which is 'adorned with thousands of [. . .] butterflies, which flocked to the float because of the specific combination of animal carcasses strapped to its underside' (*EiI* 93). Butterflies have been so emblematically used in classical magic realist text such as Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (which features a mysterious brief invasion by butterflies), and Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (in which one of the plotlines involves a woman constantly followed by and feeding on butterflies) that the self-criticism implied in this image seems as unavoidable as it is harsh: butterflies flocking to carcasses for the entertainment of the masses.

In order to illustrate the novel's departure from the agenda of its literary predecessors, its use of magic realism merits closer scrutiny, since its narrative project contradicts the focus on subversion usually associated with the mode. Focusing then on the central role of loss in the novel, I will argue that instead of deconstructing certainties with the aim of revealing an underlying absence, such absence becomes the origin of narrative in a similar reconstructive shift of perspective as we have seen emerging in the proliferation of meaning triggered by the house in *House of Leaves*. Suggesting a similar reconstructive outlook in the face of such loss, *Everything is Illuminated*, just like *House of Leaves*, explores the value of narrative creation as a labour of love and life. Furthermore, just like in Danielewski's novel, it is eventually in the interaction of different narrative levels and in the exploration of the communicative potential of the fictive that the novel's reconstructive agenda is most decidedly realised. While my main focus will lie on the Trachimbrod chapters, I will therefore conclude with an analysis of the novel's narrative structure and the interaction of its different storylines, arguing that what they dialogically perform is not so much an interrogation of the past but an exploration and ethical questioning of the abilities and responsibilities of fiction. At this stage, it will become apparent that, in spite of its optimistic features, the novel continues to insist on the

necessity for a persistent questioning of its creative and imaginative project; a project that in itself serves to exemplify the ethical implications which are involved in that negotiation of the imaginary and the real that is the fictive.

Locating the magic: aspects of magic realism

The Trachimbrod chapters recall magic realism, not only in their nonchalant presentation of the marvellous 'as a part of ordinary reality' (Bowers 66–7), but also in their recourse to myths and folk-tales as well as in their overall narrative tone. If this is magic realism, however, it is one that is neither postcolonial, nor otherwise marginal, nor, indeed, particularly subversive, in spite of its mix of mimesis and the marvellous.

The Trachimbrod story focuses mainly on two of Jonathan's ancestors: the matriarchal progenitor of his family line, Brod, who was miraculously born from the waters of a river, and, bypassing several generations, his grandfather Safran. Incredible as they are, the narrated events are often described and dated with apparent historical precision. For example, a brief history of the shifts of the Jewish-Human Fault Line, which separates the religious and secular regions of the shtetl, lists dates and historical detail with meticulous care:

> As the ratio of sacred to secular shifted – usually no more than a hair in this or that direction, save for that exceptional hour in 1764, immediately following the Pogrom of Beaten Chests, when the shtetl was completely secular – so did the fault line, drawn in chalk from Radziwell Forest to the river. And so was the synagogue lifted and moved. It was in 1783 that wheels were attached, making the shtetl's ever-changing negotiation of Jewishness and Humanness less of a schlep. (*EiI* 10)

While the idea of a moving synagogue is obviously absurd, it is recounted as a fact, supported by historical dates. In clear contrast to the implausibility of the narrated events, the possibility of historical precision is forcefully asserted by the tone of confident report employed by the omniscient narrator in a typical magic realist manner.

In this case, however, this assertion of referential accuracy is already qualified by the narrative frame, in which the Trachimbrod chapters are exposed as a work of fiction. The central questions raised by the text are consequently no longer primarily ontological or epistemological. They

do not so much concern the relation of the narrated events to extratextual reality, the validity of historical discourse or the means of historical verification. Rather, incongruity arises out of the seeming impropriety of form in relation to content. After all, the Trachimbrod narrative is characterised by a tone of 'comic detachment' (Williamson 46) that is quite typical for magic realist texts. Edwin Williamson calls this a 'humorous complicity' between narrator and reader 'behind the backs of the characters who remain circumscribed by an elemental innocence which charms but is not, of course, meant to convince' (47). The passage from the novel quoted above is characteristic in that its lighthearted and somewhat ridiculous surface passes over the horrors of the pogroms, only focusing on the tedious task of relocating the synagogue. Precisely because the fictionality of the Trachimbrod chapters is overtly acknowledged, the questions presenting themselves by this turn out to be primarily in how far such a magic realist approach might be ethically acceptable and how its use can be justified.

Clearly, magic realism is not used in this context to assert its own veracity, or to offer its vision of the world as an equally valid alternative to a rational world-view. As Williamson has noted, this innocence charms but is not meant to convince. Though the Trachimbrod story does, in its way, give voice to the silenced and the ex-centric, it does not offer its depiction of shtetl life as an alternative history, writing against official discourse. It does *not* use its magic realism to 'question [. . .] the very bases of any certainty (history, subjectivity, reference) and of any standards of judgment' (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 57). How could it, talking about events in which certainty is imperative and standards of judgement should be ethically indubitable? In fact, the novel's magic realism serves precisely to *elicit* such judgement by foregrounding its narrative choices. As it consciously inscribes itself into a literary convention, it not only presents itself as a 'creative process of (re-)inventing the past that is exposed to inevitably rely on culturally predetermined patterns of interpretation' (Amian 167), but also opens its own selection of patterns to ethical scrutiny. In this, it differs markedly from an unreserved celebration of ambiguity often associated with a postmodernist outlook and rather aligns itself with what Peter Boxall describes as a 'twenty-first-century historical mood': 'an ethical refusal of the postmodern tendency to find the political power of historical fiction in its denial of the reality of history' (79).

A comparison of Foer's use of magic with Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* – which is not only the founding text of magic realism but also serves as one of Hutcheon's major examples for postmodernist historiographic metafiction – may illustrate the

decisive differences in their respective narrative projects. Márquez's novel has obviously had a strong influence on *Everything is Illuminated*, not only in its style and narrative layout. Both texts focus on small rural towns, fairly isolated and long untouched by outside influences, with narration spanning from their quasi-mythical beginnings to their apocalyptical destruction. Both narratives do so by following the fate of several generations of the founding family. Both Macondo and Trachimbrod are eventually wiped from the face of the earth, and a sense of deep nostalgia pervades both texts.[3]

These similarities only serve to highlight the novels' decisive differences. Thus, where Márquez draws a colourful picture of rural Latin America which he wants to celebrate and empower, Foer pays tribute to the Jewish shtetl culture that has been irrevocably eradicated by the Nazis. Macondo is a fictional town claiming paradigmatic (though idiosyncratic) representativeness as an allegory of Latin American and specifically Columbian history. Trachimbrod, by contrast, is a real historical location, but its depiction in the novel is clearly not representative, and to read it as an attempt to appropriately render any kind of past or present reality would be to grossly misunderstand it.[4] The story's digression from reality is never obscured, not least since the Trachimbrod chapters are presented as the imaginary account of a young American writer whose failure to 'see what [Trachimbrod is] like, how [his] grandfather grew up' (*EiI* 59), is precisely one of the central points of one of the novel's other main storyline.

The novels' differences are most striking in their respective accounts of the communities' destructions. In Márquez's novel the downfall of the town is gradual and biblical, caused by a succession of natural disasters: a deluge lasting for four years, followed by a ten-year draught, and Macondo is finally wiped out 'by the wrath of the biblical hurricane' (*HYS* 422). The end is inevitable, fated and divinely decreed. The town has reached its destiny and completed its full cycle of existence. This is the realisation of Aureliano Babilonia, the last of the Buendías, when he finally manages to decipher the gypsy Melquíades' manuscripts and finds that they record his family's history 'down to the most trivial details, one hundred years ahead of time' (*HYS* 421). Aureliano Babilonia understands that the town's and his family's histories were preordained, necessary and inevitable. The founding Buendía line closes with the birth of a 'mythological animal,' the product of incest whose coming had been fearfully anticipated from the very beginning. Macondo, whose story itself is full of repetitions and circularity, thus completes a cycle. But despite its insistent evocation of mythical time, which is both cyclical and atemporal, the

novel's ending is decidedly apocalyptic and final since the Buendías and Macondo will be 'wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men' (*HYS* 422). There is no possibility of a return to the beginning of the cycle, of revival and repetition, since 'everything written on them [Melquíades' manuscripts] was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more, because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth' (*HYS* 422).

Similarly, the end of Trachimbrod is also fraught with mythological and apocalyptic overtones. Like Macondo, it ends with a prophesy of its ending, as the shtetl is destroyed in a cataclysm of fire and water. But in this case – and this is essential – the end is not caused by natural forces and divine judgement but by human agents, by German bombs and soldiers. Though like Macondo Trachimbrod sees a gradual decline towards its end – perhaps most evident in the epithets of the rabbis, which successively change from 'Venerable Rabbi' (*EiI* 17) via 'Well-Regarded' (*EiI* 8) and 'Tolerable' (*EiI* 93), to 'More-or-Less-Respected' (*EiI* 267) – the shtetl's end is decidedly untimely. Unlike Macondo, Trachimbrod has not reached the end of its vigour by the time of its destruction. Instead, the shtetl is ironically obliterated in the very midst of a celebration of its long tradition to 'ALLOW LIFE TO GO ON IN THE FACE OF [. . .] DEATH' (*EiI* 13; original capitals): a festival commemorating a miraculous birth from water, but ending in the death by drowning of nearly the shetl's entire population. While Macondo has fulfilled its destiny and completed its one hundred years of existence, Trachimbrod is wiped out in the very midst of such a cycle, 151 years after its naming. Its end does not come as a necessary conclusion but as a disruption, a sudden halt, prematurely and infinitely sad.[5]

By contrast, there is little sadness in the depiction of Macondo's end. Aureliano Babilonia reads the fate that was set down for him by someone else but becomes, to a degree, the agent of his own end, as he begins 'to decipher the instant that he was living, deciphering it as he lived it, prophesying himself in the act of deciphering the last page of the parchments' (*HYS* 422). Macondo exists only in the parchment, an imaginary place created by language, which ends with the deciphering of the last word. Macondo's fictionality comes as a consolation and contributes to the emotional distance kept by the narrative voice throughout the whole novel. There is no horror in the description of its ending, not even in the gruesome death of the infant, the product of the final incestuous act:

> And then he saw the child. It was a dry and bloated bag of skin that all the ants in the world were dragging toward their holes along the stone path in the garden. Aureliano could not move. Not because

> he was paralysed by horror but because at that prodigious instant Melquíades' final keys were revealed to him. (*HYS* 420)

The death of the child only serves as the final revelation. It is robbed of its horror by the unemotional narration and by the reaction of Aureliano, who instantly forgets about the deaths of all his loved ones and locks himself into the house in order to start deciphering the manuscript. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* thus largely maintains its narrative distance and ironic voice to the very end.

Herein, *Everything is Illuminated* differs most markedly. In part, this is due to the ever increasing affective charge of Alex's narration, which serves to balance the persistently light-hearted tone of the Trachimbrod story. In the very last chapter of the latter, however, the horrors of reality increasingly break through the cheerful surface. The chapter starts out by repeating almost verbatim the description of an earlier celebration of the festival. It thereby stresses tradition and continuity but also makes the intrusion of historical context conspicuous and jarring. In the course of the chapter, the immanent destruction of the shtetl imposes itself on the narration with ever increasing urgency. At first, the description of the celebration is interspersed with newspaper headlines announcing the advance of the German forces in parentheses, and the comparative shabbiness of the festival is explained by the war efforts. Later, the juxtaposition becomes much more immediate, breaking up the expected sequence of description. For example, compare the two following passages, one from the description of the festival in 1804, and one from the final chapter describing the festival in 1942:

> The first [float] to pass the Tolerable Rabbi's window, from which he gave the necessary nod of approval, was the float from Kolki. It was adorned with thousands of orange and red butterflies [. . .]. Next came Rovno's float, which was covered from end to end in green butterflies. Then the floats from Lutsk, Sarny, Kivertsy, Sokerechy, and Kovel. They were each covered with color, thousands of butterflies drawn to bloody carcasses. (*EiI* 93)

> As the first floats passed the More-or-Less-Respected Rabbi's window (from which he gave the necessary nod of approval), men in green-gray uniforms were being killed in shallow trenches.
>
> Lutsk, Sarny, Kovel. Their floats were adorned with thousands of butterflies [. . .]. In another place, their sons were killed between the barbs of their own guard wire, killed with misfired bombs while squirming in the mire like animals, killed with friendly fire, killed

> sometimes without knowing that they were about to die – a bullet through the head while joking with a comrade, laughing.
>
> Lvov, Pinsk, Kivertsy. Their floats were marched along the Brod's bank, adorned in red, brown, and purple butterflies, showing their carcasses like ugly truths. (And here it is becoming harder and harder not to yell: GO AWAY! RUN WHILE YOU CAN, FOOLS! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!) (*EiI* 269)

The effectiveness of this passage relies to a significant part on its simultaneous evocation and disruption of an established model. Always returning to the initial pattern, the description of the festival is juxtaposed with the horrors of the war, the 'carcasses' showing 'like ugly truths' beneath the colourful butterflies of the cheerful narrative surface. The ironic distance typical for magic realism increasingly breaks down as the narrator directly voices his desperate wish to intervene, to warn and save Trachimbrod from its destruction. Thus incapable of maintaining its established tone of humorous distance, the narrative eventually succumbs completely and ends in a long line of dots, silenced by the destruction of the shtetl. After having omitted a description of the actual destructive events, a markedly sobered narrative voice takes the story up again to briefly report the burning of the shtetl. It then soon gives way to a prophetic dream once dreamt by Brod, in which the death of the citizens had been foreseen. Though it is a dream and told from the perspective of the river in which everyone, including the unborn child of Jonathan's grandfather drowns, it is a merciless depiction of mass death. Dissolving syntax and sentence division, it breathlessly describes the horror in a narrative style that echoes the two testimonial accounts of Nazi crimes presented in the course of Alex's narration.

While both the stories of Macondo and Trachimbrod thus end in a prophecy of their end and in the symbolic death of an infant marking the end of a line, the reminder of Trachimbrod's real existence and the emotional charge of the final description create an entirely different effect. The most striking impressions of the end of Márquez's novel are solitude, predestination and Aureliano's indifference towards his own and his child's death, while in *Everything is Illuminated* the focus is on love, responsibility and the struggle for life that tragically fails. While Aureliano dies in complete solitude, the Trachimbroders are killed conjointly, even expediting their own doom by clinging to each other:

> the crowd pulled itself into itself long after the bombing ceased the confused the frightened the desperate mass of babies children

> teenagers adults elderly all pulled at each other to survive but pulled each other into me drowning each other killing each other [. . .] this is what we've done we've killed our own babies to save them (*EiI* 273)

Against Márquez's 'writings of radical separation,' which foreground the realisation of solitude, the lack of the other in a 'poetics of isolation' (Olsen, *Ellipse* 94), Foer juxtaposes a desperate attempt to reach out, to connect, to save one another in spite of the risk and possible futility. In stark contrast to Aureliano's indifference towards the death of his son, who is being eaten alive by ants, this is a cry of pain, despair and a love so desperate that it is doomed to kill what it strives to save. With the shift to a homodiegetic narrative perspective and the increasing breakdown of syntax, any ironic distance is entirely relinquished in face of the horror, giving way to an affectively highly charged endeavour to engage the reader's empathy.

The narrative's magic realism at this point reaches its limits and the promise of escape it offers is eventually repealed. The prophetic dream denies the solace of miraculous birth from disaster that the first chapter of the Trachimbrod story still offered. The miracle that made Brod's own birth from the waters of the river possible, namely the absence of an umbilical cord, does not recur in the birth of Safran's daughter, who is pulled back under the water towards her drowning mother. In a horrifying turn on the novel's own imagery, the bodies of the dead surface to make Brod, both river and narrative voice, disappear: 'the bodies began to rise one at a time until I couldn't be seen through all of the bodies blue skin open white eyes I was invisible under them I was the carcass they were the butterflies' (*EiI* 273). No longer the colourful façade, beautiful butterflies covering the truth, the fantastic approach becomes the vehicle for an acknowledgement of death that in the moment of its realisation must drown out and silence narration.

At the very end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the reader is forcefully reminded of Macondo's merely fictional existence by means of a final metafictional turn. The town's destruction thus becomes a purely symbolic act, the conclusion of an existence that was never more than textual to begin with. In a reverse process, *Everything is Illuminated* presents its account of Trachimbrod as fictional from the very start, never letting its readers forget that this is a novel within a novel. Its conclusion, however, firmly and shockingly resituates the narrative in the reality of the destruction of the historical shtetl. While Macondo concludes and consummates its fictional existence with the last word, Trachimbrod's fictional existence *arises* out of the obliteration of its historical reality.

The end points to the beginning, since the destruction of the shtetl is both the story's culmination and its founding moment, the single reason for the narrative's existence. If *One Hundred Years of Solitude* exposes fictionality in the attempt to show the absence of the real, *Everything is Illuminated* emphasises the absence of the real in order to show the creative power of fiction.

'The origin of a story is always an absence': narrative arising from loss

Very similar to *House of Leaves*, the narrative in Foer's novel is thus insistently born from an absence at its centre. If a house featured as the abstracted embodiment of pure absence is central to Danielewski's novel, the absence at the heart of *Everything is Illuminated* manifests itself as an utter eradication of houses. Alex's story suggests that the Trachimbrod chapters are the direct result of Jonathan's realisation that the shtetl his grandfather was born in has been so completely destroyed that the only way to write about it is by imagining it. When the search finally leads to the place where Trachimbrod once stood, Alex's words fail him in face of its shockingly absolute absence:

> I implore myself to paint Trachimbrod, so you will know why we were so overawed. There was nothing. When I utter 'nothing' I do not mean there was nothing except for two houses, and some wood on the ground, and pieces of glass, and children's toys, and photographs. When I utter that there was nothing, what I intend is that there was not any of these things, or any other things. [. . .] 'How could anything have ever existed here?' (*EiI* 184)

In face of this complete blank, there are scarcely any reference points left that would allow for a graspable connection of past to present. The resulting epistemological uncertainty about the availability of the past for narrative is the main incentive for the story. In spite of the pretence of historical accuracy, it emphatically asserts the impossibility of a direct access to a way of life not only long gone but violently eradicated, leaving scarcely any traces behind. Instead, the novel endeavours to make palpable the very absence and impossibility of access precisely by misrepresenting, or rather, by fabulating about the past, using magic realism as 'a self-conscious device for imagining the past, but one which always announces the gap between itself and the past *as it was experienced*' (Behlman 60; original emphasis).

However, there is more to the novel's use of the fantastic mode than that. While absence and loss are central to it, the novel moves beyond a postmodernist insistence on the existence of the gap to the nature of what is used to fill it. No mere reiteration of the unrepresentability of the past, the novel goes on to focus on the proliferation of narratives that nevertheless keep arising from such a gap, questioning them as to their nature, their aims, their motivation and their ethical responsibility. The scene of death and destruction at its core is insistently and repeatedly turned into a scene of conception.

Having its immediate origin in the very emptiness of the field Jonathan encounters, the Trachimbrod storyline begins as a narration of multiple acts of conception in face of an inexplicable death: 'It was March 18, 1791, when Trachim B's double-axle wagon either did, or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod river' (*EiI* 8). Historical accuracy in the date is here mixed with uncertainty as to the exact nature of the accident which led to the loss of life that gives birth to this narrative strand, to the identity of the shtetl and to the ancestor of the author himself. The chapter recounts the wondrous birth of the narrator's 'great-great-great-great-great-grandmother' (*EiI* 16) from the waters of the river Brod, an event from which the festival that will provide the shtetl with a distinct tradition originates. This accident is pivotal to the precarious dialogue between destruction and creation the novel spins out. Loss, memory, love, guilt and narrative – the main concerns in the novel's reconstructive endeavour – all converge in this foundational moment.

While the first chapter title emphasises its concern with genesis by proclaiming that 'The Beginning of the World Often Comes,' a later passage points to a (typically magic realist) mythopoeic convergence of beginning and end: 'The end of the world has often come, and continues to often come. [. . .] *Was the world first created or ended?* When the Lord our God breathed on the universe, was that a genesis or a revelation?' (*EiI* 210; original emphasis). By taking up the title of the first Trachimbrod chapter, this passage emphasises retrospectively the element of death and destruction that already underlies the scene of birth recounted in the beginning. And while such darkness can at first be glimpsed only occasionally, mainly hidden by the lightness of narrative tone, the playful use of typography and the whimsicality of the shtetl's inhabitants, it asserts itself ever more prominently in the course of the novel. End and beginning, the comic and the tragic, are insistently interlinked in a process of mutual generation. With bitter irony, the last Trachimbrod chapter – which recalls the founding scene in the

narration of the shtetl's destruction – shares its title with the first one. Trachim's death already foreshadows the eradication of the shtetl – that central absence which is *both* its inevitable final annihilation *and* the origin of all the narrative strands of the novel.

The accident does so not only because of similarities in the circumstances of the event but also in that it remains hidden, uncertain and ungraspable, in spite of an alleged eye-witness, Sofiowka, whose report abounds in contradictions:

> I witnessed it all. The wagon was moving too fast for this dirt road [. . .] and it suddenly flipped itself, and if that's not exactly the truth, then the wagon didn't flip itself, but was flipped by a wind from Kiev or Odessa or wherever, and if that doesn't seem quite correct, then what happened was – and I would swear on my lily-white name to this – an angel with grave-stone-feathered wings descended from heaven to take Trachim back with him, for Trachim was too good for this world. (*EiI* 9)

Beyond its obvious unreliability, this is intriguing for offering three accounts of the same event that differ not in *what* they assert has happened – namely that Trachim's wagon has fallen into the river – but *how*, or rather *why* it has happened. The three reasons Sofiowka offers are progressively more fantastic, trying in their various way to account for the absence that they attempt to fill. At the same time, each version endeavours to allocate responsibility for the accident. Either Trachim brought it on himself, driving too fast, or natural forces are responsible, or the accident was an act of divine will, or indeed all or none of the above. The common aim of these diverging narratives is to establish a cause, to make sense of the event by providing a reason for its occurrence. But by contradicting each other they, significantly, fail to do so, leaving only the fact of death unquestioned and unquestionable.

By offering three versions of the accident, one of which is fantastic, this account somewhat unsettlingly mirrors the three different accounts the novel itself offers of the shtetl's destruction, namely the two eye-witness testimonies given in Alex's part of the novel and the aforementioned prophetic dream. Beyond the association of the author with the unsavoury character Sofiowka, this is a troubling parallel because the one possibility evaded in Sofiowka's account is precisely the one that leads to the destruction of the shtetl itself: death caused by external human influence. Suddenly, the proliferation of different versions of the event acquires a darker sense beyond evoking the quandaries of

representation and the difficulties involved in the attempt to understand death. Indeed, questioning Sofiowka's reasons for offering his multiple testimony, one might suspect that he is trying to mask his own guilt. Though nowhere made explicit, the possibility that Trachim's death may not have been an accident but a crime is hinted at repeatedly: Sofiowka's explanations are contradictory; he emerges from behind a tree when the first villagers arrive at the scene; he claims to have recognised Trachim driving by, even though he has only seen him once as a child; he is apparently sexually infatuated with Trachim's wife; and finally, he insists vehemently that the only other two people present, the young twins Chana and Hannah, have seen nothing, although in a later chapter called 'Recurring Secrets,' there are indications that this is not true (cf. 86). The fact that this later chapter culminates in Brod's prophetic vision of her rape by Sofiowka only serves to reinforce the suspicion of a possible initial crime, and in turn, to strengthen the unease caused by the analogy between Sofiowka's and the novel's own narrative.

Indeed, pursuing these thoughts further, the triangle of Trachim, Brod and Sofiowka can be seen to aptly personify the central concerns of the novel. Trachim stands for death and the absence, the loss that eludes understanding. His body is never found and his fate gives rise to various theories and stories. Furthermore, in retrospective analogy, he also recalls all the anonymous dead that disappeared with the destruction of the shtetl without a grave to mark their passing. The plaque set up by the Trachimbroders marking the spot of the accident thus echoes the memorial Alex and Jonathan encounter in the field, in which nothing else hints at the shtetl's former existence (cf. *EiI* 93, 189). Brod, for her part, literally embodies the promise of life precariously arising from the wreckage, but also bears the name of the location and means of death: the river in which Trachim was (or was not) killed and in which the inhabitants of the shtetl will all drown in the end. Finally, Sofiowka represents the crime that is perpetrated and the guilt which is covered up. At the same time, he is the one who provides the initial account and who identifies Trachim in the first place. He is thus the initial source of narration, and in his figure all the anxious awareness of the narrative's potentially problematic and unsavoury endeavour converges. Fittingly then, these three people collectively give the shtetl its name. While Sofiowka becomes its official name 'used for maps and Mormon census records,' for all other purposes the shtetl carries Trachim's name 'like an orphan baby' (*EiI* 15). Brod is thus doubly turned into a personification of the shtetl itself, both by giving her name to it in addition to

Trachim's and by sharing its orphanhood. At the same time, she also bears features of a maternal archetype, since she embodies the site of both the shtetl's birth and of its destruction. As the birth-scene of Brod, the founding moment for the shtetl's identity and the beginning of the Trachimbrod story, the accident thus encompasses the threefold paradox underlying the novel: the commemoration of an event that is in essence an absence, the construction of identity and continuity out of rupture and uncertainty, and the miracle of life arising from the very site of death.

Besides and beyond Sofiowka's unreliable account, the accident only registers in the form of disparate material traces. This 'curious flotsam' (*EiI* 8) rising to the river surface, however, testifies to the event without offering any explanation. In this, these items recall the vast collection of motley material remains of the shtetl which Jonathan and Alex, in the novel's other main plotline, find in the house of the sole survivor of the shtetl's destruction, the old woman Lista. Stored in boxes that ostensibly try to impose some order, the seeming arbitrariness of the boxes' inscriptions only manages to aggravate the impression of chaos and disconnectedness (cf. Huber, "Quest" 127–8). But those same objects surfacing 'on the crowns of bubbles that burst when they reached the surface' (*EiI* 8–9) of the river also persistently continue to bubble up on the magic realist foam of the narrative itself. Throughout the Trachimbrod chapters they turn up again and again, often in seemingly random lists of objects (cf. for example *EiI* 45–6, 79, 173). Indeed, it seems that the story about Trachimbrod itself arises from the attempt to meaningfully integrate these random and disconnected items in order to make some kind of sense out of the fragmented traces that are left behind by the destruction. The fact that many of the objects floating on the river's surface after the accident echo the ones listed on the labels of Lista's boxes only serves to confirm that suspicion.

Indeed, the first item to surface from the accident symbolises both the disconnected, free-floating relations of the material traces, and the potential for connection: 'wandering snakes of white string' (*EiI* 8). In the course of the novel, such white string is repeatedly evoked as a symbol for memory. Once again Sofiowka provides the central anecdote in this regard:

> he was once found on the Well-Regarded Rabbi's front lawn, bound in white string, and said he tied one around his index finger to remember something terribly important, and fearing he would forget the index finger, he tied a string around his pinky, and then one

> from waist to neck [. . .] and used his body to remember his body, but in the end could remember only the string. (*EiI* 15)

Just like Sofiowka's string, the memory arising from the wreckage is free-floating, without concrete connections and is thus unable to commemorate anything but itself. As the accident remains unwitnessed and uncertain, memory cannot connect to an actual event. It can only be self-referential: commemorating the memory of the accident rather than the accident itself. It is the mere act of remembering that is essential here. Through it, the shtetl defines its distinct identity, developing a festival that gives it renown among its neighbours. The white string of memory serves not to recall an event but to create a community. Fittingly, the shtetl's festival commemorates the first object to rise with a canopy of white string, connecting the community's most divergent households and objects, poor to rich, drunkard to Rabbi, Jew to gentile (cf. *EiI* 92, 267). Meanwhile, such communal commemoration of memory as such can only barely gloss over the initial disconnectedness caused by the basic absence of the accident's unknowability that still hovers beneath the surface. As the disconnectedness of the floating white string already indicates, memory, as central a topic as it is in the novel, quickly reaches its limits as it is confronted with the radical rupture of the shtetl's destruction. Memory's role in the novel constantly oscillates between self-serving commemoration and archival conservation.

This contrast is exemplarily enacted in the two main religious movements of the shtetl, the Slouchers and the Uprighters. While the Slouchers profess that '*[t]he* what [. . .] *is not so important, but that we should remember. It is the act of remembering, the process of remembrance, the recognition of our past*' (*EiI* 36; original emphasis and italics), the Uprighters engage in a 'fantasy of complete documentation' (Amian 163). In a *mise en abyme* of the Trachimbrod chapters themselves, the Uprighters record everything that occurs in the shtetl. Initially an account of major historical events, this *Book of Antecedents* soon expands to include ever more ordinary events (cf. *EiI* 196). Lacking a connective narrative, however, the chronicle eventually amounts to no more than a fragmented collection of facts and statements, despite its exaggerated meticulousness; a mere conglomeration of aphorisms, parables and cute sayings, just like the random assortments of objects washed up from the wreckage.

A bare collection of material objects and recordable facts does not suffice to make the past meaningful; it does not allow for reconciliation and familiarity. Even though the record ends up being so complete that 'any schoolboy could easily find out what his grandfather ate for breakfast on a

given Thursday fifty years before' (*EiI* 196), this information can never be enough to even begin to understand the past. The Slouchers, in contrast, document the shtetl's dreams in their *Book of Recurrent Dreams*, which, with Brod's prophetic dream, concludes the Trachimbrod chapters. The *Book of Antecedents* remains entirely committed to the real in its endeavour for an extreme mimetic referentiality; the *Book of Recurrent Dreams* veers off into the indeterminacy of the imaginary. While one is too limited in meaning, the other is too open. Neither position suffices for the narrative's desperate struggle for connection and meaning, which increasingly disintegrates as the key moment of the shtetl's destruction draws ever closer.

In face of imminent destruction not even memory can help to make sense of the present. Quite the contrary, it becomes debilitating. In the last chapters, the shtetl's inhabitants are overcome by a collective addiction to memory, 'using memory to remember memory, bound in an order of remembrance, struggling in vain to remember a beginning or end' (*EiI* 258). Men in the village 'set up flow charts [. . .] in an attempt to make sense of their memories,' which pointlessly try to draw connections between apparently arbitrary words, leading, for example, from 'Pocket' to 'Radiance' to 'Death by drowning' (*EiI* 259). Enough of the objects that have been encountered repeatedly throughout the narrative reappear to hint at the possibility that the flowchart inserted as an example provides the basic layout of the story itself. But instead of offering explanation and insight, the relations that were carefully established throughout the narrative are here broken up again, exposed as arbitrary and far-fetched. Just as Jonathan's grandfather Safran tries and fails 'to string the events of his seventeen years into a coherent narrative, something that he could understand, with an order of imagery, an intelligibility of symbolism' (*EiI* 260), the narrative itself faces the impossibility of its own project. In analogy to the increasingly dense wreckage arising from the wagon, which blinds the diver looking for Trachim's body in the first chapter (cf. *EiI* 11), the sheer mass of objects demanding to be made sense of eventually entangle the Trachimbroders, as well as the narrative itself, in loops of remembrance, which blind the shtetl's inhabitants to the present. All the attempts to recover meaning, to reconnect to the past and to give significance to the material traces fail and dissolve again in the final acknowledgement of the radical and unbridgeable rupture separating the shtetl's past from the present of narration. It can thus be read as an admission of its own limitations when the text laments: 'It was impossible to remember what one meant, what, after all of the words, was intended' (*EiI* 261). What is left is once again only a conglomeration of objects floating up randomly on the

surface of the narrative, 'strings not fastened to anything, but hanging loosely from the darkness' (*EiI* 260).

Is this, then, the novel's pessimistic self-evaluation of its project? Does it develop its narrative with the aim to eventually expose the limitations of memory, of narrative, of language and representation in the face of the destruction and rupture it grapples with? Does the novel say all it says only to emphasise the impossibility to say anything at all, and is Lee Behlman therefore right in his assessment that the novel's central concern is to evoke the gap between past and present (cf. Behlman 60)? Yes, in part. But another perspective also suggests itself, one which shifts the focus from the point at which the narrative breaks down to the miracle of its birth in the first place.

'Every love is carved from loss': love as fictive creation

Indeed, the narrative itself is among the stray objects that rise up from the bottom of the river, both because it begins with the accident and because the letters of the story's first chapter title tumble from an image of Trachim's wagon, while all headings of the Trachimbrod chapters typographically echo the waves of the river. The string of memory, arising disconnectedly from the wreckage, can only be reconnected by an act of imagination. It is the fictive act of the Trachimbrod narrative itself that provides the necessary imaginative connections to create a coherent narrative out of all the fragmented and disconnected material and factual traces. Just as its narration successively incorporates the disparate objects arising from the wagon (and collected in Lista's boxes), establishing narrative and symbolic continuity, the story also provides the necessary context to situate (at least some of) the various entries in *The Book of Antecedents*. The novel thus emphasises the middle way between the two extreme positions of the Uprighters dedication to the real and the Slouchers celebration of the imaginary.

While disconnected white string, and thus memory, is the first object to rise, it is Brod herself who rises last as an allegorical embodiment of the narrative itself.[6] If white string stands for the attempt to reconnect disparate traces, it is Brod who provides life and hope for a new beginning. Like the story itself, she is born from destruction, she arises out of the wreckage and every single man in the shtetl falls in love with her, since the 'curious circumstances of her creation lit the men's intrigue' (*EiI* 77). She thus embodies the desire to re-imagine the shtetl, to possess the past which remains forever elusive. Finally, her suicidal death by drowning in the river not only turns her quite literally into a text

full of sadness, as the wet pages of her diary print a list of 613 sadnesses unto her body (cf. *EiI* 211). It also echoes the self-disintegration the narrative itself undergoes in the last chapter, dismembering itself in its own version of suicide in water and sadness.

If she is thus read as an allegory for the narrative itself, Brod offers a perspective that looks beyond disintegration, sadness and loss. Her life interweaves the three main incentives from which Jonathan's act of narration arises: loss, sadness, but also and essentially, love. She constantly struggles to express a love that lacks an object, to 'reconcile herself with a world that fell so short of what she would have hoped for' (*EiI* 80):

> Brod's life was a slow realization that the world was not for her, and that for whatever reason, she would never be happy and honest at the same time. She felt as if she were brimming, always producing and hoarding more love inside her. But there was no release. [. . .] Nothing felt like anything more than what it actually was. Everything was just a thing, mired completely in its thingness. (*EiI* 79–80)

As an allegory for the main narrative desire, her struggle turns into the desperate attempt to find a way to deal with the harsh historical realities and to give a meaning to the random material traces that remain – like the stray objects rising from the wagon or the collection in Lista's boxes – in a way that would express all the love, the loss and the sadness involved. Happiness and truth are, in this, mutually exclusive, since reality is bleak and desolate. Brod knows that 'there [is] no convincing reason to live' (*EiI* 81), there is no justification for her existence (or, again, for the existence of the story). She has to rely on the 'great and saving lie,' which is 'her willingness to make [the world] beautiful and fair, to live a once-removed life, in a world once-removed from the one in which everyone else seemed to exist' (*EiI* 80).

This may well amount to a justification of the novel's own embedded act of narration. A world once-removed is a fitting description of the colourful picture of Trachimbrod the novel presents, at least once-removed from historical reality, but also, as the product of Jonathan's mind, removed from the reality of the fictional world portrayed in the novel's narrative frame. Brod herself emblematises the desire to escape and to ignore harsh realities, to consciously deceive oneself, to be dishonest in order to be happy in spite of all the sadness:

> if there is no love in the world, we will make a new world, and we will give it heavy walls, and we will furnish it with soft red interiors,

> from the inside out, and give it a knocker that resonates like a diamond falling to a jeweler's felt so that we should never hear it. Love me, because love doesn't exist, and I have tried everything that does. (*EiI* 82)

This aptly describes the imaginative impulse driving the creation of the fictional shtetl as much as it applies to Brod's life with her adoptive father Yankel. Trachimbrod is imagined as a world of naïve innocence, of charming idiosyncrasies existing in nearly complete isolation from the world, cushioned from its horrors and its trouble. It is the attempt to create a new world, in face of the pain and the desolation of reality, to believe in love and happiness in spite of all the apparent proof of its nonexistence. The power of fiction lies in escape and self-deception on which happiness precariously depends.

At the same time, however, this attempt is doomed to fail. Just as the story of the shtetl, for all its apparent escapism and procrastination eventually cannot avoid the moment of destruction in which both shtetl and story disintegrate, so too does Brod's love always involve elements of sadness, disillusion and pain. Her self-deception finds its limits in several revelatory moments, in each of which she realises that love has eluded her once again. Even Brod and Yankel do not love each other 'in the simple and impossible sense of the word' (*EiI* 82), because they never really know each other. In their love for each other they thus 'reciprocated the great and saving lie – that our love for things is greater than our love for our love for things – willfully playing the parts they wrote for themselves, willfully creating and believing fictions necessary for life' (*EiI* 83). Love remains elusive for the characters as long as they yearn for happiness, since love seems only possible when one faces the truth, that is, in the acknowledgement of death. The only two moments in which love is truly felt by the main protagonists of the Trachimbrod chapters consequently indirectly relate to death by drowning in the river. Brod only truly feels love when the Kolker, on his death-bed, tells her the truth about her parents, thus bringing her face to face with what Yankel's fantastic stories had glossed over (cf. *EiI* 139). And Safran, in the later part of the Trachimbrod story, falls in love with his unborn baby girl, conceived to the sound of the first Nazi bombs exploding in the distance and doomed to die in the river at the very moment of her birth.

The Trachimbrod chapters thus continually comment on themselves as fiction arising from the absence or loss of the loved one(s), and at the same time, as an expression of the impossibility to do that love justice.

While '[e]very love is carved from loss' (*EiI* 266), 'the origin of story is always an absence' (*EiI* 230). On the one hand, fiction serves as an escape, a self-deceptive lie that denies the absence at its heart. On the other, it offers a way to give expression to that absence, to define it precisely by making its denial of representation obvious. When Brod cuts around the hole that simultaneously joined and separated her from the Kolker – 'the absence that defined it [becoming] a presence that defined them' (*EiI* 135) – to hang it around her neck, she turns the hole into an object that can be acknowledged. In the same way, the story makes the real loss of not only Trachimbrod but the whole shtetl culture painfully present by circumscribing it. This type of metafictional awareness thus serves not to destroy illusion, nor to blur the distinction between fiction and reality. Instead, it emphasises their insurmountable difference on which the ability of fiction to evoke loss is based.

This poetics of creation out of and around absence finds another potent image in one of the entries in the shtetl's *Book of Recurrent Dreams*, recounting a dream about a bird that crashes through a window, leaving its outline traced in the glass: a 'shadow that drew blood from any finger that dared to trace it, [. . .] better proof of the bird's existence than the bird ever was' (*EiI* 38). The corpse and the reality of death eventually only remain accessible in the pain of tracing their outline. The Trachimbrod chapters are the attempt to give solidity to that outline, to make palpable the edge defining the absence. At first, they set out to fill the gap with fantastic narration – Brod's miraculous birth, Sofiowka's explanatory attempts, Yankel's elaborate stories and Brod's self-deception – in the attempt, as the Venerable Rabbi puts it in the very first chapter, to 'ALLOW LIFE TO GO ON IN THE FACE OF THIS DEATH' (*EiI* 13; original capitals). However, it is precisely at the point at which pain reasserts itself, and thus, eventually, in an acknowledgement of its own impossibility that the story, paradoxically, manages to make its underlying absence present. As Alex aptly points out: 'there are only so many times that you can utter "It does not hurt" before it begins to hurt even more than the hurt. You become enlightened of feeling hurt, which is worse, I am certain, than the existent hurt' (*EiI* 117).

It is such an enlightenment, a reassertion of pain that is aggravated by its former denial, which occurs in the last Trachimbrod chapter. Enlightenment, or illumination, thus assumes a multi-faceted significance in the course of the novel, adding another bunch of significations and associations to the novel's complex development of the theme of love. On one level, illumination means facing the truth and gaining knowledge. The culmination of the whole quasi-epic 'very rigid journey'

(*EiI* 1) of Alex and Jonathan is the revelation of Alex's grandfather's past in a chapter with the title 'Illumination.' But the illumination occurring here is painfully double-edged, as the narrative not only illuminates a repressed past but also recounts the burning of Jews in the synagogue, while the fire 'illuminated those who were not in the synagogue those who were not going to die' (*EiI* 251). Illumination is thus fraught with guilt for those who are illuminated: directly so for Grandfather, but also indirectly for anyone listening to (or reading) the tale.

By contrast, however, an entirely different glow can also be found to pervade the narrative. Ending with a 'bonfire of Jews' (*EiI* 272), the last Trachimday festival concludes in a glow of a horribly different kind than the 'coital radiance' (*EiI* 95) produced by the orgy of love-making that traditionally concluded the festival and supposedly made the shtetl visible from space on this one day of the year: '*We're here*, the glow of 1804 will say in one and a half centuries. *We're here, and we're alive*' (*EiI* 95; original italics). This emphatic assertion is bitterly ironic, of course, as by the time anticipated here the shtetl will have been eradicated. The initial assertion of life thus might seem fatuously optimistic, the illuminating glow of love no more than a childishly romantic notion that turns into bitter reality in the last chapter of the Trachimbrod narrative.

Another perspective is offered, however, by the intricate ways in which this glow of love is also bound up with language. Coital light not only eventually turns into the verbal assertion '*We are alive*' but also originates from language: 'sentences became words became sighs became groans became grunts became light' (*EiI* 97) – a light that is then, in turn, seen by the first men on the moon. Such transformation of love into words into narrative (and vice versa) insistently reoccurs throughout the novel. It is striking, though, that the gradual disintegration of language described here finds its unsettling realisation precisely in the stylistic form taken by the three accounts the novel offers of the shtetl's destruction: the two testimonial reports by the survivor Lista and Alex's grandfather as well as Brod's prophetic dream. In these three inset narrations, the different meanings of illumination – knowledge, guilt and love – can be seen to converge. It is these stories that provide enlightenment, their very telling an act of love and a monument for the hope of life continuing in the face of death.

After all, what does serve to assert the former life of the shtetl inhabitants, what illuminates them, making them visible from another world as distant from the present of the shtetl as outer space, is the story itself, the fiction that arose from love and loss. We readers are the astronauts who see the glow of love that has resulted in the words on the page.

Though the novel thus emphasises the absence at its core and the 'now-vast temporal and cultural distance between late twentieth and twenty-first century America and the Holocaust' (Behlman 61), it also insists on the process of fictional imagination, which serves not only to testify to the loss that eludes narrative but also to the love that nevertheless persists in the endeavour to give expression to it.

Meanwhile, though the novel repeatedly stages a breakdown of narrative, exposing its limitations and self-deceptions, it also stresses its power to pay loving tribute to the loss it faces and to establish intersubjective connections in the act of communication. As a representative of the novel's readers, Brod turns into an audience of her own story in a repetition and reversion of the astronaut imagery. Being a secret to herself and avoiding mirrors, she 'lifts a powerful telescope to find herself' (*EiI* 87) looking straight into the future. There she sees Jonathan's grandfather as a boy reading to the girl Augustine from the shtetl's *Book of Antecedents*, another of the numerous *mises en abyme* the Trachimbrod chapters contain. The words are here traced back to the love in which they originated, stressing the act of reading as a communal, connecting activity of intersubjective communication, which, in spite of Brod's distance, indeed seems to promise some sort of self-knowledge, the chance to break out of her isolation and solitude and the potential to strive for a better future:

> The hand of the scribe, the boy's eyes, his mouth, the girl's ears. She traces the causal string back, to the face of the scribe's inspiration, and the lips of the lover and palms of the parents of the scribe's inspiration, and their lovers' lips and parents' palms and neighbors' knees and enemies, and the lovers of their lovers, parents of their parents, neighbors of their neighbors, enemies of their enemies, until she convinces herself that it is not only the boy who is reading to the girl in that attic, but everyone reading to her, everyone who ever lived. (*EiI* 89)

'The immovability of truth': love as truthfulness

If it is thus love which gives rise to the fantastic story in the escapist endeavour to deal with absence and loss, it is also love which makes imperative an acknowledgement of loss in acts of commemoration and mourning. Love both impels consolatory self-deceptions and extorts a constant confrontation with that loss and pain for which no consolation can ever be possible. Love may be a fiction, but at the same time,

as Alex comments, '[l]*ove, in your* [Jonathan's] *writing, is the immovability of truth*' (*EiI* 103; original italics). As a narrative arising from and presented as an act of love, the novel is thus equally torn between two simultaneous but opposite impulses, exemplified in the different reactions of the twins Chana and Hannah to the accident, one playing delightedly with the flotsam arising from the wagon, the other watching from the shore and wailing, or in the different approaches to memory by Uprighters and Slouchers. One tendency celebrates creation and life in spite of death, the other mourns loss and admits to the horror, but breaks down in silence; one drives towards genesis, the other towards revelation.

At first glance, this duality seems to be mirrored in the two narrative voices developed in the novel: Jonathan imaginatively creates the shtetl's past in his story, celebrating its life and attempting to compensate for his lack of real information about the past by free invention. Alex, by contrast, is much more occupied with accuracy and truthfulness, progressively leading up to the final dumbfounding revelation of Grandfather's confession of guilt. The degree of truthfulness of the respective tales emerges as a central theme of Alex's metafictional commentaries in the letters to Jonathan with which he accompanies his narrative. The conspicuousness of Alex's unreliability as narrator serves only to emphasise the centrality of his concern with truthfulness and to enforce the sincerity of his voice. By admitting to (at least some of) his alterations and inventions in his letters, the premise of a basis in reality, which can serve as a yardstick for truth, is forcefully asserted. Moreover, the same preoccupation with truth also dominates Alex's comments on Jonathan's novel, objecting, for example, to the latter's invention of characters' names or pointing out anachronisms (cf. *EiI* 25, 142).

Meanwhile, as the novel progresses, Alex's anxiety about truthfulness gradually reaches beyond his initial historical pedantry and shifts the emphasis incrementally towards pragmatic and ethical questions. The questions of the possibilities and moral implications of a manipulation of truth increasingly unsettle him. In one of the later letters he worries:

> *We are being very nomadic with the truth, yes?* [. . .] *Do you think this is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred? If your answer is no, then why do you write about Trachimbrod and your grandfather in the manner that you do, and why do you command me to be untruthful? If your answer is yes, then this creates another question, which is if we*

> *are to be such nomads with the truth, why do we not make the story more premium than life?* (*EiI* 179; original italics).

If accuracy is no longer the ultimate aim and truth has become nomadic, open to manipulation, then where is the limit? How far is one allowed to diverge from the truth and which ethical guidelines apply? These are the kind of questions which gradually supplant Alex's objections to historical inaccuracies.

Alex repeatedly invokes the possibility to change the story, to find a better, happier ending: '*It could be perfect and beautiful, and funny and usefully sad, as you say.* [. . .] *I do not think that there are any limits to how excellent we could make life seem*' (*EiI* 180; original italics). Ironically, it is now Jonathan who turns into the guarantor of truthfulness. Jonathan compels Alex to proceed with his narrative even against his will. In a desperate plea, Alex finally implores him: 'you [could] save Grandfather. We are merely two paragraphs away. Please, try to find some other option' (*EiI* 224).

The creative dialogue which is thus established between Alex and Jonathan insistently emphasises the narratives' interconnectedness and testifies to the simultaneity of their conception. As Amian points out, this turns the novel into a work in progress, which 'always remains late to come to itself translating the postmodernist maxim of endless deferral into belated acts of revision that always wait to be realized' (172). The version we are presented with is still under discussion, open to revision and change. But instead of thereby pointing to a potentially limitless plurality of meanings (as postmodernism likes to do), the novel presents its narrative paths as *choices* among a number of possible alternatives, thus encouraging readers to question the underlying motives and their ethical justification.

Although Alex asserts his own narrative control in the initial chapters, Jonathan eventually emerges as the final authorial (and authoritative) agent, in control of not only the Trachimbrod chapters but also of Alex's narrative. While Jonathan's role at first seems to be limited to suggestions for corrections – which Alex even occasionally decides to ignore (cf. *EiI* 55) – the further the story progresses, the more often Alex appeals to Jonathan to change and manipulate its outcome: '*I beseech you to forgive us, and to make us better than we are. Make us good*' (*EiI* 145). Eventually, he appears to hand over the story to Jonathan entirely, in a parenthetical aside inserted immediately prior to the revelation (or illumination) of Grandfather's past:

> I have written to this point many times, and corrected the parts you would have me correct, and made more funnies, and more

> inventions, and written as if I were you writing this, but every time I try to persevere, my hand shakes so that I can no longer hold my pen. Do it for me. Please. It is now yours. (*EiI* 226)

Although, after this parenthetical insertion, the narrative voice continues to be ostensibly Alex's, some subtle differences do indicate that Jonathan has indeed taken charge. Most of what follows both in this and in the last chapter of Alex's narrative is rendered as free direct speech, first in form of a dialogue between Alex and his grandfather, then as a monologue of the latter. While this has been a common stylistic feature of Alex's story throughout, in none of the longer dialogues included before are the individual utterances set off by paragraph changes, a detail of layout which is suddenly introduced at this point. On the one hand, this has the effect of optically slowing down the pace of narration, stalling for time before revelation becomes unavoidable. On the other hand, this echoes the typographical layout of Jonathan's Trachimbrod chapters. Hinting further at a change in narrative authority, Grandfather's confession, which concludes the chapter, is presented as an increasingly breathless monologue, with sentences and words running into each other without punctuation or spacing, with a degree of stylistic daring that Alex's story (in contrast to the confidently playful Trachimbrod chapters) has never aspired to before. In addition to these implicit indications, Jonathan's narrative mediation of this part of the story is also pointed at quite explicitly, as the text repeatedly insists that what is set down in the 'Illumination'-chapter is precisely what Jonathan has written in his diary: 'I told all of this to Jonathan as Grandfather told it to me, and he wrote all of it in his diary. He wrote:' (*EiI* 243, cf. also 228).

Thus, Grandfather's confession is multiply refracted and mediated. Alex's and Grandfather's dialogue is ostensibly translated by Alex from Ukrainian into English for Jonathan, who writes it down in his diary, which Alex allegedly copies into his narrative. But this narrative, as we have seen, might itself have been taken over by Jonathan earlier, who in that case appropriates Alex's voice. At the same time Alex, in turn, according to his own words, from the very beginning has been attempting to imitate Jonathan and to write 'as if I were you [that is Jonathan]' (*EiI* 226). The confession is thus turned into a communal effort involving all three voices, which merge into each other to the point of indistinguishability.

While such merging is perhaps most obvious in this central scene, the separation of the narrative strands of the novel is confused at several

stages, testifying not only to the alleged mutual influence of Alex and Jonathan on each other's stories, but also, in a metaleptical leap, to the presence of the controlling narrative instance of the implied author. In one scene, Alex reads his own future in Jonathan's diary, a passage that quotes verbatim from the final letter by Grandfather which concludes the novel (cf. *EiI* 160, 274). Grandfather's death by slitting his wrists in the bathtub in turn connects back to Brod's suicide by drowning in the river and to the initial accident of Trachim B; not only because all of these deaths involve water but also because 'the bleeding red-ink script of a resolution: *I will . . . I will . . . '* (*EiI* 8; original italics) which is washed up among the objects from the wagon seems to be none other than Grandfather's suicide note, which concludes: *'I will walk without noise, and I will open the door in darkness, and I will'* (*EiI* 276; original italics). The apparent narrative structure of the novel is thus reshuffled. Not only is Alex's travelogue situated on the same diegetic level as the Trachimbrod chapters, both being presented as more or less obviously fictional results of an allegedly real journey, but Alex's own fate, indeed his very existence, in retrospect seems to arise from the wagon's wreckage no less than the Trachimbrod chapters themselves. The relation between frame and embedded story eventually turns out to be reversible, with the desire to imagine the shtetl's past giving rise to the need to acknowledge its destruction and vice versa. Meanwhile, both impel the novel to continually question its justification, its motives and its effects.

Throughout, the novel remains in doubt about its own answer to this fundamental question. This insecurity about the validity of its own endeavours openly emerges in a dialogue that ensues when Alex asks Jonathan why he writes:

> 'I want to express myself.' 'The same is true for me.' 'I'm looking for my voice.' 'It is in your mouth.' 'I want to do something I am not ashamed of.' 'Something you are proud of, yes?' 'Not even. I just don't want to be ashamed.' [. . .] 'A question.' 'Yes?' 'Do you write because you have a thing to say?' 'No.' (*EiI* 70)

With his deceptively naïve rejoinders, Alex exposes Jonathan's grounds for claiming authorship as insufficient and pretentious. The endeavour to find the right form only seems to hide that there is no content, that there is nothing to say. Jonathan is literally struggling with the fact that he has not 'a thing to say,' since he fails to find what he was looking for in the Ukraine. He has to deal precisely with the difficulty to find

anything to say he would not be ashamed of in face of the horrors of the past. Shame is involved in this not only because all his problems (of expressing himself, of finding his voice) seem so irrelevant and ridiculous in comparison, but also because there are always ulterior motives behind any creation. An entry on art in *The Book of Antecedents* reads thus:

> Art is that thing having to do only with itself – the product of a successful attempt to make a work of art. Unfortunately, there are no examples of art, nor good reasons to think that it will ever exist. (Everything that has been made has been made with a purpose, everything with an end that exists outside that thing, i.e., *I want to sell this*, or *I want this to make me famous and loved*, or *I want this to make me whole*, or worse, *I want this to make others whole*.) And yet we continue to write, paint, sculpt, and compose. Is this foolish of us? (*EiI* 202; original italics)

This reminder of the inevitable instrumentalisation of art in this context directly brings to mind the criticism raised frequently against Holocaust literature, namely that it lacks respect. Is it not scandalous to use the death of millions as a topic in a work of art that was written with a motive like: '*I want to sell this*'? And is it not even worse in this context to be presumptuous enough to hope that the narrative can '*make others whole*'? The central issues of guilt, shame and the possibility of forgiveness which repeatedly arise in the course of the novel thus also concern the narrative project itself. After all, as Lista still insists, in a distinct echo of Theodor Adorno's famous indictment of poetry after Auschwitz, what happened 'is not a thing that you can imagine. It only is. After that there can be no imagining' (*EiI* 188).

Nevertheless, the novel is quite clear about the fact that Lista remains imprisoned in the past, unable to leave death behind and to live again. Forgiveness for her, as a direct victim, is as impossible as love and life. To the members of a third generation, who come to her in the attempt to understand and be reconciled with the past, she can offer no illumination, only the utter darkness of the shtetl's eradication (cf. *EiI* 184). But the central absence and scattered traces, which for her are final, give rise to the narratives which allow her guests to avoid the fate of Lot's wife, petrifaction in face of horror. As far as illumination is possible at all, it is realised as identification and affective empathy in a converging of voices which is no longer a simple process of exposition and reception, no longer a passing on of truth for truth's sake, nor a mere insistence on the insurmountability of the gap between past and

present, but a communal narration leading to a realisation of one's own responsibility and implication.

Such universality of responsibility and guilt finds its most emphatic expression in the confusion of voices in Grandfather's confession, which eventually broadens out to include even the reader in its final unanswerable question:

> where do we go now what do we do with what we know Grandfather said that I am I but this could not be true the truth is that I also pointed at Herschel and I also said he is a Jew and I will tell you that you also pointed at Herschel and you also said he is a Jew and more than that Grandfather also pointed at me and said he is a Jew and you also pointed at him and said he is a Jew and your grandmother and Little Igor and we all pointed at each other so what is it he should have done he would have been a fool to do any thing else but is it forgivable what he did can he ever be forgiven for his finger for what his finger did for what he pointed to and did not point to for what he touched in his life and what he did not touch he is stillguilty I am I am I am I am I? (*EiI* 252)

The narrative act itself feels like a transgression, a pointing of fingers that attributes guilt both to the pointer and the one pointed to. The very act of narration involves an act of perpetration on several levels: guilty for representing the past, guilty for misrepresenting it, guilty for attempting to understand, guilty for not being able to understand. Like Sofiowka raping Brod, the narrative impulse appropriates and abuses the past, satisfying a narrative desire that follows dubious motives (earning money, fame and so on).

Alex's narrative thus struggles with the impossibility of presuming to recreate and empathise with what happened through the act of narration. But the Trachimbrod chapters, in upholding their narrative distance and in their avoidance of identification, face the opposite problem. Their attempt to freely imagine the inaccessible and to invent a story may easily be subject to Claude Lanzmann's critique, that such attempts at aestheticisation amount to 'real cowardice, because this idea of our being able to engender harmoniously [. . .] this violence, is just an absurd dream of nonviolence. It is a way of escaping; it is a way not to face the horror' (207). In fact, Alex eventually rejects Jonathan's project with a seemingly similar judgement:

> *You are a coward, Jonathan, and you have disappointed me. I would never command you to write a story that is as it occurred in the actual, but*

> *I would command you to make your story faithful.* [. . .] *all of your relatives are cowards. You are all cowards because you live in a world that is 'once-removed,'* [. . .] *because you are all in the proximity of love, and all disavow love.* (*EiI* 240; original italics)

Opting for the exoneration from referential obligations offered by an evocation of the marvellous stance may thus seem too easy, cowardly and insincere.

Is this then, finally, a rejection of the means of the fantastic? Does the novel dismiss the marvellous in favour of the mimetic, first with its fictionalisation of the fantastic, with its denial of magic realism in the last Trachimbrod chapter, and finally with Alex's indictment of the escapism implied by Jonathan's narrative? Not in the least.

After all, Alex's own narrative is no less fictional than Jonathan's, while both narratives develop distinctive approaches to their topic. Whereas Jonathan's tale initially celebrates life continuing in the face of death, Alex's narrative faces the horror of two testimonial reports and the shocking void of the field in which the shtetl once stood. Both narrative incentives are utterly inadequate to grasp the past and to fill the absence that the shtetl's destruction has left behind. But at the same time they are both imperative if what happened is not to be silenced, repressed and forgotten. They testify to their own impossibility, their necessary impropriety, as their continuous dialogue results in increasingly jarring juxtapositions (most drastic in the immediate transition from Grandfather's shocking confession to the account of an adulterous orgasm at a Trachimbrod wedding reception).

Foregrounding the process of its own creative conception and using the fantastic mode to further expose its mechanisms of fictionalisation, its intersubjective negotiations and the deliberate narrative choices on which it is based, the novel subjects its narrative to constant ethical scrutiny. If the past is utterly unavailable and referentiality is eventually constructed, we need to take responsibility for the kind of stories we necessarily tell to fill the gap. This is where the novel's focus markedly diverges from postmodernist aesthetics. After scepticism has called everything into question and exposed all former certainties as fictions, we are called upon to take responsibility for the kind of fictions we propose and subscribe to.

Thus, eventually, despite the undeniable importance of the events of the past, the novel, with all its proliferation of words and imagination remains ultimately largely silent about it. Readers face the same void and darkness Alex and Jonathan encounter in the field in which Trachimbrod formerly stood, with the actual past being present in the narrative only

in form of repeated reminders of its absence and inaccessibility. Instead, the focus of the novel is on the process of telling and receiving stories, the difference fiction can make in life and the ability of stories to create intersubjective connections and to break through the barriers of a solipsistic self. Instead of condemning recourse to the fantastic, the novel therefore explores the potential of the fantastic, not to portray the past, but to imagine stories that might make a difference today.

Thus, although Alex's rejection of Jonathan's writing echoes Lanzmann, concerned as it is about the attempt to escape from facing the world by living 'in a world that is 'once-removed,' his objection arises precisely from Jonathan's refusal to provide the story with a happy ending in spite of what happened. What Alex wants Jonathan to face is not the historical reality of the past. Quite the contrary, and very much in a reconstructive mood, he asks him to affirm love *in spite of* its impossibility, to assume agency and responsibility in contrast to the passivity and inability to take decisions that characterises the Trachimbroders, and to imagine a better world. He calls for the same reconstructive decision to live, love and create *in spite of* absence with which we have already seen *House of Leaves* conclude.

For Alex himself, then, it is *not* the revelation of his grandfather's past (which had already occurred before he begins to write his story) that leads to maturation, but instead the acts of writing and reading he engages in. At the end of the collaborative creative process that is the novel, he finally speaks out against his father's abuses and takes responsibility and action in order to create a better future for himself and his family. As he is constantly confronted with the need to make and to justify narrative choices, he realises the possibility and necessity to take his future into his own hands and to stand by his decisions. While the novel thus illustrates the impossibility of fiction to access the past or to fill the void it left behind, it also optimistically celebrates its potential to matter for the present and future. Precisely because meaning is only possible as a narrative construction around a central absence, these necessary constructs are opened to a dynamic ethical questioning that is based on intersubjective communication.

While the novel acknowledges the unbridgeable rupture from the past, it also evokes the ability of works of fiction to create emphatic connections like those which Brod experiences when watching Jonathan's grandfather reading to Augustine in the attic, or as they are affirmed in one of Alex's last letters:

> *We are talking now, Jonathan, together, and not apart. We are with each other, working on the same story, and I am certain that you can also feel*

> *it. Do you know that I am the Gypsy girl and you are Safran, and that I am Kolker and you are Brod, and that I am your grandmother and you are Grandfather, and that I am Alex and you are you, and that I am you and you are me?* (*EiI* 214; original italics)

Reader and writer are here compared to pairs of lovers, connected and indeed entirely merged by love. Even though some of the shame repeatedly expressed in the novel might well stem from a certain embarrassment at its own optimism, what the novel eventually seems to suggest, in spite of all its self-doubt, is the reconstructive conclusion that love, eventually, turns out to be all at once the source, the nature and the aim of narrative, the one means by which everything can be illuminated.

5

Escaping Towards History: Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

History and superheroes

Compared with the postmodernist pyrotechnics of *House of Leaves* and *Everything is Illuminated*, Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* presents itself as much more conventionally mimetic. Drawing on a number of well-tried realist conventions, it tells an American-Dream story of underdog success and unfolds a social-historical portrait that pays a nostalgic tribute to life in New York City in the 1930s and 1940s. At the same time, its recourse to the fantastic leans even more decisively towards the marvellous than the Trachimbrod narrative in *Everything is Illuminated* does. If my arrangement of texts has followed a logic of receding prominence of postmodernist aesthetic strategies, this comes along with an increasingly distinct separation of the two stances. The gothic narrative at the core of *House of Leaves* relies heavily on an invocation of the mimetic stance in order to effect fantastic hesitation. The use of magic realism in *Everything is Illuminated* largely eschews such mimetic truth claims but still insists on and arises from its anchor in reality. *Kavalier & Clay*, in contrast, includes fantastic narratives that, while still claiming some mimetic connection, drift far into the marvellous: the superhero stories of early comic books.

In many ways, Chabon's novel therefore neatly falls in line with the revived appeal of realism that has been diagnosed for literature after postmodernism. With its straightforward, heterodiegetic narrative voice, its fairly linear plot-development, its tendency to dissolve fantastic hesitation into the definitely marvellous and in its quite conventional realist aesthetics, Chabon's style is a far cry from Danielewski's typographical innovations and labyrinthine multi-strand narrative. Compared to Danielewski's novel, which struggles to leave

the postmodernist house, to think and enable a life on its margins, and *Everything is Illuminated*, which sets out to find, or rather re-establish, some kind of non-referential truth in representation after postmodernism's deconstruction of the very notion of truth, Chabon's novel agonises much less over its relation to its postmodernist predecessors. Nevertheless, as I will argue, reading its particular politics of representation in the context of reconstructive endeavours may further contribute to an understanding of the subtle ways in which a younger generation of authors takes up and transforms postmodernist insights and aesthetics. It also offers another striking illustration of the role the fantastic mode can play in such a negotiation.

Even though *Kavalier & Clay* is ostensibly a historical novel, its positioning within the mimetic is not unproblematic. In its strategies of representation it does not return to a naïve faith in the possibility of realism, and while it clearly depends on a mimetic stance in its use of the fantastic and the marvellous, it also allows for a degree of ambiguity and blurred boundaries. But while all surfaces, and especially those of representation, are treacherous in *House of Leaves*, and truth becomes a matter of serious ethical debate and quandaries in Foer's novel, in *Kavalier & Clay* the topic of representational truth and accuracy recedes to the background. Where the former two novels insistently evoke epistemological and ontological aspects of the fantastic even as they turn their attention increasingly towards pragmatic considerations, the latter is strikingly unconcerned with the possibility or impossibility of representational truth. Ontological and epistemological doubts, it seems, have largely been left behind, as the novel's pragmatic focus brings the value, the responsibilities and consequences of fictive inventions and interventions into view.

At the same time, and despite their stylistic difference, there are numerous striking parallels between *Kavalier & Clay* and *Everything is Illuminated*. Critics have not failed to comment on the similar biographical background of the authors or on the fact that both texts touch upon the Holocaust and draw on the marvellous stance in their engagement with these events (cf. Behlman; Petrie; Ribbat). Just like in Foer's novel, fantastic narration in *Kavalier & Clay* arises at least in part from one of the protagonist's attempts to come to terms with the deep gulf between his own life and the cruel realities faced by European Jews under German occupation. At the same time, in both cases the recourse to the marvellous painfully attests to the impossibility to bridge this gulf in representation. Furthermore, the two novels share a focus on the creative collaboration between two young men, which results in

a fantastic narration that is itself embedded as a largely independent narrative within the framing tale of their partnership.

These similarities render the differences between the texts all the more striking. While the American is cast as the clueless visitor in *Everything is Illuminated*, roles are reversed in *Kavalier & Clay*, in which the young Josef Kavalier arrives as a stranger and fugitive at his aunt's place in New York City after a difficult escape from occupied Prague. Desperate to earn money in order to rescue his family from the persecutions of the Germans, Josef lets himself be persuaded by his cousin Sam Clay to start on a comic-book venture. Together they give creative form to their common and yet so different dreams of escape by inventing a new superhero, the Escapist, who is endowed with superhuman powers of escape artistry. The fantasies of rescue, which the end of *Everything is Illuminated* so poignantly denies, are here fully fleshed out. This relates directly to the fact that the experience of unbridgeable distance from which fictional creation arises in Foer's novel is temporal, while in *Kavalier & Clay* it is spatial. The narrative position from which the fantastic storyline is introduced in the former is an explicitly contemporary one, which looks back on the events leading up to the destruction of the shtetl. Though Jonathan assumes an omniscient narrative voice, the fantastic mode serves to stress his inability to access the past. The heterodiegetic narrative perspective in *Kavalier & Clay*, by contrast, confidently assumes authority over its subject, maintaining a mimetic stance even while it draws attention to its own nostalgic construction of the past. Meanwhile, the fantastic mode is chosen by its protagonists to deal with their helpless spatial distance from events which they can neither influence nor witness.

The two novels thus differ decisively in their premises, in the development of their themes and in the stylistic devices they employ. In Foer's novel, the fantastic story arises from the attempt to meaningfully rediscover a past that has been lost without negating that loss. At the same time, the fantastic narrative becomes a means for communication and dialogue that manages to point beyond lamentations of the past into a tentatively optimistic future. Fantastic imagination in *Everything is Illuminated* turns into a vehicle for an extended meditation on the traces and the meaning of the past for readers today. *Kavalier & Clay*, by contrast, presents its embedded products of fantastic fancy as a means to evade and forget the present, and much more openly than Foer does, admits to its commercialisation. While Foer's central concern is with fiction's ability to tell different kinds of truth, Chabon focuses on that 'universally despised' gift of the imagination, that 'genuine magic of art'

(*K&C* 576): escapism. In contrast to Foer's excess of signification and celebration of the idiosyncratic and the wonderful, Chabon's embedded superhero stories are entirely conventional and follow faithfully established patterns of the superhero genre. If the Trachimbrod chapters are imbued with heightened complexity and playful freedom, as narrative vignettes that favour symbolically charged situations over extended, coherent plot development, then Chabon's inserted fantasies mimic the condensed simplicity of comic-book aesthetics, mainly driven by the inevitable unfolding of their straightforward tales of superhero origins. While Foer thus uses marvellous aspects to return to and engage history, the marvellous in Chabon's novel, while still entrenched in history, briefly but wilfully turns its back on it. At the same time, however, it ironically serves as a monument to history, since superhero comic books become the very conduit and focus of the novel's historical narrative, which traces fifteen years of comic-book history.

With this, another difference between the novels I have discussed so far comes into view. While the fantastic in both Danielewski's and Foer's novels serves as a means to express alterity, in *Kavalier & Clay* the fantastic is not used as a discourse of the inaccessible other. In *House of Leaves*, the fantastic enters as pure abstract alterity that threatens to swallow and erase all meaning in its nihilistic destructiveness. Meaning can only be established in spite of it, precariously hovering on its edges in a recovery of communicative relations which ground themselves in the mimetic stance and thereby attempt to overcome the nihilistic, fantastic threat. In *Everything is Illuminated*, alterity enters as a traumatically violent rupture, no longer general and abstract but historically specific. In Foer's novel, the fantastic does not evoke the threat of this incommensurable alterity but is nonetheless born out of the latter's inaccessibility. It circumscribes alterity by excessively glossing over it. Finally, in *Kavalier & Clay*, access to the inaccessible is no longer even attempted. Instead of trying to delve into the surface of reality to expose and evoke what lies underneath and what arises from its gaps, the fantastic narratives here seek to escape from reality. They do not aim to represent an unacknowledged aspect of reality, but to imagine a different world.

This progression from pure alterity as a central motif in *House of Leaves*, to the importance of a specific kind of alterity in *Everything is Illuminated,* to a virtual indifference to alterity in *Kavalier & Clay* can be directly correlated both with the novels' respective struggles with representation and with their specific realisations of the combination of the mimetic and marvellous stances that is characteristic of the fantastic. In its continuous attempts to represent the unrepresentable, the fantastic

mode in *House of Leaves* clearly tends towards the mimetic. By using it to both evoke and to allegorically transcend loss, the fantastic in *Everything is Illuminated* oscillates truly between both stances. Meanwhile, in the superhero stories in Chabon's novel, with their dreams of revenge, power and justice, the fantastic leans decidedly towards the marvellous.

Chabon's avoidance of any direct representation of the Jews' desperate situation in Europe, in contrast to Foer's novel, therefore falls perfectly in line with his thematic exploration of escapism. *Kavalier & Clay* focuses on the escapee in America, who is painfully unable to obtain any kind of precise information about what is happening to his family. In contrast to Jonathan's stories about his ancestors, Josef's fantasies are not directly concerned with representing his family's unknown fate. As Lee Behlman points out: 'The Escapist, like America itself, is always set in contrast to the Holocaust experiences of Josef, and is never used as vehicle for the depiction of those experiences, indirect or otherwise' (68). Indeed, to be more precise, Josef himself has no 'Holocaust experiences' at all. Although he already suffers some discrimination, he leaves Prague in 1939 just before his family is forced to move into a ghetto. The Holocaust, though continually present as a subtext, is therefore entirely absent from the narrative surface.

Instead, the utter distance between events in Europe and the life and culture of New York City becomes one of the defining tensions of the text. By continually insisting on Joe's repeatedly frustrated attempts to help his family, the novel provides a bitterly ironic counter-current to its nostalgic celebration of the heydays of comic books. After all, the most commercially successful period in the Kavalier and Clay partnership – narrated in a part of the novel that bears the rather cynical title "The Golden Age" – coincides with Joe's receipt of the last letter from his mother and thus quite probably with the death of all members of his family back in Europe. While this may be perceived as a rather irksome attempt to lend dramatic depth and seriousness to a discussion of something as frivolous as comic books (cf. D. G. Myers), I would argue that the effect of this use of historical background is primarily to aggravate central questions about the role of the fictive. Herein, finally, Chabon's and Foer's novels are once again quite similar, as both texts explicitly explore the ethical and pragmatic consequences and justifications for their flights of fancy. By setting their narratives in the context of the one event in recent Western history that has arguably sparked the most controversial debates about the ethics and politics of representation to date, they offer a specifically ethical perspective on that exploration of the reconstructive potential of the fictive which was developed in more

general terms in *House of Leaves*. Meanwhile, in their focus on creative collaborations, all three novels use embedded fantastic narration as a means to question the role and the responsibility of art, especially as it transforms and transcends questions of reference and aesthetic illusion.

Accordingly, the dual status of the comic-book narrative as both an evocation of and an escape from history on the one hand, and the implications of the simplistic fantastic narratives that Chabon inserts on the other, will be the central concerns that guide my reading of the novel. The juxtaposition of narrative genres which develop contrasting narrative stances serves here to foreground generic differences in function and effect. However, at the same time, a clear distinction between conventionalised fantastic superhero story and complex historical realist narrative cannot be easily upheld. Instead, the two genres enter into a complex interrelation that once again obliquely raises issues of representability while at the same time extending the novel's complex engagement with the problem of escapism beyond an immediate pertinence for the comic book to its relevance for the fictive as such.

In my reading, I will thus shift my focus away from the two main interpretative perspectives that have so far dominated the discussion of Chabon's novel. I will not, as many have done, concentrate on Chabon's tribute to early comic books and on his particular take on the history of that genre (cf. Chute; Doherty; Groß; Punday; Singer). Instead of following an approach which reads the text mainly as a historical novel *about* comic books, I ask for the implications of its *inclusion* of narrative (though not medial) comic-book elements and thus consider its juxtaposition and combination of various genres. Understanding the superhero stories first and foremost as one possible form of the fantastic mode, I thus stress the essential similarities Chabon's narrative construction shares with the other novels considered previously, rather than focus the discussion on the development and defence of one particular medium or subgenre. Beyond its loving tribute to the comic-book medium in general and the genre of superhero stories in particular, I will therefore argue that the novel develops both an intriguing and multi-faceted defence of escapism and enters into a dialogue with postmodernist concerns, in a complex meditation on the role not only of the marvellous and the fantastic but of the fictive in general.

Those critics who have read the novel in the context of a more general defence of the fantastic have so far tended to stress its relation to traumatic experiences as a means to acknowledge 'both the urgency of representing trauma, and trauma's seeming unspeakability' (Chute 287; cf. also Behlman 69; Singer 286). Just like in the case of *Life of Pi*, *House*

of Leaves and *Everything is Illuminated*, trauma seems to provide a useful explanatory framework critics tend to fall back on in order to account for the texts' employment of the fantastic.[1] However, once again, there are some limitations to such a reading of Chabon's novel. Josef's loss is certainly of importance, but the value the novel ascribes to the fictive, I would argue, cannot be limited to a therapeutic one. Especially so since trauma is, in fact, not a central concern of the novel at all. Indeed, trauma is not even an adequate descriptor of Josef's situation.

Instead, my reading will follow Windy Petrie's lead, who argues that Chabon's and Foer's novels share 'a longing for lost innocence, and an exploration of the power and relevance of art' (104). This exploration, as I will argue, encompasses not only comic-book fantasies but also extends to the realist narrative into which they are inserted and is not limited to art's ability to offer consolation or to express loss. Paying close attention to the ways in which the novel combines, juxtaposes and merges different genres will allow me to illustrate how its focus on the fantastic genre of comic books and its concern with the issues of nostalgia and escapism can be understood more generally as another reconstructive attempt to reconcile postmodernist insights with the need to redefine the relationship of artistic creation and world as one of significance and responsibility.

Ringing true: revisiting the historical novel

To begin with, the novel's recourse to historical realism is worth some closer consideration. In the first pages of the novel the narrative voice establishes itself as that of a comic-book aficionado who presents a biography, not so much of Josef (Joe) Kavalier and his cousin Sam Clay, but of the superhero character of their creation, the Escapist. While the novel does not consistently adhere to this façade of a pseudo-biographical, historical study, it returns regularly to its initial legitimising conceit, particularly in extended discussions of and references to comic-book history. Clearly, this serves as a realist device strongly reminiscent in tone and style of Melville's enthusiastic excursus on whales in *Moby Dick,* grounding the work of fiction in extratextual reality in the same way as the novel's precise historical and geographical setting does (cf. Behlman 64).[2] In Behlman's opinion, *Kavalier & Clay* partly 'aims to be a novel of social realism, capturing the working environments of late depression-era New York' (66). The novel clearly evokes realist traditions of the *Bildungsroman* and of narratives of economic rise and fall and follows literary convention by eventually tying up all loose

ends in a scene of general reconciliation. As Daniel Punday points out, drawing a parallel to another work of classical realism, it thus offers a 'traditional story of personal development similar to Crusoe's spiritual improvement' (300).

But the novel's return to mimetic realism is far from unambiguous. Indeed, the narrative presentation of the past repeatedly falls short of credibility in its nostalgic romanticisation. Behlman, for one, criticises that 'despite its attempts at a hard-edged depiction, the novel more often slips back into a sentimental view of this period and setting' (66). Indeed, the mimetic narrative is to a large degree hopelessly romanticised and abounds in improbabilities, fortuitous encounters, lucky escapes and nostalgia. As Amy Benfer criticises in her review of the novel:

> Sammy and Joe take on nearly superhuman powers: Their hare-brained schemes lead to fame and fortune, often in a matter of days. Their loves are requited. They hobnob with the likes of Orson Welles, Salvador Dalí and Joseph Cornell [. . .]. Stan Lee knows their name. Greedy bosses prove to be good men with the boys' best interests in their hidden *hearts of gold*, and their enemies are foiled *in the nick of time*. This leads to some rather implausible last-minute saves, including one especially improbable sequence in which a well-timed phone call to *Eleanor fucking Roosevelt* [. . .] *saves the day*. (original emphases)

If the work is read as a historical novel and tribute to the struggles of the early comic-book creators (certainly one possible and valid reading), such improbabilities must be seen as further flaws contributing to its romanticisation and nostalgia. Indeed, the novel's criticism of the exploitation of comic-book artists is half-hearted at best. After all, Sam and Joe settle into a very comfortable life and repeatedly succeed in getting their way in negotiations with their publishers and their editor, all of whom are picture-book versions of essentially good-natured businessmen. They are lustrous exemplars of a functioning patriarchal capitalism, employers who 'not only preached initiative but rewarded it' (*K&C* 81) – a representation clearly tinged by romanticising nostalgia. As a novel of social realism aiming to denounce the rough working conditions or the legal injustices of the comic-book boom, *Kavalier & Clay* arguably falls considerably short.

This perceived shortcoming, however, may in fact be essential to the novel's specific aesthetic strategy. After all, whereas the superheroes

featured in the novel are ostensibly clearly separated from the main narrative, embedded as they are on a metadiegetic level marked as fiction within fiction, marvellous elements *do* intrude into the mimetic frame narrative. The novel's most obvious disruption of the mimetic realist illusion occurs right at its outset and at the heart of its plot. In fact, Joe only manages to escape from Europe in the casket of a creature straight out of legend and fantasy: the famous Golem of Prague. The novel's historical narrative thus very deliberately falls short of mimetic referentiality. Given such an obvious breach of the dictates of realism as the introduction of the golem, perhaps the 'gruff realism' Behlman misses has never been intended (66).

Indeed, even in its very proliferation and insistent elaboration of markers of realism the novel eventually works to undermine its own pretences at mimetic illusion. Instead of using historical facts and real-life events merely as a scaffold, filling the blanks that history has left open – as historical novels are wont to do to sustain their aesthetic illusion of verisimilitude – Chabon integrates and reconfigures historical information freely, openly merging fictional and factual elements. Prominent historical personages like Orson Welles, Salvador Dalí and Alfred E. Smith, president of the Empire State Building Cooperation, make their appearance, as well as actual comic-book artists. Newspapers and magazines are quoted, footnotes add historical and occasionally apocryphal information, and cultural and historical events ranging from the premiere of *Citizen Kane* to Pearl Harbor have a decisive impact on the plot. Such well-known referential anchor points are continually and inseparably mixed with fictional elements. Joe, for example, saves the life of Salvador Dalí and Sam meets and briefly talks with Orson Welles, thus openly violating ontological boundaries. While traditional historical novels, according to McHale endeavour 'to hide the ontological "seams" between fictional projections and real-world facts [. . .] by tactfully avoiding contradictions between their version of historical figures and the familiar facts of these figures' careers' (*Postmodernist Fiction* 17; cf. also Saintsbury 22–3), in *Kavalier & Clay* these seams are made quite visible.

A footnote to Joe's heroic act of saving Dalí's life is highly illustrative of this idiosyncratic approach, which uses authenticating markers of realism to undermine its own mimetic project. The footnote refers to a fictive article in *The New Yorker* by E. J. Kahn, who indeed regularly wrote for that magazine in the 1930s:

> Two weeks after Kahn's piece appeared in *The New Yorker*, giving some particulars of Josef Kavalier and of his family's plight, Kahn

> forwarded to Joe a check for twelve dollars, one for ten, and a letter from a Mrs. F. Bernhard of East Ninety-sixth Street, offering to feed him a home-cooked meal of schnitzel and knödelen. It is probable that Joe never took her up on the offer. Records indicate, however, that the checks were cashed. (*K&C* 243)

While offering, in best Barthesian manner, entirely irrelevant details, such footnotes nevertheless undermine any momentary *effet de réel* by their own hyperbole. Their role is so obviously to establish the aesthetic illusion of historical documentation of facts that their effect is the exact opposite, especially since such brief displays of external focalisation pretending to rely on recorded data are immediately dissolved again into the zero focalisation of an omniscient narrator. Very similar in its effect to the proliferating fictional footnotes in *House of Leaves*, such continual merging of fact and fiction eventually casts all the historical references in doubt. As Petrie remarks: 'Chabon's sudden historical discursives, including both real and fake information footnotes, leave the reader almost as off balance as do Foer's antics' (104). Obviously, Danielewski falls easily in line here.

However, as can be attested by the many readers who, like Behlman, read Chabon's novel as social realism, this unbalancing of reference does not necessarily result in a familiar postmodernist questioning of representation. Chabon's exaggerations do seem to accord with McHale's characterisation of postmodernist fiction in so far as they make the ontological seams between fact and fiction conspicuous. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the novel 'foregrounds its ontological seams by systematically transgressing [the] rules of the genre' (*Postmodernist Fiction* 17). Whereas with its improbable and even supernatural occurrences the text fails to be entirely consistent with accepted norms of reality, these failures never go so far as to fundamentally unsettle the novel's basic mimetic stance. *Kavalier & Clay* thus develops a kind of alternative history with some fantastic transgressions rather than a 'projected world [that] is governed by fantastic norms' (*Postmodernist Fiction* 17). Furthermore, instead of transgressing the rules of genre, Chabon exaggerates them, thereby tempting his readers to check up on the historical context, just like one might want to follow up on the fictional references in *House of Leaves*, in order to be able to better understand the specific acts of selection and combination that constitute the narrative. And just like *House of Leaves* is, in a way, an ingenious and subtle academic treatise in spite of the nonexistence of its object of study, *Kavalier & Clay* happens to work quite well as a

historical novel, despite its occasional inclusion of entirely improbable and marvellous episodes.

Chabon's novel neither simply reinstates nineteenth-century positivism nor centrally endeavours to emphasise the fallibilism that Robert Scholes claimed to be at the heart of postmodernist fabulation (cf. 8). *Kavalier & Clay*, so it seems, is neither a traditional historical novel nor an example of what Hutcheon described as typical postmodernist historiographic metafiction. While foregrounding its own fictionality, it neither invalidates its own fictional vision nor posits itself as a critique of history. Blatant as it is both in its transgression of history by its use of marvellous elements and in its employment of authenticating strategies to bolster its mimetic truth claim, the question of the ontological status of its narration, which so typically occupies postmodernist literature, seems here to be quite simply beside the point.

At the same time, the novel's move beyond postmodernism does not, I would argue, manifest itself as a reinforcement of the importance of historical reference. Indeed, as Eric Berlatsky argues, historical reference has perhaps not even been as universally eschewed in postmodernist literature as has frequently been claimed. What does move Chabon's novel decisively beyond postmodernism, however, is the utter nonchalance with which these issues are brushed aside. While Berlatsky argues that the postmodernist literary texts he studies 'critique narrative as a means of accessing the past, while proposing alternative means to historical referentiality' (38) by employing literary strategies which he calls 'nonnarrative' and 'antinarrative,' in *Kavalier & Clay* historical referentiality is simply no longer posed as a central problem. Chabon's novel never takes issue with narration's 'unifying tendency' (Berlatsky 20–1), with the necessary processes of exclusion and selection and the creation of coherence it implies. Instead, narration (or plot, if you will) takes centre stage, while historical accuracy is 'cheerfully or with regret, ignored' (*K&C* 637), as Chabon puts it in the author's note to the novel. Instead of lamenting fictional illusion and feeling guilty about it, *Kavalier & Clay* flaunts and celebrates it. In this nonchalance, one could say, *Kavalier & Clay* has taken a step further on the reconstructive path than *House of Leaves* or *Everything is Illuminated*, which still struggle centrally with the possibility or impossibility of representation. If both the latter texts eventually end up by proposing the creative and constitutive power of the fictive as a complementary and consolatory corrective to nihilistic disintegration and ontological despair, *Kavalier & Clay* from the very outset never even poses representation as a fundamental problem anymore. What is at stake here is no longer historical

accuracy but the ability of the fictive to communicate and share dreams, to create and maintain illusions and to envision our own as well as alternative worlds.

With its very first words, the novel argues precisely this point: in a retrospective introduction we are told that Sam Clay, when asked about the origins of the Escapist, later claimed that he had been deeply fascinated by Houdini as a boy. But the extradiegetic narrative voice sets the record straight: 'The truth was that, as a kid, Sammy had only casual interest, at best, in Harry Houdini [. . .]. Yet his account of his role – of the role of his own imagination – in the Escapist's birth, like all of his best fabulations, rang true' (*K&C* 3). What I would like to stress here is not so much that, as Petrie argues, 'the faithful, not the mere actual, is Realism enough' (107). After all, the narrative voice does oppose its own 'true' account to Sam's version. I do not think realism is the central point here, since most of Sam's other fabulations (the best of which 'rang true') are little concerned with realism: they are mainly comic-book stories and works of pulp fiction. Instead, this passage seems to claim that there is a different kind of truth to the fictive and to dreams; a truth that has little to do with realism but a lot with imagination. Thus, this first paragraph can be read as a condensed *mise en abyme* of the novel's juxtaposition of genres, in which mimesis is confronted with fabulation, but both are conceded their own specific value.

In contrast to Petrie, who effectively subsumes the use of fantastic elements by Chabon and Foer under the common goal of an attempt to develop 'a new realism for the 21st century, a self-reflexive realism that eschews the naïveté of claims to Truth, but still embraces the possibility of Trust: a realism not of the actual but of the faithful' (107), it seems crucial to me that the texts do not merely redefine realism but also include fantastic elements in their rethinking of the role and functions of the fictive. Thus, I would foreground the way in which these texts may amount to a revalorisation of the role of the imaginary in the fictive acts of transformation. They do so by situating themselves between mimetic and marvellous narrative stances, variously juxtaposing and merging the latter in a tentative exploration of the ways in which fictions and dreams can shape realities and lives.

What Iser calls the third fictionalising act, the gesture of self-disclosure or bracketing, is clearly central to this. Self-disclosure of fictionality and construction, however, here no longer serves as a postmodernist attack on certainties and dominant discourses. If there is a metafictional aspect to Chabon's novel, its aim is not 'to challenge the notion that history may be retrieved by objective investigations of fact' (Scholes 206), but

to establish illusion in spite of self-disclosure, or, to put it slightly differently, to be believed in spite of disbelief. Chabon's insistent and proficient use of authenticating markers that so effectively weave a historical realist illusion out of often entirely improbable material thus equals the kind of illusion the magician Kornblum (Josef Kavalier's mentor) practised, 'whose success, after all, increased in direct proportion to his audiences' constant, keen awareness that, in spite of all the vigilance they could bring to bear, they were being deceived' (*K&C* 265).

Deception, that central element of fictional narrative that has bothered both classical realism in its sincerest attempts at truthful representation and postmodernism in its iconoclastic endeavour to deconstruct truths that were long held to be unassailable, is here celebrated as not only inherent to the fictive, but indeed, as the latter's main source of pleasure and primary reason for existence. As Chabon argues elsewhere:

> In fiction and in stage magic, one result of this deception, if it works, is the experience of pleasure in the audience at the verisimilitude of the effect. In both cases the pleasure is possible – indeed, it depends entirely – on the audience's knowing perfectly well that it is being fooled, on its avid willingness to be fooled, to participate in creating the illusion of reality. (Chabon, *Maps* 218)

If the discourse of realism and truth has accompanied the genre of the novel from its very beginning (as seminal work by Erich Auerbach and Ian Watt influentially suggests), Chabon and the other authors here under consideration gradually seem to turn away from this concern. Truth is replaced by skilful deception; didactic intent and revelatory zeal give way to entertainment and pleasure.

While such a shift certainly carries some deeply troubling implications in its association with hedonism and consumerism, there may also be a more constructive and potentially ethical aspect to it: the fictive here no longer finds its justification in the nature of its relation to material realities but as a form of communication and connection between human minds, which involves mutual exchange, hospitality and responsibility. Chabon himself eloquently argues in this vein, pointing to the original sense of the word entertainment as 'mutual support':

> It suggests a kind of midair transfer of strength, contact across a void, like the tangling of cable and steel between two lonely bridgeheads. I can't think of a better approximation of the relation between reader and writer. Derived senses of fruitful exchange, of reciprocal

> sustenance, of welcome offered, of grasp and interrelationship, of a slender span of bilateral attention along which things are given and received, still animate the word in its verb form: we entertain visitors, guests, ideas, prospects, theories, doubts, and grudges. (*Maps* 15)

'Walking along the trembling hem of reality': blurred genre boundaries

Entertainment and pleasure are the obvious and explicit functions of the fantastic stories that are introduced into *Kavalier & Clay*'s realist frame tale. Similar to *House of Leaves* and *Everything is Illuminated*, *Kavalier & Clay* traces the creative history of particular works of fantastic fiction: the superhero series of the Escapist and Luna Moth. In their explicit self-disclosure and their contrast to the historical narrative in which they are embedded, the chapters which narrate the birth as superheroes of these two main creations of the Kavalier & Clay partnership are the central hinge on which the novel's exploration of fictionality turns.

It is of central significance that these origin stories are set apart as contained chapters, digressing from the main plotline, instead of being merely described without a change in narrative level, as elsewhere in the novel where the narrative discourse is *about* the comics but does not include the stories directly (cf. for example *K&C* 368–9). In the case of the origin stories of the Escapist and Luna Moth, in contrast, the distancing narrative metaperspective has disappeared and narrative mediation shifts to the level of the comic-book story. These chapters are set apart as intrusions and digressions from the frame tale, apparently superfluous and without directly perceivable function for the main narrative. Their difference from the frame tale is clearly asserted, not only by means of their explicit fictionalisation, but also since they unmistakably shift into the marvellous in their setting: 'Call it Empire City, home of the needle-tipped Excelsior Building, tallest ever built; home of the Statue of Liberation, on her island in the middle of Empire Bay, her sword raised in defiance to the tyrants of the world' (*K&C* 123). While close enough to the real world for the analogies to be easily recognisable (and the Escapist, after all, eventually does fight against Hitler and the Axis forces), this imaginary parallel version of the world clearly dissociates itself from strict mimetic claims. The distinction is further marked by a shift to narrative present tense, giving the comic-book chapters an atemporal quality which contrasts with the historical realist narrative surrounding them.

But even while the novel emphasises the ontological difference between its narrative levels, this difference is also constantly drawn into question. For one, no change of medium occurs here. The origin stories are not included as comic panels but stay within the purely textual realm of novelistic narration. As Behlman points out, '[t]he comic book story [. . .] is transmuted in the narrator's hands into a kind of literary hybrid. It becomes a purely textual short story that includes a level of physical detail and even psychological sophistication that would never appear in a comic book of this era' (65). The effect of this is to aesthetically narrow the difference between the inserted stories and the main tale. Although the narrative context makes it quite clear that these stories are the product of a collaborative act of creative imagination by Sam and Josef, they are included as independent chapters without direct introductory links which would make the transition from one narrative level to the other explicit. Without such explicit markers, this transition becomes fuzzy, forcing readers to draw their own conclusions about the narratives' interrelation and respective ontological status.

Moreover, such blurring occurs even more explicitly at other points in the novel. Most strikingly, one chapter starts as the narration of another comic-book adventure featuring one of the Escapist's main antagonists, a supervillain called the Saboteur. As the chapter develops, this fantastic figure merges with Carl Ebling, a frustrated Nazi who attempts to kill Josef Kavalier. The different levels of reality gradually intermingle as the narrative continues seamlessly from the Saboteur leaving his lair to Ebling's attempted bombing at a bar mitzvah reception (cf. *K&C* 328–33). To be sure, this merging of levels is to some degree reintegrated into a realist illusion since Carl Ebling, as it turns out, is delusional and actually believes himself to be a comic-book character. Nevertheless, such blurring contributes to a destabilisation of a clear distinction between the narrative levels. Even while the fantastic narrative is ostensibly securely contained within its fictionalised metadiegetic boundaries, it continually seeps into the realist diegetic level.

The inevitable duality of effect accompanying metafictional framings – which always expose the essential similarity of framing discourse and embedded narrative even while they assert their difference – becomes the site of playful mutual intercessions of and between genres. While the comic-book stories acquire the 'physical detail' and 'psychological sophistication' of a realist novel (Behlman 65), the mimetic realist narration takes on marvellous comic-book traits that appear as faults in the novel's verisimilitude. Furthermore, the novel's narrative presentation frequently echoes comic-book aesthetics. One example for this

can be found right at the beginning of the novel, when Josef breaks into the comic artist's studio. This scene clearly follows a comic-book script: from Joe's entirely superfluous acrobatics on the fire escape and the beam of sunlight that breaks through the clouds at just the right moment to illuminate him from behind so that he 'seemed to shine, to incandesce' (*K&C* 112), to the 'impossibly musical Fay Wray scream' (*K&C* 113) that greets his entry into the apartment. Nor does this fact remain unacknowledged by the witnesses of the scene: '"Huh," Julie said. "The guy might do all right in the cartoon business"' (*K&C* 113). Another similar instance of comic-book aesthetics is provided in Joe's jump from the Empire State Building, the description of which does not only easily translate into a sequence of comic-book panels but also employs onomatopoetic means reminiscent of comic books: a 'sharp twang,' a 'brief, muffled smack,' followed by a 'faint groan' (*K&C* 538).

Even while the novel re-establishes mimesis (even realism), it also highlights the similarities between the classical realist novel and the comic book. After all, both forms have their roots in serialised publication formats and both have arisen from popular culture. Furthermore, while the title of Chabon's novel recalls pulps and comics, it simultaneously refers back to the earliest roots of the realist novel, echoing the titles of such classic texts as Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. Moreover, by making exaggerated use of realist conventions in both story and discourse of the frame tale, the novel implicitly points to the fact that its social historical narrative is no less bound up with conventions than the simplified narrative structures of the comic-book stories which it encompasses.

The novel even goes so far as to ironically comment on its own fulfilment of typified plot-structures. After having succeeded in convincing Sam's boss to give their business idea a try, a dazed Joe believes himself to be living the American Dream:

> The whole morning [. . .] had conformed so closely to Joe's movie-derived notions of life in America that if an airplane were now to land on Twenty-fifth Street and disgorge a dozen bathing-suit-clad Fairies of Democracy come to award him the presidency of General Motors, a contract with Warner Bros., and a penthouse on Fifth Avenue with a swimming pool in the living room, he would have greeted this, too, with the same dreamlike unsurprise. (91)

Admittedly, the only Fairy of Democracy we encounter in the novel ultimately springs from Joe's own mind in form of the superheroine

Luna Moth. But the cousins' creations indeed reach a Hollywood screen and the partnership is successful enough to enable Joe to lease a spacious apartment on the Upper West Side and to save enough money to eventually buy Empire Comics for a million dollars. The realist plot thus quite blatantly follows and fulfils a scarcely less convention-driven basic pattern as the highly schematic superhero stories.[3]

The same applies, in principle, to the main actors in these plots. Indeed, the comic-book stories seem to take only a further step of abstraction from the fictional characters of Sam, Joe and Rosa (Joe's girlfriend). After all, true to György Lukács' seminal observation about the typicality of characters in the historical novel, Chabon's protagonists 'give living human and poetic embodiment to historical-social types' (*Historical Novel* 35). As Behlman points out:

> Josef stands, in many respects, for a particular Jewish American notion of the dark but romantic Mitteleuropean past, with his serious intellectual bearing, his background of suffering and stoicism, and his masculine and slightly mysterious aura; Sam, on the other hand, is the short, clever, fast, funny and ambitious New York Jew. (67)

As far as Rosa is concerned, she is not only the idealised love interest (after all, she and Josef fall in love almost at first sight), but also, as Hillary Chute argues in reference to Rosa's full name Rosa Luxemburg Saks, an artist 'who represents the intertwining of the political and the commercial' (289). Stemming from a high-class family steeped in surrealism, she lends artistic lustre to the comic-book project, while the descriptions of her own art seem mainly 'to suggest the more formal similarities between the avant-garde projects of Dada and Surrealism, and the ostensibly categorically, taxonomically different project of comics' (Chute 289). Undoubtedly, the names Josef 'Joe' Kavalier and Samuel 'Sam' Clay (former Klayman) mark the typicality of these characters no less than the name Rosa Luxemburg Saks does. The first invokes both a certain romantic chivalrous aristocracy and the biblical story of the exiled but highly successful interpreter of dreams, while the other cousin combines the archetypal American name with the malleable base material of golems. Both names point to the man of clay that stands at the symbolic centre of the novel: Sam with his rejected family name and Josef with his given name, which he shares with that ascribed to the golem in legend (cf. Patai 638). These characters arguably only differ from the condensed simplifications of comic-book heroes by degree, not by nature.

While the novel acts on the one hand as a defence of the value of the comic-book medium, it is on the other hand the very revaluation of illusion it so strongly advocates that, in reverse, enables it to establish a degree of realist mimesis. By defending the imaginative flights of the comic books the novel simultaneously justifies the element of the imaginary in its mimetic illusion. The comic-book traits of illusion, self-deception and active imagination are accepted as integral elements of the fictive in general. Sam's own attempt to radically turn his back on frivolous comic-book fantasies in order to write an autobiographical novel aptly entitled *American Disillusionment* is therefore doomed to fail. Even as he tries to reject illusion and subscribes to strict realism, which he associates with the seriousness of high art, he finds himself unable to avoid established generic conventions ranging from 'bitter comedy' to 'bare-knuckles urban *Huckleberry Finn*' and eventually amounting to no more than 'an elaborate system of evasion and lies unredeemed by the artistic virtue of self-betrayal' (*K&C* 543).

What the novel juxtaposes then, are not so much different kinds of reality but different ways of performing the fictionalising acts of selection and combination of the real and the imaginary. Sam and Joe 'walking along the trembling hem of reality that separated New York City from Empire City' (*K&C* 135), transforming the Statue of Liberty into the Statue of Liberation and the Empire State Building into the Excelsior Building, exemplify the processes of selection, combination and self-disclosure Iser identifies as the basic fictionalising acts. By analogy, they take us along on a similar walk along the trembling hem of reality that separates Chabon's New York from the one we might know and experience. The blurring of boundaries thus serves to expose the common fictive nature of both narrative strands.

This is not to say that boundaries between the different genres are completely effaced or even made irrelevant. Quite the contrary. The contrast between the simplified imaginary world of the comic books, whose commercial exploitation of adolescent wishful thinking the novel openly acknowledges, and the comparative complexities of the historical narrative into which they are inserted are essential for the novel's development of its central themes. As far as they are kept distinct, the narrative's meditations on escapism, responsibility and agency in art become possible. As far as the simplified comic-book narratives can be understood as a condensation and distillation of fictionalising acts underlying every fictional narrative, the implications of these meditations are extended to pertain to the whole novel, and in a synecdochal transference, the fictive itself. It is in this that the novel's combination

of mimesis and the marvellous marks a shift towards pragmatic questions, mirrored in Josef and Sam's own realisation that in order to come up with a viable new superhero, '"How? Is not the question. What? Is not the question" [. . .] "The question is why"' (*K&C* 94).

'Kid stuff, pure and true': comic-book nostalgia

Accordingly one may ask: why comic books? What are the consequences of the employment of superhero stories in this context; a genre that is decidedly and unabashedly 'Kid Stuff, pure and true' (*K&C* 77)? As Marc Singer has noted, recent literature has seen 'a minor explosion of novels written about comic-book superheroes' (274–5), a development that may partly be due to a generational change in which avid readers of comic books have themselves become writers. 'Rapidly coalescing into a genre in its own right,' Marc Singer states, these novels share some common themes 'including, but hardly limited to, adolescence and nostalgia' (274). Singer goes on to suggest that *Kavalier & Clay*'s preoccupation with comics can be understood as an 'attempt, however provisionally, to ignore or undo the symbolic deferral of meaning that accompanies all language' and that it thus 'participate[s] in an important trend in contemporary fiction, a renewed interest in referentiality' (274).

While seemingly echoing both Petrie's postulation of a new realism of trust and the wider claims of a recent 'revitalisation of realism' (Rebein, *Dirty Realists* 17), Singer locates this different stage of referentiality not in an attitude of sincerity or mimetic accuracy but in a rhetoric of hypostasis.[4] Singer claims that Chabon foregrounds hypostasis as the comic book's central trope in preference to metaphor or metonymy, in order to propose 'that tremendous representational power may be found in and assembled from these cast-off products of popular culture' (287). Josef Kavalier's ultimate artistic creation of a superhero turns into 'a metacommentary on art and hypostasis – that is, it hypostasizes art's power to hypostasize concepts into concrete, animate, human forms' (286). In stark contrast to Petrie's new kind of realism, the representational power or return to referentiality Singer is talking about here obviously has little to do with mimesis or realism. Comic books do not depict reality but embody (male) adolescent dreams. They are, as one reads in the novel, the condensed

> inspirations and lucubrations of five hundred aging boys dreaming as hard as they could for fifteen years, transfiguring their insecurities and delusions, their wishes and their doubts, their public educations

> and their sexual perversions, into something that only the most purblind of societies would have denied the status of art. (*K&C* 575)

The referentiality of hypostasis is a referentiality of dreams, illusion and escape; a hypostasis of delusions, wishes and sexual perversions.

In view of this, I have some reservations towards Singer's daring conclusion that 'those figures can challenge one of the most dominant paradigms in contemporary philosophy and address one of the most basic dilemmas of artistic representation, as they attempt to escape the seemingly inescapable difference between a sign and its object' (287). However, I agree with his reading in so far as I would insist that the novel makes an emphatic argument for the value and justification of the fantastic and the imaginary in fictions. It advocates a kind of semiotic relationship in which referentiality indeed does become possible again, because the sign here creates its own object which does not depend on a referent in reality altogether. This is, perhaps, not a realism of trust and the faithful, as Petrie has it, but the profession of trust and faith in the creative power of the fictive in spite of, or alongside, reality. The novel forcefully asserts this idealism, even as it admits it to be precarious and virtually untenable, as Josef continues to cling to his belief in the power of his art and his imagination in spite of its apparent futility in face of reality (cf. *K&C* 286).

Hypostasis as a rhetorical figure, however, is by no means exclusive to comic books and has little direct correlation with the specific material conditions of that medium, although it certainly does find emphatic expression in the genre of superhero stories. The revision of referentiality that plays out here thus seems to have less to do with comic books in particular than with a reconsideration of the reinvigorating potential of the fantastic in general. After all, hypostasis is little more than that basic quality of the imaginary entering into language: Todorov called this the 'tautological semantic function' (92) of the fantastic and Rosemary Jackson spoke of 'thingless names' and 'nameless things' (41). Singer's thoughts about hypostasis, while fruitful, give prominence to a single aspect of the use of superhero stories in the novel. Still, they do not, in my opinion, provide a sufficient answer concerning the reasons and the effects of the comic-book theme in the novel, since they touch only briefly upon other aspects which seem to me to be inextricably related to the novel's engagement with the problem of referentiality: the interrelated topics of nostalgia and imaginary wish-fulfilment.

I have already hinted at the fact that *Kavalier & Clay*'s main mode of engagement with history is nostalgia. In reviving the historical novel,

it paints a sentimentalised picture of a glorious past, a golden age ripe with youthful hope and possibilities. This leads to a strange correlation of nostalgia and referentiality, as the underlying mood of nostalgic yearning extends not only to the medium of the comic book but in a similar measure to the very genre of the historical novel, in which it chooses to cast its frame narrative. Deeply rooted in the postmodernist realisation of the 'inability to reach all the way to the real' (Berlatsky 8), the novel self-consciously casts its own relation to historical referentiality as a nostalgic desire that yearns for and mourns what has never been more than an illusion in the first place. Nostalgia thus pervades not only the novel's subject matter with its loving celebration of the early comic book and its rather sentimental rendition of the pioneers of the medium as living examples of the American Dream. It also informs the novel's return to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, 'a kind of story,' as Punday remarks in this context, 'that has seemed problematic since the nineteenth century' (300).

Nostalgia, of course, has been identified as one of the central aspects of postmodernism by Fredric Jameson. In contrast to theorists like Hutcheon, who argues that postmodernism's fascination and engagement with history is ironic, aiming to revise and rewrite, Jameson suggests that '[c]ultural production has been driven back inside the mind, within the monadic subject: it can no longer look directly out of its eyes at the real world for the referent but must, as in Plato's cave, trace its mental images of the world on its confining walls' ("Postmodernism" 118). According to Jameson, in postmodernism this nostalgia eventually plays out as a dejected realisation of limitation, since 'for whatever peculiar reasons, we seem condemned to seek the historical past though our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach' ("Postmodernism" 118).

In *Kavalier & Clay*, in contrast, nostalgia is neither an expression of a dejected sobriety, nor of a feeling of limitation. Instead, it offers a means of imaginative escape. On the one hand, such a self-consciously nostalgic desire for history can only manifest itself because an innocent pre-postmodernist naïveté has become impossible. On the other, it no longer laments the inaccessibility of the past. Instead, fictions arise directly from nostalgic desire. They give shape to such a desire to the same degree as they are its precondition, since the object of desire never pretends to be more than an idealised projection, 'a past which has only ideological reality' (Stewart 23). With its turn towards nostalgia, realist mimesis thus approximates the marvellous, 'a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss' (Jackson 3).

It is important to note that under such circumstances nostalgia can no longer be dismissed as a form of naïve self-deception and idealisation. Instead, it provides a way to imaginatively recover historical narrative, never obscuring its fictional and even fantastic nature in the process. Realism as a literary form at this point folds back into the marvellous in a manifestation of what Chabon calls 'our innate human talent for nostalgia [. . .] the aetataureate delusion, our false but certain collective human memory of a Golden Age' (*Maps* 187). As the object of nostalgic desire, realism itself has become the imaginary homeland.

With this in mind, the novel's repeated suggestion of an analogy between the fictive and magic gains profile. The creation of narrative unity, referential illusion and causal coherence, and thus the ability to bring order to the chaos of the world, are all aspects of narrative that are no longer rejected as falsification and misrepresentation but celebrated in the very acknowledgement of their illusory nature.[5] Both in magic performance and in the fictive a reconstructive power in the face of harsh reality is valued as the essential worth and nature of illusion:

> The magician seemed to promise that something torn to bits might be mended without a seam, that what had vanished might reappear, that a scattered handful of doves or dust might be reunited by a word, that a paper rose consumed by fire could be made to bloom from a pile of ash. But everyone knew that was only an illusion. The true magic of this broken world lay in the ability of the things it contained to vanish, to become so thoroughly lost, that they might never have existed in the first place. (*K&C* 339)

The loss expressed here reaches deeper than the immediate context of Josef's sorrow of exile and the personal loss from which it arises. Magic offers its illusory consolation to a world that has been robbed of a belief in stability and durability.

Is it too daring to read this not only as a comment on Josef's personal loss, but also to understand this lament of a broken world as a nostalgic comment on postmodernist philosophy's eternal scepticism, endless deferral and missing centres? And will this claim seem perhaps a little less construed considering that Josef comes to this understanding after an important personal letter – which enticingly promises (but, to Josef, who never reads it, eternally fails to provide) knowledge about his family's welfare and whose contents will come to symbolise for him the ultimate inaccessibility of their real experiences – disappears from his pocket; lost or, perhaps, (pace Lacan) purloined?

Be that as it may, a pervasive sense of nostalgia not only for a past but also for the means to represent that past can also be noted in the novel's most explicitly nostalgic scene. Asked for his favourite place in the city, Sam can only think of one that has not only ceased to exist, but was decidedly imaginary and artificial in the first place. Sam's return to the derelict remainders of the World Fair is heavily suffused with nostalgia. Along with the other buildings, the statues of 'George Washington, Freedom of Speech and Truth Showing the Way to Freedom had been peeled, striped, prized apart, knocked down, bulldozed into piles, loaded onto truck beds, dumped into barges, towed out past the mouth of the harbor, and sent to the bottom of the sea' (*K&C* 377). Standing thus, as it were, in front of the dismembered remains of the master narratives of nationalism, of the sovereign subject of speech and of truth (even more pointedly, a decidedly humanist conception of truth), Sam mourns not only a childhood dream long passed, but also the lost innocence and the 'immense mud puddle' (*K&C* 377) postmodernist deconstruction has left in its wake:

> It made him sad, not because he saw some instructive allegory or harsh sermon on the vanity of all human hopes and utopian imaginings in this translation of a bright summer dream into an immense mud puddle freezing over at the end of a September afternoon – he was too young to have such inklings – but because he had so loved the Fair, and seeing it this way, he felt in his heart what he had known all along, that, like childhood, the Fair was over, and he would never be able to visit again. (*K&C* 377)

Just as there is no simple return to childhood innocence, there is no ignoring of the impact of postmodernist scepticism and critique. The values of a pre-postmodernist world-view have been irrevocably dismantled as the artificial constructions they are and cannot simply be re-erected. To cast the relation to traditional realism as nostalgic is thus to admit to the impossibility of an unconditioned recovery and to eschew a naïve return to realist confidence. Even while nostalgic desire, according to Svetlana Boym, craves 'to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition' (xv), the desire itself attests to the unbridgeable difference from which it arises.

While there is regret in this, this is no defeatism since the nostalgic mood allows for an acceptance of disillusionment while simultaneously asserting a conscious decision for illusion in spite of it. Thus, while he

finds himself unable to recover the innocent immediacy of childhood's immersion, Sam successfully makes a conscious effort 'to lose himself in the illusion of the model [of Futurama's utopian city] the way he used to lose himself in Futuria, back at his drawing board' (*K&C* 380). Instead of a cynical comment on the futility of human hopes, the scene therewith eventually turns into the site of an affirmation of the power of the imagination and of human dreams. Nostalgia swings back into utopianism, as in the midst of the discarded utopian dream of Futurama's model city Sam is briefly able to escape society's sanctions and to give in to his homosexuality. The ability of the fictive to allow us to explore different lives in a momentary escape into the imaginary eventually enables Sam to rethink his life and personality, if only for a moment.

By focusing on the history of comic books the novel thus brings the three main strands that govern its exploration of the fictive – nostalgia, utopian wish-fulfilment and escape – effectively and vividly together. While nostalgia is expressed through the schematically conventional form and excessive illusionist discourse of the realist narrative as well as in its pseudo-historical celebration of the doubly fictional Escapist, the comic-book tales themselves embody the '[w]ishful figments' (*K&C* 145) of escapism, both in their presentation of puerile justice in a world whose lack of moral complexity equals the simplicity of their artistic design and in the personification of escape in the cousins' main creation.

'Wonderful escape': risks and rewards of escapism

While nostalgia is the novel's major mood, its main theme is doubtlessly escapism. However, the novel's defence of escapism has to be seen in the light of its continual destabilisation of easy distinctions between escapist fantastic superhero stories and historical realist narrative. Escapism, of course, has always been a problematic issue for fantastic literature. As Tobin Siebers remarks, few scholars of the mode have failed to comment upon this aspect of the appeal of the fantastic, either to condemn, to deny or to revalue it (cf. 46–8). If nostalgia is the precipice on whose edge historical fiction precariously hovers, escapism has always been at the heart of condemnations of the fantastic in all its forms.

The superhero genre may well serve as an emblematic exemplar of such escapist tendencies. In contrast to the classical fantastic, which concentrates on human struggles to apprehend the world and to defeat its evils, the superhero comic indulges in fantasies of miraculous empowerment, wonderful rescues and superhuman acts of heroism. While in

the classical fantastic the juxtaposition of good and evil is often no less facile than in modern superhero stories, the fantastic intrusion into normality in the latter does not necessarily come with negative connotations. The classical fantastic may bring the terrors of the imaginary to the fore, the anxieties raised by the existential uncertainty of its ungraspable formlessness. Superhero stories, conversely, present the flip side of the coin: the imaginary's power of wish-fulfilment, of distraction and escape. It is mainly for this reason that they have so often been condescendingly treated as immature and puerile.

Far from attempting to gainsay these accusations, *Kavalier & Clay* not only admits to escapism but celebrates it as one of the main functions and beneficial uses of the fantastic and the marvellous. Very obviously, the fantastic in *Kavalier & Clay* serves not as a means to express fears but to escape from them and to create the illusion of agency in face of helplessness. The value of such an escape is most explicitly expressed in Joe's musings about the (historical) Senate investigation into the youth-corrupting effects of comic books:

> The newspaper articles that Joe had read about the upcoming Senate investigation into comic books always cited 'escapism' among the litany of injurious consequences of their reading, and dwelled on the pernicious effect, on young minds, of satisfying the desire to escape. As if there could be any more noble or necessary service in life. (*K&C* 583)

In accord with this celebration of escape, all the idols and role models of the main characters are escape artists: the real Houdini, the fictional Kornblum and the doubly fictional Escapist. Nevertheless, the novel leaves little doubt as to the essential immaturity of this rather adolescent desire. For the most part, comic books are written by adolescents for adolescents and escape is openly admitted to have its problems.

After all, in contrast to the novel's emphatic celebration of escape as salutary and heroic, both Joe's imaginary and his real acts of escapism lead him repeatedly into danger and increasing isolation. Already his very first youthful attempt at heroic escapism back in Prague nearly ends fatally for himself and his younger brother. Later, Joe escapes to America only to find himself locked in 'the imprisoning futility of his rage' (*K&C* 171), in which the 'unreason' of his 'make-believe war [. . .] offer[s] the only possible salvation of his sanity' (*K&C* 285). Meanwhile, the increasingly gruesome carnage he wreaks among Nazi forces in his comic books can only afford him a short-lived ersatz-gratification, and

he gradually slips into acts of real violence. The role of his escapist fantasies thus becomes increasingly problematic. On the one hand, they provide him with a fictive battleground to work off his futile aggression. On the other hand, they fuel that very aggression as he gradually identifies with the character of his creation and starts to pick fights with every vaguely German-looking person he encounters on New York's cosmopolitan streets.

This tendency finds its culmination in his destruction of the office of Carl Ebling's Aryan-American League. The presentation of this scene leaves no doubt about its provenance, as Josef imagines it as a comic-book-style 'dark fantasy':

> running up to the office and bursting into that warren of snakes, feet flying right up at you out of the panel as jagged splinters of the door shot in all directions. He saw himself wading into a roiling tangle of braun-shirts, fists and boots and elbows, and finding, in that violent surf of men, triumph, or if not that then atonement, retribution, or deliverance. (*K&C* 198)

That this mania of revenge and aggression is not only pointless and hopelessly deluded but also ruthless and far from heroic in spite of Joe's impersonation of his superhero creation, is underscored by his own latent awareness of its pathetic futility: 'He was afraid that if he allowed himself to feel anything, it would be neither rage nor satisfaction but merely pity for the mad, dusty nullity of Carl Ebling's one-man league' (*K&C* 202). Moreover, he exhibits a considerable lack of scruples in executing his rampage, as he does not even hesitate for a moment to demolish a child's bike in order to acquire the lock picks he needs to break into the office (cf. *K&C* 199). While his own acts here already offer an implicit critique of an endorsement of the kind of violent solutions in a world of easy moral distinctions which superhero stories indulge in, the realisation that Carl Ebling is himself actually an avid fan of the Escapist finally makes Josef 'feel the shame of glorifying, in the name of democracy and freedom, the vengeful brutality of a very strong man' (*K&C* 204). In a moment of troubled self-questioning, 'it occurred to Joe to wonder if all they had been doing, all along, was indulging their own worst impulses and assuring the creation of another generation of men who revered only strength and domination' (*K&C* 205).

Even while the novel thus presents its spirited appeal for the status of comic books as art, it never disavows their problematic aspects. Instead of an unanimous celebration of 'the beauty and necessity of escape in

all its forms' (Benfer), the novel openly recognises that escapism, for all the apparent value it attributes to it, can have bleak consequences. As Singer noted, the Escapist figures as 'an extended metaphor of escape that variously denotes the characters' efforts to break free from political oppression, artistic constraints, the demands of postwar middle-class family life, or simply life itself' (285). [6] The progression in the enumeration Singer provides is striking. While escape from political oppression and artistic constraints undoubtedly carries positive connotations, breaking free from family responsibility and the flight to suicide are clearly much more problematic versions of escape.

Accordingly, the novel juxtaposes Josef's often self-destructive escapist heroics with Sam's self-sacrifice for the sake of family and security: After Joe joins the army, cutting all bonds with his American life and leaving a pregnant Rosa behind, Sam, who lacks the courage to openly live his homosexuality, marries her and becomes a father to Joe's son in an act of voluntary self-denial and sacrifice. Of course, Sam's repression of his homosexuality and his 'deliberate and conscious act of self-immurement' (*K&C* 581) can hardly be read as a positive counterexample to Joe's vanishing acts. Assuming the responsibilities of a father, Sam 'resolved never to let [Joe's son Tommy] feel abandoned, never to walk out on him' (*K&C* 631) and thus deliberately shackles himself to a life that is a lie. The point here is, though, that both Joe's radical rejection of human ties and Sam's self-denial lead to impasses from which the two characters are unable to extricate themselves on their own.

In contrast to Sam's self-restriction, Joe continually escapes, 'from ropes, chains, boxes, bags, and crates, from handcuffs and shackles, from countries and regimes, from the arms of a woman who loved him, from crashed airplanes and an opiate addiction and from an entire frozen continent intent on causing his death' (*K&C* 575). Each act of escape leads into new commitments and new chains and not all of them, perhaps, are to be rejected. Josef's 'dangerously metaphorical reasons' (*K&C* 37) for his continual endeavours to escape eventually lead to a complete physical and psychological isolation, which finds its overemphasised symbolic realisation in Josef's term of service on the Antarctic. Living in almost complete isolation, Josef's only contact with the outside world is the radio. Teetering on the edge of madness, he continues to be unswervingly governed by an irrational desire for vengeance. When this latter is finally achieved, however, it does not satisfy him, but on the contrary, breaks his heart, since he ends up killing the only other living human being that could relieve his isolation and loneliness

(cf. *K&C* 465). Furthermore, Josef repeatedly contemplates suicide, on the verge of giving in to his desire to escape from reality in a more literal way than reading comic books. Even before he is harrowed with survivor's guilt, he is prone to feel metaphysically imprisoned, and as the novel clearly states, 'the final feat of autoliberation' for such men as him is 'all too foreseeable' (*K&C* 37). Finally, even after his return to New York he is unable to reconnect to his former life. He has escaped so often that he cannot find his way back. Eventually, he ends up burying himself alive in an office in the Empire State Building and in the massive creative effort to write his magnum opus, a novel-length comic book called *The Golem*.

It is at this point that the novel's epigraph from Nathanial Hawthorne's short story "Wakefield": 'Wonderful escape!' is explicitly referred to, bringing to the fore the deep ambiguity of the novel's evocation of escape. While the epigraph at first may seem to be an unreservedly enthusiastic praise of escape, it provides a much more complex and problematic motto for the novel if one takes the context of Hawthorne's story into account, in which escape is inextricably associated with deception and unnecessary, egoistic, self-perpetuating isolation. Does this mean, then, that the novel defends escapism in the fictive but acknowledges its problems in real life? Does it emphasise the necessity to keep the real and the imaginary apart, attesting to the 'extreme incommensurateness between fantasy and reality' as Behlman argues (68)? And if it does, what would that imply for the role and importance of the fictive as such?

Answers to these questions have frequently pointed to the therapeutic potential of the marvellous as a means to deal with a reality full of pain and sorrow. As both Behlman and Chute have emphasised, Josef's spirited defence of escape is contingent on his loss and his attempt to deal with his grief and anger. Both in his own creative work, in which Josef fights an extended and increasingly violent 'funny-book war' (*K&C* 163), and in his intensive reading of comic books he finds a way to momentarily forget his grief about the loss of his family and his frustration about his inability to help them. The novel's strongest defence of escapism thus evokes its therapeutic value, its potential to console and to distract from loss:

> Having lost his mother, father, brother, and grandfather, the friends and foes of his youth, his beloved teacher Bernard Kornblum, his city, his history – his home – the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*, seemed to

> Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf. (*K&C* 575; original emphasis)

His art provides Joe with a means of self-expression that culminates in his creation of *The Golem* – a 'secret record of his mourning, of his guilt and retribution' (*K&C* 579) that, he feels, 'was helping to heal him' (*K&C* 577). Indeed, Hillary Chute reads Joe's entire artistic development (from popular comics, to modernist aesthetics, to book-length graphic narrative) as a successive progression as he 'searches for the form that best registers his traumatic experience' (286). Or, as Behlman puts it:

> Chabon's intent in exploring superhero comics is not to issue a post-modern critique of the 'real' and realistic art forms, nor a populist anti-intellectual assault on 'elites' and their art, but to show, in a phenomenological way, how fantasy feels, and how it may assuage pain. (62)

According to this logic, the fantastic becomes acceptable as long as it is clearly separable from realism, serving primarily therapeutic aims in a transformation of traumatic experience into form. Behlman thus finds the novel 'most vivid and ultimately most convincing in its defence of fantasy not as a device that gives shape to the real but as one that is inevitably, hopelessly, and yet somehow hopefully distant from it' (70).

However, Chabon develops this defence by means of a novel that is itself quite blatantly fictional, indeed even fantastic. If the novel's defence of escapism is therefore limited to the latter's therapeutic value '"especially" worthy for survivors immediately after the war' (Behlman 70), how is Chabon's act of writing the novel, or indeed, the reader's pleasure in reading it justifiable? After all, the text makes a point to emphasise the common fictional nature of its different narrative strands. By analogy, its meditation on escapism certainly applies no less to the *Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* than to the '*Amazing Adventures of the Escapist*' (*K&C* 297). How then can the novel's nostalgic turn towards comic-book history and a sentimentalised golden age of pre-war American culture – in which capitalism was benign, initiative and artistic creativity paid off and good and evil were apparently so easy to distinguish – be justified in terms of their therapeutic value? After all, neither the author – in his own words 'a lucky man living in a lucky time in the luckiest country in the world' (*Maps* 165–6) – nor, in all probability, the majority of the novel's readership can claim any direct experience of the war. And why make a point of blurring the distinction

between the escapist superhero stories and the historical realist narrative, if this turns the therapeutic defence of the fantastic, arguably, into a rather self-defeatist argument? Such questions, I would suggest, can only be answered by reconsidering the novel's exploration of escapism in terms that go beyond a celebration of the healing qualities of the fictive.

'A gesture of hope, offered against hope': reconstructive affirmation

Escape, so it turns out, is a double-edged thing. While it remains 'a noble and necessary service in life' (*K&C* 583), it is worth heeding the wisdom of Joe's mentor Kornblum: 'Never worry about what you are escaping *from* [. . .]. Reserve your anxieties for what you are escaping *to*' (*K&C* 37). The escape fiction offers may be liberating, it may allow us to experience ourselves as different, to 'speak to ourselves through the possibilities of our otherness' (Iser 303). But while, according to Iser, such an element of escape from reality, of an *Entgrenzung* of the real by contact with the imaginary, is a defining quality of the fictive, it does matter what kind of place it offers us to escape to. The question is not whether to tell fictions or not (after all, has postmodernism not been trying for decades now to convince us that we cannot help producing fictions whatever our intention?), but *why* we choose to tell *what kind* of stories and to what *effect*. Thus the endless arguments about mimesis and the antagonism of realist and non-realist approaches are superseded by a different perspective. A perspective which no longer values one stance over the other but asks for what they, each in their turn, have to offer, and which evaluates them not according to their relation to reality but to their ability to communicate and to the significance of their creative expression. This interrogation of the fictive highlights not so much its nature, nor its meaning, but its use and usage. Like the golem, so the novel implies, works of fiction are, at all times and in all their forms, both artificial constructs and servants.

Both within the pages of *Kavalier & Clay* and elsewhere, Chabon repeatedly draws this analogy between the creation of fiction and that of a golem: 'as the kabbalist is to God, so is a golem to all creation: a model, a miniature replica, a mirror – like the novel – of the world' (*Maps* 164). This act of creation is intensely liberating, an act of a denial of the oppressing limitations of reality:

> The shaping of a Golem to [Josef] was a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation. It was the expression of a

> yearning that a few magic words and an artful hand might produce something – one poor, dumb, powerful thing – exempt from the crushing strictures, from the ills, cruelties and inevitable failures of the greater Creation. It was the voicing of a vain wish, when you got down to it, to escape. To slip, like the Escapist, free of the entangling chain of reality and the straightjacket of physical laws. (*K&C* 582)

The fantastic and the marvellous may offer hope, dreams, utopian visions of better futures, alternative worlds, joyful reunions and miraculous salvation. In essence, this simply amounts to an outright exposure of the 'transformation of the determinate into the indeterminate' that is, according to Iser, the basic function and nature of all fictionalising acts (Iser 3). No mere indulgence of the pleasure principle or trivial entertainment, this is an important exigent of human psychology, an expression of humanity's ability to dream and constantly re-imagine itself and its circumstances.

But creating golems, as Chabon repeatedly avers, is not without its dangers (cf. *Maps* 165, *K&C* 580). After all, '[a] golem, like a lie, is the expression of a wish: a wish for peace and security; a wish for strength and control' (*Maps* 199). Wishes can just as easily be violent and destructive as hopeful and benevolent, and all too often they are both at the same time. Indeed, Chabon does not fail to remind us that golems are hard to control and often turn against their creators (cf. *K&C* 582). Significantly, the creation of his graphic novel *The Golem* helps Joe to deal with his loss but also drives him into ever increasing reclusiveness and isolation. He is effectively silenced in the very act of giving expression to his mourning. Moreover, although the artwork is based on a script and was initially supposed to include speech, Joe later refrains from adding speech balloons and becomes increasingly unwilling to share his work with anyone (cf. *K&C* 578–9). True healing, however, can eventually only be achieved in an act of communication and understanding; it requires the human other, the loved one: 'Joe's ability to heal himself had long since been exhausted. He needed Rosa – her love, her body, but above all, her forgiveness – to complete the work that his pencils had begun' (*K&C* 578).

The thematic change from the superhero Escapist, who 'offers the hope of liberation and the promise of freedom' (*K&C* 121), to the story of the 'wayward, unnatural child, Josef Golem, that sacrificed itself to save and redeem the little lamplit world whose safety had been entrusted to it' (*K&C* 577), itself acts out a turn from escape to commitment, from breaking free to assuming responsibility. In the end, Josef's continual

escape is as problematic and imprisoning as Sam's sarcastic disillusionment. He is eventually unable to escape from his own devastatingly successful escapism on his own and needs external help to re-enter the ties of responsibility and love that human relations require. The Escapist has to die first – both symbolically in Joe's botched plunge from the top of the Empire State Building, and effectively by the discontinuation of the comic-book series – before the wayward child, finally willing to accept the burden of responsibility, is able to find its way home.

Consequentially, when the most blatant element of fantastic intrusion into the realist illusion of the main narrative, the Golem of Prague, reappears at the end of the novel, it no longer serves as a means of miraculous escape but as a bond to a lost past and home. At the beginning of the novel, the golem's body had weighed so little that the casket in which it lay seemed to be empty, thus resembling the escaping Josef himself, who felt 'as he sailed toward freedom as if he weighed nothing at all, as if every precious burden had been lifted from him' (*K&C* 66). Having lost its magic shape and disintegrated into a heap of clay at the end of the novel, the golem has, in contrast, become 'mysteriously heavy' (*K&C* 609). With appropriate symbolism, Josef tells his son that the box contains his iron chains, wondering all the while whether 'there could be more than one lost soul embodied in all that dust, weighing it down so heavily' (*K&C* 612). Burdened with the past and the souls of all the lives lost in the atrocities of the Third Reich, its miraculous arrival affirms Joe's commitment to a new home, his turn away from the weightlessness of escape towards the chains and burdens of responsibility.

Does this final disintegration of magic shape into formless mud imply a rejection of the fantastic in accordance with a wider return to realism after all? And is it therefore true that Chabon, in spite of all defence of the marvellous, eventually concludes by stressing the incommensurability of fantasy and reality as both Chute and Behlman contend? My answer would be yes and no. Yes, insofar as the novel affirms its stakes in mimetic realism as opposed to postmodernist disillusionment and as it openly admits to the eventual impossibility of bridging the gap between representation and the real. No, insofar as both the marvellous and the mimetic are presented as viable and valuable means of fictional expression that differ only in degree and not in nature and that do not negate but complement each other. Instead of pitching one against the other, the novel indicates that all literary fictions are essentially escapist. After all, the nature of the fictive, so Iser contends, is to 'reveal [. . .] that human plasticity is propelled by the drive to gain shape, without

ever imprisoning itself in any of the shapes obtained' (xi). As Iser so compellingly argued, imaginary escape creates the space for a staging that 'allows us – at least in our fantasy – to lead an ecstatic life by stepping out of what we are caught up in, in order to open up for ourselves what we are otherwise barred from' (303).

It is this aspect of the fictive that Chabon's novel explores. It foregrounds the interaction of the real and the imaginary in the fictive, both in its more mimetic and in its more marvellous narrative strands, but in doing so it does not grapple with epistemological or ontological quandaries. Instead, it repeatedly poses questions about the ethical, anthropological and constructive value of an escape to fiction. In this sense, perhaps the most important insight into the function of the fictive *Kavalier & Clay* offers can be found on its very first page: 'It was never just a question of escape. It was also a question of *transformation*' (*K&C* 3; original emphasis).

6
Dreaming of Reconstruction: David Mitchell's *number9dream*

Pragmatics of life in hyperreality

For my last case study, I turn to a novel that effectively presents in a nutshell those gradual steps away from postmodernism which I have traced throughout the previous chapters. In its story of young Eiji, who comes to Tokyo in search for his father, David Mitchell's *number9dream* follows a distinct reconstructive agenda such as I have defined it. Combining its central narrative thread with a proliferation of other stories and genres, it offers a veritable showcase of varieties of the fictive, ranging from a quasi-historical journal to absurd, quirky fables. Moreover, it frames its reconstructive tendencies in a *Bildungsroman* narrative, and thus offers itself as a kind of *mise en abyme* of the development that I myself have been suggesting in the succession of my previous readings.

Constructed as a *Bildungsroman* trajectory, Chapters 3–5 of this study can be read as a setting out, a journey and a return. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, as I have argued, makes an effort to leave the house of postmodernism, taking some probing steps beyond its ontological agonies and its dangers of paranoia and solipsism, even while still remaining deeply committed to postmodernism both in content and in form. With the version of a quest in search of authenticity developed in *Everything is Illuminated*, the necessity to rethink a postmodernist bias for subversion and destabilisation is set in a specific historical context. The novel asks further for the ethical implications of postmodernist tenets, especially with regards to historical facts, and for the responsibility of works of fiction in face of human atrocities and trauma. Putting ontological and epistemological questions dear to postmodernism even further aside, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* revaluates the joys and the worth of escapism as an important complementary function

of the fictive, even while emphasising the need for commitment and responsibility.

At the same time, it seems that increasingly tacit ontological indifference goes hand in hand with a decreasing prominence of the fantastic elements in the texts – or, indeed, vice versa. Thus the novels differ strongly in the degree to which they return to realist narration. Whereas *House of Leaves* is highly experimental both in its narrative form and in its textuality and draws heavily on the fantastic mode, *Kavalier & Clay* is a conspicuously conventional novel situating itself firmly in the mimetic. *Everything is Illuminated*, with its playful experimentation and balanced juxtaposition of magic realism and a travelogue, holds the middle ground between the two.

By this arrangement of my chapters I do not intend to imply a wholehearted endorsement of such critical positions which diagnose a return to realism in contemporary literature. Instead, I would argue that these texts manifest an increased investment in genre, a strengthening of genre boundaries and genre differences that a postmodernist aesthetic programme, in its aversion to conventions and restrictions, often sought to blur and to transgress. As opposed to such postmodernist hybridisations of genres, in which genre is only evoked to be transgressed, or transformed into parody or pastiche, these recent novels explore the potential of genre to establish different types of fictional communication. Genre boundaries are thus revaluated as a means to guide reception, allowing fiction to satisfy different kinds of aesthetic (and anthropological) needs, while at the same time they also govern the essential difference between fictional and non-fictional discourses as such.

number9dream is exemplary for such a revaluation of genre boundaries. The novel's employment of the fantastic mode encompasses a similar kind of trajectory from ontological and epistemological uncertainty to a pragmatic reassertion of genre boundaries which I have successively traced throughout the previous chapters. Still, this novel concludes neither with a rejection of the fantastic mode, nor with a critique or denial of the postmodernist awareness of ontological instability, but instead with an evocation of the creative and constructive power of the fictive and the responsibility this implies. In its last chapter it retracts its prior return to the mimetic, turning to dreams as an analogy for fictional imagination. In its *Bildungsroman* trajectory from ontological instability and transgression to a reinvestment in realism and finally to a celebration of the fictive, it may thus effectively serve as a *mise en abyme* and model for the trajectory of my own argument over the course of this study.

Just like the other three novels previously discussed, Mitchell's work clearly remains highly indebted to postmodernist thought. Whereas *House of Leaves* engages with postmodernist destabilisations of meanings and missing centres, and Foer's and Chabon's novels react primarily to postmodernism's subversive attitude towards history, Mitchell's novel is firmly and emphatically placed within the context of contemporary hypercapitalism and consumerism. While Danielewski's novel relates to the nihilistic uncertainty and solipsism into which postmodernist thought threatens to slip, and *Everything is Illuminated* and *Kavalier & Clay* raise ethical questions about the responsibility of fictions towards history, *number9dream* portrays a late capitalist world in which reality is up for sale. The megalopolis of present-day Tokyo provides the novel with a setting of futuristic surreality, brimming with flashing billboards, exclusive artificial environments and countless entertainment offers that promise escape from reality.

The tensions between the real and the imaginary that Mitchell's novel acts out are thus not so much those between historical fact and its imaginary transformation but rather such as arise more generally from the postmodernist topos of panfictionalisation. While the novel portrays a world of Baudrillardian simulacra and hyperreality, however, the absence of the real does not necessarily cause undue anxiety. More emphatically even than with *House of Leaves*, the world of Mitchell's protagonist, Eiji, can be described as one in which 'mediation has become so ubiquitous and inexorable [. . .] as to simply be reality, to be the bedrock upon which our investment and belief in the real can be built,' as Hansen had claimed for Danielewski's novel (601). In *number9dream*, ontological indifference has become a fact of quotidian life, since 'in a world disseminated through an array of different mediums [the polarity between reality and the imaginary] seems increasingly anachronistic' (Childs and Green, *Aesthetics* 131).

Prominent postmodernist thinkers like Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson have taken a largely pessimistic view of such an 'era of simulation' (Baudrillard 2), in which reality itself has become fictional. For them, the inaccessibility of the real is not an anthropological given (a position for which the names of Derrida and Lacan have become a kind of short-hand), but the historically developed state of our contemporary world of late capitalism. If that is the case, then this increasing loss of reality seems to involve an ominous restriction of agency, maturity and understanding. Frank Palmeri calls this flip side of postmodernism's concern with power structures and subversion its 'strong paranoid strand.'[1] In this guise, postmodernism shows a decided penchant for

conspiracy theories that finds expression in the postmodernist topos of subjects at the mercy of unintelligible, controlling systems (cf. Mason 54; Melley).

In this context, postmodernism has frequently employed a combination of multiple narrative levels with a decidedly fantastic streak as a literary strategy. As McHale for one argues, recursive narrative structures such as *trompe-l'œil*, *mise en abyme* and metalepsis are preferentially used in postmodernist fiction 'to foreground the ontological dimension of the Chinese box of fiction' (*Postmodernist Fiction* 114) and thus to present ontological ruptures typical of the fantastic. Martin Horstkotte even goes so far as to call postmodernist metafiction in general 'inherently fantastic' (144). The metaleptical disruption of narrative levels, in which characters realise that their lives are scripted by forces beyond their control, namely a manipulating author figure, is a stock feature of the postmodernist conspiracy topos. The implication of such a scheme is always that we as readers can never be sure whether we are not, in turn, just pawns in a game whose rules we fail to understand, characters in some unknown fictional script, whose author(s) we have yet to identify.[2] As Jorge Luis Borges put it: 'Such inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious' (57). In such a scenario, the fantastic is clearly not a liberating factor. In contrast to such postmodernist authors who turn to the fantastic mode to serve as a subversive and liberating element that allows for a fresh perspective (as is often the case in historiographic metafiction), this paranoid streak presents the fantastic as potentially problematic and dangerous, not a means of empowerment but an imprisoning and all-engulfing force. Situated between and beyond these two tendencies of postmodernist usage of the fantastic mode, in *number9dream* the multi-leveled infiltration of the real by the imaginary has become an inevitable premise, a reality in itself that is neither to be lamented nor celebrated but rather explored as the basis of contemporary culture.

Similar to the novels which I have discussed before, *number9dream* performs a reconstructive shift from ontological questions to the ethics and pragmatics of the fictive in a formally still emphatically postmodernist metafiction. Though postmodernism is viewed rather critically by one of the narrator-protagonists of Mitchell's third novel, *Cloud Atlas*, who claims that he 'disapprove[s] of flashbacks, foreshadowing, and tricksy devices; they belong in the 1980s with MAs in postmodernism and chaos theory' (150), structural playfulness, intertextual games and allusions, narrative fragmentation, unreliability, linguistic and

typographic experiment and narrative loops as well as ontological reversions reminiscent of McHale's postmodernist 'worlds under erasure' (*Postmodernist Fiction* 99–111) pervade Mitchell's fiction at every point. Nevertheless, as Leigh Wilson has remarked, Mitchell's 'obvious talent with textual play does not reduce the reading experience, or indeed the world, to the textual but rather reveals the textual as the site for the production of the peculiarly human, of hope, love, yearning, grief and loss' (100).[3]

Number9dream's simultaneous invocation of the paranoid strand of postmodernism and decisive move beyond it can be exemplarily encountered in its very first chapter, entitled "PanOpticon," which evokes a typically postmodernist scenario only to dismiss it in a similar way as we saw happening in *Man in the Dark* (cf. Chapter 1). The episode is set in a war-torn country at an undetermined place and time. A psychologist arrives at a decrepit Kafkaesque prison, one of whose unfortunate inmates claims to be God. He encounters a place in which reality itself seems to be in decay. All prisoners' files have been burned for fuel, unmooring the place from history. Even language itself threatens to disintegrate into 'hisses, slushes and cracks' (*n9d* 29). The very ground has become literally unstable and precarious: half the floorboards in warden Bentham's (!) office have been removed, opening up holes of fantastic depth. The prisoner tells the doctor that he has created the universe nine days ago, countering the doctor's contrary evidence by claiming that he created that evidence as well, and that everything in the universe is a product of his imagination. However, he is far from satisfied with his own omnipotence, since this forces him 'to keep imagining every last atom, or it all goes "poof!"' (*n9d* 32). After having proved his divine power to the doctor, the prisoner complains of boredom and decides to quit:

> We're going to change places. *You* can juggle time, gravity, waves and particles. *You* can sift through the dreckbin of human endeavour for tiny specks of originality. *You* can watch the sparrows fall and continents pillaged in your name. Now. I'm going to make your wife smile in a most involuntary way and partake of the chief warden's brandy. (*n9d* 36; original emphasis)

Turning his back on ontological concerns and quandaries, this God abdicates his responsibilities as a creator and turns towards the humbler pleasures of the everyday. He swaps bodies with the unfortunate doctor, who is left a prisoner and insane to all appearances. This brief

episode thus unfurls as a scenario of solipsism typically associated with postmodernism's more nihilistic guise (fittingly, solipsism is also the doctor's initial diagnosis). In familiar postmodernist manner, hidden structures of authorial control, knowledge, gaze and power are exposed, surface reality is ruptured by cracks and gaps, and definitions (madness/sanity, freedom/imprisonment, power/powerlessness, and so on) can be reversed in the blink of an eye.

But the above only features as a brief, quirky episode, its potential to evoke ontological anxiety cushioned by the fact that it is presented as the description of a film which Eiji watches in a cinema. The postmodernist scenario itself is thus thrice distanced from the reader's reality: by means of the eerie and surreal indeterminacy of its temporal and spatial setting, by the external focalisation of the narrative perspective the film-conceit dictates, and by its frame, which does not propose it as an existential ontological riddle but as a piece of cheap entertainment. The disruptive potential of fantastic hesitation is thus curtailed by the preceding exposure of the episode's fictional status. Moreover, Mitchell goes to some lengths to present this postmodernist topos as rather antiquated, emphatically out of place in the high-speed, high-resolution and technicolour environment of modern-day Tokyo, in which the novel's main plot is set. The cinema is a sorry place that 'should have gone out of business decades ago' (*n9d* 27); the film is foreign, black and white, and of no interest to its small audience, who only attend in order to covertly conduct other business, to which the film serves as an inconsequential backdrop. But that is not enough. In a final twist, which further drives the unreality of the film-conceit home, it eventually turns out that the entire trip to the cinema has never even happened. All of it, the film included, is no more than a mere figment of Eiji's nervous imagination.

Instead of unsettling readers' perceptions of reality and disturbing their alleged ontological complacency, the postmodernist scenario has turned into a tired literary commonplace. It has become so familiar that it is largely emptied of significance and stripped of its ability to surprise and unsettle. The episode evokes postmodernist concerns about ontological boundaries and narrative control only to dismiss them and to return to the issues at the heart of the novel: the attempt of young Eiji to find his father, to resituate himself with respect to his past, his family, his present situation in Tokyo and his future. A postmodernism that has turned into a stale stereotype is here programmatically left behind in favour of a strengthened interest in questions that postmodernism has often eschewed: about maturity, identity, commitment and about ways to find meaning in life.

As this episode clearly shows, *number9dream* draws on typically postmodernist strategies but no longer focuses primarily on the critical impact and subversive exposure of conventions and disruption of illusion that have been so closely associated with postmodernist aesthetics. Instead of using its combinations of mimesis and the marvellous and its metafictional aspects to force the reader to 'revise his or her ideas about the philosophical status of what is assumed to be reality' (Waugh 34), the novel explores the ways in which reality is inextricably infused with dreams, addressing not only the dangers of this fusion but also the potential of dreams to transform and to create. Even while it makes use of ontological uncertainties to the point at which ontological boundaries become blurry and reality is a matter of negotiation, the novel also insists on an ongoing responsibility and ethical exigency to attempt to establish pragmatic distinctions.

Mitchell thus provides another interesting case for an investigation of the ways in which recent fiction might be said to write through postmodernism towards a renewed belief in the vitality and importance of fictional illusion. In the course of this chapter, I will take a closer look at the ways in which the novel includes elements of the marvellous and the fantastic in its multi-leveled narrative, arguing that their perspective on the nature and role of the fictive amounts to an essential shift away from postmodernism. Kathryn Simpson has perceived a contradiction in the novel's aesthetics since the resurrection of 'humanist concerns of *number9dream*'s coming-of-age narrative' is, according to her, 'fundamentally at odds with the knowingly postmodern qualities of the novel' (51). I, however, argue that the novel's reconstructive attitude towards the fictive inscribes itself into a broader contemporary attempt to reconcile the humanist and the postmodernist in reconstructive aesthetics of the 'in spite of.' Indeed, the contradiction Simpson perceives is partly based on a widespread assumption of the incompatibility of the two, which the novel eventually sets out to question. Proceeding from the apparent critical consensus 'that while Mitchell employs postmodern literary techniques, he does not adhere to the apolitical and antisocial nihilism of postmodernity with its ironic take on modern life and its paradoxical insistence on the inadequateness of narrative, language and literature' (Dillon, "Introducing", 18), I suggest that Mitchell's departure from postmodernism reveals itself most clearly in his combination of mimesis and the marvellous.[4] As the postmodernist aspects of the novel no longer serve a subversive and antagonistic agenda of challenging established hierarchical structures or exposing untenable convictions, it becomes possible to see them as the means for, instead of a

contradiction to, that ongoing reconstructive project to create ourselves and our world.

A showcase of the fictive

In many ways, Mitchell's novel follows a typical *Bildungsroman* formula:[5] A modern-day Pip, young Eiji Miyake is in every sense uprooted and adrift, having come to strange and unfamiliar Tokyo from the remote rural island Yakushima in search of his father, whose identity has been kept a secret from him. Since his mother is an alcoholic and mentally unstable (she confesses in a letter that she came close to killing Eiji as an infant, one of the many traumas of Eiji's past), Eiji and his twin sister Anju grew up with their grandmother. Ever since his sister drowned at the age of eleven in a tragic accident, for which Eiji blames himself, he had been staying with various aunts and uncles, further displaced from a sense of rootedness and home. Legally coming of age in the second chapter, Eiji also, very much in line with the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* genre, successively loses his virginity, comes valiantly to the defence of a woman (who will later become his girlfriend), starts a job, rescues a friend, kills someone, faces death, learns about his ancestry, falls in love, and finally returns to his home (and his mother) in a spirit of reconciliation.

Eiji's coming-of-age narrative serves as the bracketing frame tale in *number9dream*, but the novel is much more complex than that. In almost every chapter Eiji's narrative present alternates with examples of 'alternative modes to reality' (Dutta) in which Eiji loses himself, with successive chapters elaborating on 'imagination, memory, the moving image, nightmare, fiction, meaning and dreams,' a list Shomit Dutta provides referring to an author's note.[6] Even the framing coming-of-age narrative itself is pervaded by digressions, inserted stories and anecdotes. Though some of the digressive stories have some marginal functional role in the narrative (for example the story of detective Yamaha; *n9d* 333–8), others remain completely unrelated (for example Suga's computer anecdote; *n9d* 144–5). Intriguingly, *number9dream* thereby harkens back to the beginnings of the novel form, recalling both in content and in structure that earliest novel about the inability of a protagonist to distinguish reality from imagination, Miguel Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. While still fairly frequent in the early novels of the eighteenth century (Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* offering its parodist culmination), over time digressions were increasingly seen as flaws in a novel's structure, diverging from what was rapidly being established as

a norm. Commenting on this process with regard to Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, Jeffrey Williams explains that 'interpolated tales disrupt the code of normal novelistic expectation and readability' and are thus often perceived as unnecessary narrative baggage (86). Indeed, the fact that the focus of *number9dream* deliberately changes from chapter to chapter makes it difficult to find a unifying interpretative perspective that does not dismiss large parts of the novel as basically irrelevant. Always depending on which elements of the narrative one decides to foreground, whole chapters inevitably appear to 'ultimately serve only as deferrals of the major plot' (Boulter 123).[7]

Digressions are not simply functionless, however. As Williams argues, 'their residue, the remainder in excess of that failed representation, is their depiction of scenes of narrative exchange' (86). Digressions are inherently self-reflexive:

> Rather than feeding into the chain of actions that comprise the plot proper, their specific action is, very literally, the act of narration. [. . .] they function as blunt inscriptions of narrating, foregrounding the act and dynamic of storytelling, whereby the characters engage explicitly in the exchange of narrative. (35)

I thus propose to approach Mitchell's novel not from a thematic perspective but from a structural one, understanding its very heterogeneity and digressiveness as one of its central points. Digressive excess already functions to foreground exchange of narrative and the pragmatic and rhetoric situations underlying such exchanges (narratives in *number9dream* are bought and sold, are recreative, seductive, escapist, comforting, provide company, convince . . .). But in *number9dream*, I would argue, digressions serve further to emphasise different kinds of relations between narrative and reality, that is, they function as a showcase of the fictive. The representational excess of the digressive structure is mirrored by an imaginative excess wherever the content of the insertion drifts into fantasy. As a result, the novel reads almost like a case study of different possible ways of combining the real and the imaginary, always gauging their role and potential within the protagonist's quest for meaning.

In this, *number9dream* falls roughly into three parts, to each of which I devote a subchapter: the first four chapters are marked by a gradual blurring of ontological boundaries between explicit fiction and portrayed reality, between the imaginary and the real. The second part then reverses this movement and emphatically returns to clear boundaries and mimetic narration. Instead of concluding on such a programmatic

rejection of (postmodernist?) ontological uncertainty and return to the real, however, the final two chapters offer a third perspective: the reconstructive power of dreaming and of fictional creation.

Moving towards fantastic hesitation

"PanOpticon," the first chapter of the novel, finds the young narrator-protagonist Eiji, recently arrived in Tokyo, daydreaming in a café while he attempts to gather enough courage to confront the lawyer from whom he hopes to learn his father's name. In a series of *trompe-l'œil* manoeuvres, the narrative spins into a number of strange scenarios, all of which break off suddenly, returning the story to the café, in which Eiji has remained seated all the time. The daydreams themselves can best be described as genre pastiches, in which Eiji invariably poses as a heroic man of action, clearly fuelled by the imagery and staple plots of popular media: cyberpunk action thriller, environmental disaster scenario, spy fiction, and postmodernist ontological riddle.

These dreams of agency and power contrast starkly with the insecure, late-adolescent Eiji who conjures them up. The novel's very first lines open with Eiji's failing (and already imaginary) attempt to forcefully assert his own identity: '"It is a simple matter. I know your name, and you knew mine, once upon a time: Eiji Miyake. Yes, *that* Eiji Miyake [. . .]." Or something like that. [. . .] My first morning in Tokyo, and I am already getting ahead of myself' (*n9d* 3; original emphasis). The matter, of course, is far from simple, as Eiji himself seems to be rather uncertain who '*that* Eiji Miyake' really is. He is repeatedly 'getting ahead of [him]self,' constantly imagining himself in roles that he cannot fulfil. Just as his imaginary heroic actions sharply highlight his actual passivity, his repeated imagined staging of opportunities to speak these very same first lines only serve to contrast drastically with his failure to make his name known to anyone outside of his fantasies (cf. *n9d* 9–10, 34). Even when he calls the lawyer's office he gives a false name and the guard who turns him away at the entrance refuses to take his name down for an appointment (*n9d* 22–3, 40). His encounter with the beautiful waitress Ai is no less disastrous, and her scathing retort to his cowardly clumsiness summarises quite aptly Eiji's identity troubles: 'Some are real. Some are fake. Some are full of shit' (*n9d* 38). Eiji constantly tries to invent himself, always failing miserably to live up to his own dreams and expectations: 'I, Eiji, Tokyoite. Do I fool anybody, or is every laugh, meeow and muffled stare directed at me, as I suspect?' (*n9d* 24). The narrative in this first chapter thus repeatedly veers off into the imaginary only to subsequently reassert the comparative reality of

the setting of narration: Eiji, no hero but an ordinary adolescent with blackhead problems, sitting nervously and worried in a Tokyo café.

Meanwhile, the narrative refuses to privilege the representation of the real over that of the imaginary, even while it eventually insists on their distinction. Each time, the ontological nature of the presented events only becomes clear in retrospect, since the homodiegetic narrative voice of Eiji remains unchanged throughout. The daydreams *are* Eiji's reality at the given moment. He consigns himself to them unconditionally and they efface his perception of his environment completely. Lack of distance and differentiation also characterises the narrative language and style. Not only are Eiji's sentences replete with enumerations, in a collage-style sensual overload – reviews speak of Mitchell's 'overheated' language (Zalewski), or 'megawatt prose' (Picone) – his narrative also uses present tense throughout. There is, in this homodiegetic narrative, no split between the moment of narration and the narrated events, and thus no possibility of the evaluative retrospection temporal distance would offer. As perception merges with imagination in Eiji's daydreams, readers continue to follow Eiji's narrative stream of consciousness. Approximating an equivalence of narrated time and time of narration, every thought of Eiji's is registered and portrayed. While the external ('real') action narrated in the first chapter thus amounts to little more than a young adult spending several hours chain-smoking and drinking coffee in a Tokyo café, everything that matters here happens in Eiji's head and his dreams are represented with the same narrative detail as are his perceptions. This is a homodiegetic Don Quixote who takes the reader along in his illusions.

But this Don Quixote needs no Sancho Panza to check him. Though the reader may have trouble distinguishing between reality and dream, Eiji himself never has such difficulties. Even whilst he is dreaming he is perfectly (and painfully) aware of his own fanciful constructions, and though he idealises his own agency, his scenarios invariably end in failure, death, or imprisonment. As he very well knows: 'How do daydreams translate into reality? [. . .] Not very well, not very often' (*n9d* 4).

For the reader, however, the narrative stance of the novel remains largely uncertain throughout the first chapter. After all, the overwhelming reality of contemporary Tokyo itself continually seems to border on the fantastic, testament to the precarious nature of the real in modern high-tech consumer society. To Eiji, life in Tokyo feels like being 'on holiday on another planet, passing [himself] off as a native alien' (*n9d* 56). 'Everything is over your head – dentists, kindergartens, dance studios. Even the roads and walkways are up on murky stilts' (*n9d* 3). Reality in Tokyo has left the ground, has become detached. The streets

are an overwhelming chaos of incessant movement: 'Pin-striped drones, a lip-pierced hairdresser, midday drunks, child-laden housewives. Not a single person is standing still. Rivers, snowstorms, traffic, bytes, generations, a thousand faces per minute' (*n9d* 3). Nature, technology and the virtual merge here with the human to the point at which signification becomes confused: rivers no longer of water but of human beings, cars and information; snowstorms on screens; traffic both real and virtual; generations not only in a biological but also in a technological sense. Even the hot and humid September weather is 'extraplanetary' (*n9d* 17). Tokyo's lurid and dreamlike reality often seems scarcely removed from the scenarios Eiji dreams up in his flights of imagination.

This continual slippage between reality and imagination is further facilitated by the fact that Eiji's narrative voice is heavily influenced by mass-media imagery and genres throughout. The 'microcosm of the excesses of global technocapitalism' presented by *number9dream*'s setting is saturated by virtual reality and real virtuality (Childs and Green, *Aesthetics* 127).[8] The disorienting globalised space of Tokyo – in which people are as likely to eat at McDonalds or order pizza as to have sushi or udon at a local soup kitchen, where Marlboro is as present as is Fujifilm or Panasonic and where American films vie with Japanese video games for consumers' attention – is no longer a place of human beings but of drones, cogs in a capitalist machine that erases the individual and which measures difference by wealth. Eiji soon realises that 'Tokyo turns you into a bank account balance with a carcass in tow' (*n9d* 16). Dehumanised and futuristic, Tokyo's reality exceeds and eludes the understanding and representative abilities of the individual: 'Tokyo is one massive machine made of smaller components. The drones only know what their own minute component is for. I wonder what Tokyo is for. I wonder what it does' (*n9d* 57).[9] As cyberpunk vocabulary thus drifts into the cyberpunk scenarios of Eiji's daydreams, readers are again and again forced to revise their assumptions about the narrative world they are presented with, in what amounts to an extended uncertainty about the genre of the text in front of them, producing 'a nagging sense of unreliability in the narration on the reader's behalf since the reader is never certain whether what she or he is reading is fact or fiction, within the imaginative world of the novel' (Posadas 82).

Ultimately, however, this first chapter uses the fantastic mode to assert an essentially mimetic stance for its idiosyncratic narrative, even as readers are cautioned to mistrust appearances. In a similar process of deferred revelation to that which Todorov has described for the fantastic-uncanny (cf. Todorov 44–6), it always eventually exposes

the dream-scenarios it spins out as illusory. It is well worth stressing, though, that the sense of unreliability that is created here remains entirely on the part of the reader. Though Childs and Green call Eiji an unreliable narrator, this is not entirely accurate (cf. "Novels" 53). While his narrative is disorienting, readers are at no point led to suspect it to be insincere or delusional and, even in his daydreams and musings, it continues to mirror Eiji's thoughts and perceptions with, to all appearance, high accuracy. Though readers may be deceived initially, Eiji himself never is. Instead of the sceptical distance between reader and narrator which is the usual effect of unreliability, readers are asked to share Eiji's dreams, which ultimately do not pretend to *be* more than dreams. It is therefore not Eiji's voice that becomes unreliable but the reader's comprehension of its circumstances.

A similar strategy of disorientation characterises narration over the next few chapters. The second chapter, "Lost Property," opens with a curious scene in which an eleven-year old Eiji saws off the head of a thunder-god statue. As the chapter proceeds, we learn that this is a scene from Eiji's past which visits him during a sleepless night at the end of his first week in Tokyo. In the course of the chapter, these memories from his childhood are complemented by his recollections of the previous week. Eiji's musings in the café were directed towards the future and propelled by a narrative desire for an eternally elusive truth (namely, his father's identity). The generic forms they take (cyberpunk, environmental apocalypse, detective story, postmodernist ontological conspiracy) aptly reflect this. In the second chapter, in contrast, the past comes back to haunt Eiji in various forms.

Eiji's memories recounted in this chapter, whose fantastic genre references are to myth and superstition, revolve around the loss and guilt he's been suffering ever since the drowning of his twin sister Anju. Myth echoes in the chapter's cyclical structure, which starts and ends with the decapitation of the thunder god, and the twin's childhood is filled with magical beliefs and ghosts. Eiji is convinced that he is to blame for his sister's death because he promises any sacrifice to the thunder god in exchange for success in a football game. The entirely improbable goal he manages to score is, in his opinion, the direct cause of his sister's death. His revenge on the thunder god, decapitating the statue, thus amounts to both a rejection of the mythical beliefs of childhood and to their reaffirmation.

While in the first chapter Eiji is the source and the agent of fantasies of empowerment, here he is at the mercy of powers he fails to control. The recourse to the fantastic mode is no longer a result of the projection of desires but an attempt to account for the inexplicable, to find

meaning and reason behind loss and grief. Still, contrasted as they are with his more mundane musings about his life and work in modern Tokyo, the fantastic aspects of his memories can rather easily be dismissed as merely another product of a vivid imagination. Instead of presenting a threat to mimetic illusion, or posing ontological doubt, they appear to have their source in a child's naïve and credulous understanding of the world, as well as in Eiji's need to come to terms with his sister's tragic death.

A nagging doubt remains, however. After all, Eiji does seem to have scored his miraculous goal, bringing home a trophy that no one expected him to earn, and his belief in the role of the thunder god does not seem to have changed significantly once he grew older (cf. *n9d* 329). Furthermore, "Lost Property" not only draws directly on myth and superstition but also invokes their use within a distinctly magic realist tradition.[10] Its evocation of ghosts and the contrast of its decidedly rural setting to the megacity Tokyo further reinforce this. The chapter serves as a reminder that reality is always multi-layered, as the past comes back to haunt the present, most eerily perhaps in the return of the stray cat that had taken refuge with Eiji and that was reported dead only to come back to him alive, looking at him with Anju's 'bronze-spark Cleopatra eyes' (*n9d* 92, cf. 51).

After the imaginary futures of the first and the mythical past of the second chapter, the third, "Video Games," turns to a much more direct and contemporary infiltration of reality by fantasy. In a stylistic return to the cyberpunk scenarios of the first chapter, it begins with a fast-paced action sequence, featuring futuristic weapons and violent zombie attacks. This turns out to be (rather unsurprisingly) a video game Eiji is playing at a games parlour, one of several which readers will encounter in the course of this chapter. Once again, the actual nature of the sequence is only established in retrospect, leaving the reader initially in doubt. While the former two chapters both contrast Eiji's reality with his imagination, though, in this chapter the present is infiltrated by the fantastic in the form of popular entertainment.

In hypermodern Tokyo, both reality and unreality are up for sale. As Eiji muses: 'All these people like my mother paying counsellors and clinics to reattach them to reality: all these people like me paying Sony and Sega to reattach us to unreality' (*n9d* 102). Just as Eiji's narrative offers the imaginary and the real side by side without differentiation, both flicker side by side across the giant media screens overlooking the city:

> I [. . .] watch the media screen on the NHK building. Missile launchers recoil, cities on fire. A new Nokia cellphone. Foreign affair

> minister announces putative WW2 Nanking excesses are left-wing plots to destroy patriotism. Zizzi Hikaru washes her hair in Pearl River shampoo. Fly-draped skeletons stalk an African city. Nintendo proudly presents *Universal Soldiers*. The kid who hijacked a coach and slit three throats says he did it to stand out. I watch the passing traffic. (*n9d* 125)

News and advertisement are here reduced to the same level of the media image, no more than different forms of entertainment, equally insubstantial, decontextualised and made sexy by spectacular violence (Zizzi Hikaru is a character from a first-person-shooter video game, which Eiji plays earlier in the same chapter). Images of a deeply troubled world are translated into the language of video games in Eiji's mind, as starving human beings are turned into sinister skeletons laying siege to a city. The news amounts to little more than 'comic books and bedtime stories' (*n9d* 230). Moreover, the images of commercialised entertainment culture presented by the advertisements seem to relate much more directly to Tokyo's reality (or Eiji's experience of it) than the violence in remote, unspecified parts of the world, which serves as no more than a backdrop for Tokyo's busy streets, scarcely able to hold the spectator's gaze.

Eiji himself soon turns his attention to the next video game, which allows him to experience something apparently far more relevant to his current situation: another one of the numerous imaginary encounters with his father that continue to dominate his imagination. Reality recedes to a background noise as virtuality takes over. Indeed, while Eiji completely immerses himself in the experience of the video games, which are 'Better than the real thing [. . .]. Realer than the real thing' (*n9d* 108), the drug-hazed reality of his loss of virginity is utterly disappointing: '*That* groin sneeze was sex? That was no Golden Gate bridge to a promised land. It was a wobbly plank across a soggy bog. Nobody even gives you a badge to sew on' (*n9d* 120). In a further twist, the difference between the video game scenarios and Eiji's real experiences in this chapter itself becomes blurred as his exploration of Tokyo nightlife 'quickly comes to resemble a seedy teen-buddy movie,' as Steve Poole aptly remarks in his review. The video games, for their part, serve Eiji both as an escape from his loss and loneliness and as a way to give shape to his desire, which the games are designed only ever to perpetuate.

Since Eiji's search for his father is exclusively cast in the imagery and plot-structures of popular media stereotypes, however, it attains from the very beginning qualities of the simulacra, the copy. This is quite paradoxical, since as a young man's attempt to assert his individuality

and identity in best *Bildungsroman* tradition (thence also Eiji's contempt for the uniform 'drones'), Eiji's search turns out to be, at least to a degree, externally imposed, an instantiation of a cultural archetype that is universal enough to be profitably merchandised. How much Eiji's search seems to be a cliché is even noted by other characters. Yakuza boss Morino comments: 'You really don't know who your father is, do you? To think, these things happen in real life. A semi-orphan comes to Tokyo in search of the father he has never met' (*n9d* 171). The search for origins is thus based on a copy, the search for individuality on a popular trope. Less pessimistically, one could suggest with Kathryn Simpson that 'Eiji overlays his own emotional fantasy onto this virtual reality game' (65). This perspective grants him much more agency within an environment of entertainment culture. Not necessarily a victim to the games' rules, he is able to twist them to his own advantage. A true child of the hyperreal age, Eiji makes use of virtual reality to play through and address his emotional needs and anxieties. While popular culture has obviously formed him, he himself uses and adopts the scenarios popular culture offers him to create his own environments.

Nevertheless, a Baudrillardian scenario of the omnipresent and omnipotent reaffirmation of the image is emphatically reinforced in the video game with which this chapter ends. In another violent sci-fi game version of a paternal encounter, Eiji rescues his father, 'the man who will free humanity from the tyranny of the OuterNet,' from prison, heroically declaring that 'The revolution to reverse reality starts now' (*n9d* 149). As in previous imaginary encounters, this turns out to be a trap. The control of hyperreality is complete and every belief in the ability to return to the real is both an illusion and an irregularity that is not only already anticipated, but indeed, to an extent, necessary to the system. As the OuterNet executive who awaits player Eiji in the cell explains:

> 'Your susceptibility to indoctrination by our provocateurs is evidence of defective wetprogramming. The very idea that ideology can ever defeat the image is itself insanity. OuterNet will reprocess your wetware [. . .].' He brings his face up close. It is not hateful. It is tender and forgiving. 'Game over.' (*n9d* 149)

There are clear echoes of George Orwell's *1984* in this scenario of double deception that ends in a hopeless return to the status quo against which no rebellion is possible (the game is even called *2084*).

A paradox, however, lies in the fact that this is firstly a video game, and secondly a fiction within a fiction. The declaration 'Game over'

implies a return to reality after the end of the game (and we have already witnessed several similar switches back and forth between metadiegetic video games and diegetic reality in the course of the chapter), and is thus, in terms of the game, a paradoxical moment of self-defeat, releasing players from the virtual reality it purportedly dooms them to. However, as we have seen, the reality of Tokyo is itself already hyperreal, a place where the image rules. At the same time, this passage ends the chapter, whose title, after all, is "Video Games," indicating a further, metafictional application of the phrase. The passage thus indicates both a return to reality after all the games encountered in this chapter and the impossibility to escape the world of the image.

This ambivalent status of reality, then, is precisely what readers encounter in the next chapter, "Reclaimed Land." Having already witnessed Eiji's virtual death several times, readers find chapter four opening once again with such a by now familiar scenario. This time, however, the narrative insists on its reality:

> So this is how I die, minutes after midnight on reclaimed land somewhere south of Tokyo bay. I sneeze and the swelling in my right eye throbs and nearly ruptures. Sunday, 17th September. [. . .] I am here, this is real. A waking nightmare from which I will never wake up. (*n9d* 153)

The need to establish the scene as real is obvious here. After the false leads and illusions of the previous chapters, every conceivable step is taken to anchor the scene in reality, not only by explicitly declaring it's reality but also through immediate specification of temporal and spatial coordinates, by adding the pathetic sneeze in contrast to the cool of Eiji's former imaginary heroic personas and by topping it off with the equivalent of the pinch on the arm: real pain.

At the same time, however, doubt immediately arises again with Eiji's reference to nightmares. And indeed, as the chapter alternates between flashbacks to the events leading up to Eiji's imminent death and his last thoughts while watching his killer approach, it resembles ever more closely the violent world of gangster films and video games we have seen Eiji indulging in before. Through a series of coincidences and misunderstandings driven by his persistent endeavour to find his father, Eiji is drawn into a bloody war of power between different Yakuza factions. Encountering another incarnation in the line of deceptive and false father figures, he is forced to sign a devil's contract (in blood!) with the Yakuza boss Morino, pledging him his company until midnight in

a sort of nightmarish fairy tale, in which Eiji, as Simpson wryly puts it, features as a 'very unlucky Cinderella' (55). That the episode draws on action-film patterns is explicitly acknowledged when Eiji agonises: 'I feel like I have strayed into an action movie' (*n9d* 197). Moreover, even the very language of representation mirrors the descriptive aesthetics encountered before in the representations of video game violence. A scene in which one of the henchmen kills off injured enemy thugs, for example, not only refers directly to video games but also employs the exact same onomatopoetic sound-effects and uncouth commentary: '"A twitcher!" *Bang*! [. . .] "Yer got the wobblies too, huh?" *Bang*! "Guns! The ultimate fucking video game." *Bang*!' (*n9d* 167; original emphasis; cf. 97–8).

As the chapter proceeds, its claims of mimetic referentiality become increasingly implausible. Spinning into scenarios of ever more gruesome violence, the narrative begins to resemble a surreal descent into a nightmarish underworld:

> Through a temporary door in a plywood wall we enter a vast darkness, sealed against the day. At first I cannot see a thing, not even the floor. I can only feel the emptiness. [. . .] This is a bowling alley. We walk past lane upon lane. I lose count. Minutes seem to pass, but this is impossible. [. . .] I should not be here. This is a nightmarish mistake. (*n9d* 184–5)

Space and time are distorted and brought out of focus, as are all moral and ethical coordinates that used to govern Eiji's reality. Even more explicitly, Morino and his henchmen start to philosophise about nightmares later in the chapter:

> nightmares are our wilder ancestors returning to reclaim land. Land tamed and grazed, by our softer, fatter, modern, waking selves. [. . .] Nightmares are sent by who, or what, we really are, underneath. 'Don't forget where you come from,' the nightmare tells. 'Don't forget your true self' (*n9d* 190).

This alludes not only to the chapter's title but also to the setting of this whole exchange, which takes place while driving across reclaimed land close to Tokyo. The nagging suspicion that this is once more just a dream, some sort of illusion, turns almost into a certainty when, later in the chapter, Morino seems to be able to read Eiji's thoughts and knows the most improbably intimate details about him and his past (cf. *n9d* 196).

This chapter constantly tantalises the reader with the possibility of disbelief, creating a sustained fantastic hesitation à la Todorov that is atypical insofar as it is not merely positioned between the marvellous and the uncanny, but more specifically, between the (deceptive?) 'sunlit real world' of consumerism (*n9d* 184), where Eiji's future girlfriend Ai plays Mozart at the opening of a new shopping mall, and the brutal reality (nightmare?) of the Yakuza organisation that rules this world in secret. Ontologically, this fantastic hesitation here works both ways. While the otherworldliness of Eiji's experience casts the narrative's mimetic claims in doubt, the nightmarish Yakuza violence also reclaims the land on which the consumerist dreams of the Xanadu amusement park and luxury hotel Valhalla are built. Epistemologically, the fact that Eiji is suffering from an increasingly high fever during the whole chapter calls the reliability of his perceptions into doubt in a way that is, once more, all too typical for fantastic narratives, adding to the pervasive uncertainty about the chapter's mimetic stance. Nevertheless, although doubts are deliberately being raised here, for all purposes of further plot development the gruesome events of the chapter seem to have been no dream. While readers might continue to expect the moment of sudden awakening that has called an end to all those previous games and dreams the novel has beguiled them with, this relief never comes. Even in this point the chapter remains true to the nature and logic of nightmares, since 'a nightmare is a comedy without a release valve. They tickle, but you can't laugh. And the pressure builds up and up' (*n9d* 190).

The question that is raised here, beyond the ontological and epistemological dimensions of uncertainty, is ultimately one of responsibility, of realities and selves we not only perceive and inherit, but also create. While Eiji keeps insisting that he should not be there, Morino brusquely contradicts him: '"I wish you would stop saying that," says Morino, [. . .] "It's getting on my nerves. We all get exactly the nightmare we deserve"' (*n9d* 189). Indeed, the scenario the chapter spins out could appropriately be said to be precisely the nightmare Eiji deserves. Morino is a nightmarish version of just the sort of powerful father figure Eiji has been imagining all along, and the oneiric scenario does little more than confront him with the sort of violence he has been indulging in every time he has imagined himself as a heroic protagonist in his daydreams and video games. At the same time, of course, these very daydreams and video games are themselves mere versions of typical popular culture narratives. Thus, this particular nightmare both is and is not Eiji's own, both the nightmare he deserves and 'another man's nightmare into which

[he] accidentally strayed' (*n9d* 202). The chapter therewith comments both on Eiji's indulgence of the violent images of popular culture and on that culture itself; a culture that celebrates and sells violence while obfuscating the real violence which sustains its glamorous fabrications, its Xanadus and Valhallas, providing a graphic illustration of Fredric Jameson's reminder that 'the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and horror' (*Postmodernism* 5).

In an immediate reaction to this encounter with a violent reality, Eiji rejects the images of popular culture in which he had been immersed. His experience makes him feel both the 'utter weirdness of utter normality' (*n9d* 241) and understand the falseness of the commercialisation of violence. Watching an action film later he comments: 'This movie is brutal and cheap and fake. If people who dream up violent scripts ever came into contact with real violence, they would be too sickened to write such scenes' (*n9d* 362). After having been confronted with a nightmarish blurring of reality and fantasy, Eiji realises the dangers involved and the need to keep these realms apart. Accordingly, the next chapter goes some way to re-establish the boundaries that the narrative so far has proceeded to unsettle. Turning away from fantastic hesitation and uncertainty, the second part of the novel emphatically swings back towards the mimetic stance.

A return to mimesis

If the constant awakenings of the first chapter gradually turned into a sustained fantastic hesitation in the Yakuza nightmare, the fifth chapter, "Study of Tales," clearly separates the realm of the marvellous from the mimetic, counteracting the permeability of their boundary encountered before. Eiji hides from the Yakuza in the house of an author and spends all his time reading, among other things, the Goatwriter stories, a set of highly playful fables about three half-human, half-animal characters. In by now familiar manner, the chapter alternates the Goatwriter stories with Eiji's description of his quiet days, which are most insistently filled with mundane details, listing what he eats, what he reads, when he takes a shower, and so on. The distance between the two narrative elements is further emphasised by a change of narrative perspective from homodiegetic to heterodiegetic.

In stark contrast to the nightmarish scenarios encountered before, these stories present the marvellous in its most playful and childish aspect, extensively revelling in language games and literalised metaphors and delighting in the materiality of language to the point of silliness. The inconsequentiality of these stories is deliberately

emphasised: they are children's stories, a writer's morning warm-up exercise (cf. *n9d* 236). While the previous chapters showed an increasing entanglement of the real and the imaginary which made a distinction between them ever more difficult, "Study of Tales" indulges in the playful freedom clear boundaries allow for, an exuberance of blissfully gratuitous imaginative pleasure that manifests itself not only on the level of content of the Goatwriter stories but also in their language. To cite just one of countless examples of its phonetic and linguistic playfulness, a shopping list compiled by one of the characters in the story comprises a 'size nine knitting needle, nit lotion, Indian indigo ink, Polish polish, Zanzibar marzipan, two cans Canadian toucan candles' (*n9d* 219). Much more directly than any other digression in the novel, the Goatwriter stories are set apart, seemingly quite disconnected from the events of the frame tale. They are excessive in more than one sense: both in their verbal fireworks and in their position within the novel, in which they seem to be very much unrelated to the rest, literally in excess. Not surprisingly then, they have been variously discounted as 'slightly tiresome' (Barnacle "*number9dream*"), or much harsher, as 'wastebasket-fodder' (Poole).

Even those who think them entirely superfluous, however, do point out that 'it becomes painfully apparent, among the superfluity of pages devoted to this arch nonsense, that we are witnessing a fable about fiction itself' (Poole). The books offer Eiji a place of safety, both metaphorically and literally an escape and respite from the violence he had faced before. In the library of his refuge, he finds '[e]nough books to build an igloo to hide in' and a whole world to inhabit, '[b]ook walls, book towers, book avenues, book side streets. Books spillages, book rubble. Nine lifetimes of books' (*n9d* 210) – escapism in the most literal, most benevolent sense. But not only does the chapter present readers emphatically with scenes of reading, the fables themselves feature a writer as protagonist, following Goatwriter as they do on his quest for an ever-elusive 'truly untold tale' (*n9d* 207). They are stories about literary inheritance, about the materiality of language, about the challenges to literature in a digital age, about imaginative theft and inspiration, about the risks and sacrifices one might or might not be willing to make for the sake of creation and about its power and its rewards. They also exemplify fictionalising acts in play, in their explicit self-disclosure but also in selection and combination: the shopping list quoted above draws on the ordinary and everyday and even connects the list with real geographical determinants (Canada, Zanzibar, Poland), while opening their determination both by means of linguistic excess and by

the fantastic nature of the list's owner, Mrs Comb, who is not a lady but a hen.

At this point, the carefully reasserted boundaries between the marvellous realm of the fables and the everyday reality of Eiji's exile once again become precarious. For one, the insistent puns and allusive language of the Goatwriter stories draw attention to language itself, to its materiality both as and beyond referentiality and thus serves as a reminder of the textuality of the whole novel (cf. Childs and Green, "Novels" 42). Indeed, while the propensity for puns and rhymes certainly comes to the fore most insistently in the Goatwriter chapters, similar examples can be encountered occasionally in Eiji's own narrative. Such language is used earlier, for example, to convey Eiji's intoxication in a drug-hazed conversation: 'A scroll, doll, droll troll, a bowing chrysanthemum in a vase. "So how old are you, roadie?" I even hear her lush hair hush' (*n9d* 117). In such language games the stylistic difference between the metadiegetic quirky and marvellous fables and the diegetic mimetic frame tale dissolves.

Flirtation with metafiction in the chapter "Study of Tales" becomes even more explicit in a playfully self-conscious moment, as the attic library of the author's house, a room with 'the highest book population density [Eiji has] ever come across,' makes him wonder 'if I am a book too' (*n9d* 210). While the books come alive to him, creating a space to be inhabited, he also starts to refer to his own life in terms of a story in imaginary exchanges with a photograph of the owner of the house. It is in response to her (imaginary?) request to tell her his story that he recounts how he escaped from the Yakuza in what is the only instance of past-tense narration in Eiji's entire narrative. Later on, she wonders 'what happens in the next chapter?' (*n9d* 237), and when Eiji hesitates to open a letter from his mother, she urges him to '[o]pen it now and spare us all the tension' (*n9d* 244). Eiji himself, as it were, self-consciously casts his life as a story, while the owner of the house turns into a mouthpiece for the reader.

Even while the uncertain boundaries of the previous chapter are thus replaced by the clear distinction between metadiegetic marvellous fables and diegetic mimesis, these metafictional allusions clearly point towards their essentially similar status as fictions. This is even more forcefully asserted by the fact that the first part of the Goatwriter stories is, for once, inserted *before* Eiji actually sits down to read it in his narrative present. In all prior instances of insertion, the narrative continued to follow Eiji's perception and experience, allowing for no distance between the narrative present and the present of narration.

This is precisely what allowed for reader disorientation while still holding on to an essentially sincere reliability of narrative voice. Departing from that practice, the first part of the Goatwriter stories provides the only instance in which the presence of an implied author overtly asserts itself, since here the narrative is evidently no longer entirely under the control of Eiji's perspective. Even though the fables are thus revealed to be embedded fictional stories, they take up a strangely detached and coequal position with respect to the rest of the narrative. All the while, the proliferation and exchangeability of author and reader figures in this chapter give cause to wonder who is writing and reading whom. Thus, when Goatwriter, at the end of his search (and the chapter), muses, 'All my life, I searched for the truly untold tale in the arcane, in the profound. Could my quixotic quest be a quite quotidian query? Does profundity hide in the obvious?' (*n9d* 256), this intriguingly resonates with the novel's own subsequent turn away from marvellous flights of fancy.

This chapter can therefore be seen to mark a turning point within the novel, from a gradual blurring of the boundaries between literary stances in the first three chapters that culminates in the extended fantastic hesitation of chapter four, to a reassertion of differences and a clear separation in chapter five. But "Study of Tales" also marks a shift in Eiji's practices of reception. The fantasies Eiji has indulged in so far were mostly violent and narcissistic, constantly failing embodiments of his main quest to find his father. In "Study of Tales," Eiji turns 'into a reading machine' (*n9d* 236), immersed in the stories of others, while up until now he was entirely engrossed in so many versions of his own. He no longer engages in fantasies only to encounter himself but opens up his search for meaning to other perspectives.

Turning decidedly towards the mimetic pole in such a search for meaning, the next chapter "Kaiten," no longer flirts with the marvellous but reclaims history. The inserted narrative in this case is the diary of Eiji's great uncle, written during his training as a kaiten pilot, a suicide torpedo programme that Japan launched in the last year of the Second World War. Meticulous in its historical accuracy, this is the only part of the novel for which Mitchell acknowledges having conducted further research. Obviously, this stands in stark contrast to the flights of fancy of the self-styled 'fabulist' (*n9d* 228) encountered in the previous chapter.

While the fables in "Study of Tales" lead away from Eiji's quest, ostensibly no more than excessive, playful digressions, the diary seems to get at the roots of reality, to offer both vindication and a solution

for Eiji's search for origins. He receives the pages from his grandfather, who emphatically insists on the importance of history, bloodlines and heritage: 'Flesh and blood matter [. . .]! Blood-lines are the stuff of life. Of identity! Knowing who you are from is a requisite of self knowledge' (*n9d* 274). Similarly forceful is the insistence on the journal's authenticity. It is the original, since a 'copy would dilute its soul, its uniqueness' (*n9d* 274). This chapter's guiding topic is meaning, and it is in history, with its unambiguous mimetic claims, that this meaning seems to find its ultimate anchor, whereas the fictive search of Goatwriter can only lead to ever-new searches, ever-new stories, as the truly untold story must by definition remain untold.

As a story of maturation, this, so it seems, is an appeal to return to mimesis, to an increased investment in the determinacy of the real. The success of Eiji's coming of age appears to hinge on 'whether Eiji will or can ever stop dreaming' (Simpson 70). In this chapter, Eiji finally seems to have found everything he has been looking for: a grandfather who is not only willing to acknowledge him but even to pass on an inheritance, a bloodline. With the journal he is offered an identity rooted in a past, an origin and a history that is decidedly heroic, something to be proud of and to emulate. One might argue that with this turn away from his futile dreams, leaving the escapist realm of the marvellous behind, Eiji has finally matured and turns to the real world, to history. The trajectory of the novel's use of the marvellous thus seems to lead naturally to the conclusion reached by Jonathan Boulter, who argues that 'the true impulse behind the narrative' is 'to reveal the end of fantasy, to explore what happens when fantasy is left behind' (118–19). The blurring and merging of illusion and reality, the omnipresence of the simulacra and the uncertainties of meaning which dominate Eiji's present and the first half of the novel are contrasted and replaced here with the 'rock-solid valid' (*n9d* 288) meaning of life offered by the journal: 'to defend the Motherland' (*n9d* 285).

But this attempt to determine meaning, to narrow it down to an originary truth – an attitude which would necessarily favour the mimetic – is repeatedly undermined in the chapter. Instead of leading to an acceptance of this ancestry and an acknowledgment of the determining force of history, reading the journal makes Eiji realise that his granduncle's experiences have little in common with his own: 'I wonder how I would have fared in the war. [. . .] I guess I would not have been "I." I would have been another "I." A weird thought, that – I am not made by me, or my parents, but by the Japan that did come into being' (*n9d* 310). The world described in the journal is scarcely less remote from

the reality Eiji lives in than the marvellous Goatwriter stories. Realising this, Eiji wonders:

> What would Subaru Tsukiyama say about Japan today? Was it worth dying for? Maybe he would reply that *this* Japan is not the Japan he did die for. The Japan he died for never came into being. It was a possible future, auditioned by the present but rejected with other dreams. Maybe it is a mercy he did not see the Japan that was chosen. (*n9d* 310; original emphasis)

The historical narrative inserted in the form of the journal thus seems to be even more out of place, more heterogeneous to the story than Eiji's daydreams, or the video games we have encountered before.[11] In this way, it strangely corresponds with the Goatwriter stories in its distance to the main narrative, similar also in that they shift away from Eiji's narrative perspective. Thus, one could say, the Goatwriter stories and the kaiten journal both stand in contrast to Eiji's narrative to the same degree, but from opposite ends of the scale of the fictive, one marvellous and one mimetic. Thus, Eiji's own narrative situates itself even more emphatically on a fantastic middle ground, fraught as it is with slippages between dream and reality, suspended between a myth-ridden past revolving about loss and a cyberpunk future, in which the central desire, the encounter with his father, remains ever elusive.

Identity, so Eiji discovers, is not shaped by the past but by the present. Rejecting the identity determined by bloodline that is offered to him, the mimetic historical narrative turns out to be no more (but also no less) relevant to Eiji's present than the video games or the fictions he encounters. Its truth claims ultimately do not provide it with a privileged authority to decide on the question at the heart of this chapter: meaning. Instead, the journal clearly demonstrates that each reality is shaped by dreams, dreams that can be powerful and alluring enough to die for, but still fail to become reality. Even Subaru's 'rock-solid valid' (*n9d* 288) meaning of life is not determined by the real at all but arises from the dream of a Japan that is never to come and loses its validity in a death that seems to have been in vain in more than one way.

In contrast to the determinacy proclaimed by the journal, the chapter proposes much more fluid and dynamic approaches to meaning in its contemporary narrative strain. Meaning is understood here as a process, as something each individual must define for him- or herself in an endless search: 'Maybe the meaning of life lies in the act of looking for it' (*n9d* 288), or in 'passing or failing a series of tests' which one poses

oneself (*n9d* 309). This finds an apt illustration in the search for the 'Holy Grail' of computer hackers, on which Eiji's friend Suga focuses all his endeavours. At first Suga is desolate when he finds out that there are countless Holy Grails, that 'Holy Grail is just an exercise in infinity. In meaninglessness' (*n9d* 304). But only when he returns to the task, launching a search programme that starts looking through all the countless Holy Grails, notwithstanding their apparent futility, he finally achieves his aim: to be drafted into the American secret service (cf. *n9d* 344–5). To find the Holy Grail, the one and only meaning, is ultimately not necessary. Indeed, it might not even exist at all. What is important, however, is to always keep looking for it.

It is this kind of dynamic and fluid meaning that we see Eiji pursue in his search of a father, and it is in the same spirit that the novel explores its various venues for meaning and identity. At the end of the chapter, Eiji rejects not only the determinism of a meaning and identity which are historically rooted, but also abdicates his need to meet his father and opens himself to the plethora of meanings promised by the imaginary indeterminacy of the Goatwriter stories. If Eiji has here, indeed, as Boulter claims, 'essentially come to the end of his quest,' and the *Bildungsroman* plot has drawn to a close, this is an ending that is emphatically not a closure but an opening (129). Eiji has given himself up to life and to the present. No longer driven by a single desire that limits his options and perceptions, he is able to explore more fully the new reality of his life in Tokyo, the relations he has established there and the circumstances he finds himself in.

If one takes this into consideration, the topic of the next chapter, "Cards," follows with an almost inevitable logic: luck and coincidence. This is the only chapter that departs from an alternating structure, as it presents a continuous narrative development in time. In that sense, it takes a further step away from the marvellous pole, tracing, so to speak, a gradual maturation of the protagonist, from his early indulgences in the imaginary via the anchoring experience of the historical narrative to an unambiguous, stringent style more reminiscent of classical realism. In this penultimate chapter, all loose ends are tied up. It promises justice, reconciliation, resolution and ultimately even a happy love relationship. The chapter's content in that sense mirrors its form, harkening back to the conventions and typical features of the classical realist novel. This would amount to nothing less than a refutation of the marvellous and a reclamation of mimesis. The only magic in this chapter are the tricks of Eiji's colleague Doi, practising magician, which are all exposed as precisely that: tricks and illusion.

However, the resolution of all narrative tangles in this chapter is conspicuously neat. Rather than 'realistic' in a more colloquial sense of the word, its accumulation of coincidences is almost ridiculously improbable. If one of the functions of the extensive metafiction in "Study of Tales," with its open meditations on fictionality and narration and its proliferation of writers and readers is, as Boulter suggests, 'to highlight the specifically *constructed* nature of [Eiji] Miyake's narrative' (124; original emphasis), "Cards" follows this up by a hyperbolic 'realist' contrivance. Much too neat in its resolutions, it exposes itself as no less indebted to the imaginary than all the former, more openly fantastic chapters of the novel. Mimesis is here strained to its very limits, in a manner that does not hide but conversely exposes the workings of the fictive, thus aligning the chapter with the novel's ongoing exploration and showcasing of the fictive.

While the narrative thus clearly shifts towards a mimetic stance, on closer consideration this shift is accompanied with an insistence on the common fictive nature of both the mimetic and the marvellous. The novel's last chapter, then, further serves to confirm the suspicion that the point of all this is not a reclamation and celebration of mimesis but instead an exploration of the whole breadth of possibility offered by the flexibility of the fictive in its endlessly variable negotiations between the imaginary and the real.

The meaning of dreams and dreams of meaning

As if to retract the novel's trajectory towards mimesis, the last chapter, with its focus on dreams, emphatically swings back to the pole of the marvellous. Indeed, it is perhaps the most truly fantastic among the novel's chapters in the sense that the border between dream and reality, which the former chapters always, in the end, maintained (albeit sometimes very tenuously), at this point finally breaks down entirely. Not only are some of Eiji's dreams very 'undreamlike' (*n9d* 392), indicating some higher control and purpose, but Eiji also meets a strange woman who claims to be a witch and to feast on dreams. While Eiji, who is 'too modern to understand' (*n9d* 402), dismisses her as a lunatic, her claims are eventually confirmed both by her ability to read Eiji's thoughts and by a later lurid night-time meeting, something between a rape and a wet dream, that is truly fantastic and cannot be entirely grasped as either real or imaginary (cf. *n9d* 408). In its last chapter, the novel thus emphatically reasserts the power of the imaginary.

Dreams are equated here in many ways with the fictive itself. The witch's description of dreams even sounds like a poetic version of Iser's

scholarly definition: 'Dreams are shores where the ocean of spirit meets the land of matter. Beaches where the yet-to-be, the once-were, the will-never-be may walk amid the still-are' (*n9d* 394). Moreover, the last of the eight dreams told in this chapter is a dream of creation, recalling Japanese myths of origin. It dreams not only a world and a setting but also itself, the story of the novel, and even its readers:

> I dream all dreamers, all of you.
> I dream the frost patterns on the temple bell.
> I dream the bright water dripping from the spear of Izanagi.
> I dream the drips solidifying into these islands we call Japan.
> I dream the flying fish and the Pleiades.
> I dream the skin flakes in the keyboard gullies.
> I dream the cities and the ovaries.
> I dream a mind in eight parts.
> I dream a girl, drowning, alone without a word of complaint. I dream her young body, passed between waves and currents, until it dissolves into blue and nothing remains.
> I dream the stone whale, wrapped in seaweed and barnacles, watching.
> I dream the message bubbling from his blow-hole.
> 'We interrupt this programme to bring an emergency bulletin . . . ' (*n9d* 417)

I quote this dream in its entirety, because it marks most impressively the novel's insistence on an interrelatedness of fiction and dream. As the eighth dream in the eighth chapter of a novel called *number9dream*, it leads in many ways circularly back to its beginning, a self-engendering narrative, a dream of 'a mind in eight parts.' The 'I' here has become a highly slippery signifier, no longer unambiguously identifiable as Eiji but pointing back to the implied author, whose imagination not only encompasses myths *and* realities, the macro-cosmos as well as the micro-cosmos, but also brings them all to bear on the story of loss that lies at the heart of this narrative. That this dream is a scene of creative authorship is further emphasised by the otherwise rather incongruous reference to the skin flakes in the keyboard gullies, which clearly evoke the writing process itself, even while denying it a privileged ontological authority by including it, in turn, in this dream sequence. Similarly, readers themselves are both addressed and evoked as 'all dreamers, all of you.' The 'I' that is speaking here therewith also emerges as the voice of the reader, who, having read the book, has dreamt the dream.

The message bubbling up from the whale's blow-hole, the report of the earthquake that might or might not have destroyed Tokyo, thus no longer unambiguously returns us to Eiji's reality but mires us ever more deeply in the fictive.

Others have claimed that, in this final scene, 'the actuality of the event is painfully affirmed, with Eiji's fantasies appearing finally to give way to a catastrophic eruption of the real into his dreamworld' (Childs and Green, "Novels" 38). However, while the real certainly asserts itself here, this violent intrusion not only ambiguously arises from a dream, it also serves as the source for new imaginations as Eiji pictures the catastrophe: 'I imagine a pane of glass exploding next to Ai's face, or a steel girder crashing through her piano. I imagine a thousand things' (*n9d* 418). The creative force of this – dream engendering dream – is asserted even more strongly by the clearly metafictional comment made in an earlier dream-sequence (by John Lennon, no less) that '[t]he ninth dream begins after every ending' (*n9d* 398). The ninth dream is withheld, both in the last chapter, which features eight dreams, and in the novel as a whole, since its ninth chapter is a single blank page. This is partly circular, evoking the novel itself as dream number nine (this is, after all, its title), indicating an endless circle of returns back to the beginning. But this also effects another of those numerous ambiguous awakenings: similar to Eiji's awakening to devastating news after his last dream, the reader closes the book, returning to a reality that is the birthplace of dreams.

In fact, this also harkens back to the end of the Goatwriter stories, which strikingly echoes the end of Eiji's narrative. In both cases, the protagonist finds himself alone in an isolated house in nature after an experience of death, a shedding of the outside world. There is even an almost verbal echo. The eerie sense of silence falling over the valley outside Eiji's grandmother's house – 'Outside, a century of quiet rain is falling on all the leaves, stones and pine needles of the valley' (*n9d* 418) – recalls the post-mortem peace Goatwriter encounters: 'Outside, over the highlands, lowlands, rainforests, slums, estates, islands, plains, the nine corners of the compass, peace dropped slowly from the mist-melded sky' (*n9d* 267). Though Goatwriter's search ends in the ultimate sacrifice, death, this seemingly final conclusion only opens up once more to further stories, as 'Goatwriter [takes] out a fresh sheet of paper' (*n9d* 267). This, one may suspect, is no other than that very same blank page we find at the end of the novel under the chapter-heading "Nine." Just as the latter returns readers to the origin of all dreams, namely reality, "Study of Tales" concludes by asserting that: 'Reality is the page. Life is the word' (*n9d* 267).

If then the dreams are a comment on the fictive and are opened up to encompass the novel in its entirety, the questions about the meaning of dreams that are raised repeatedly in this last chapter are worth some more attention. Offering amalgamations of plot-elements, motifs and topics that surfaced throughout the novel, the dreams seem to promise some sort of deeper insight into Eiji's mind as well as into the symbolic structures underlying the text. But the dreams ultimately escape determination (as manifestations of the imaginary are wont to do) even while they are, in their emphasised over-signification, '*too* obvious and overloaded' (Simpson 69). Looking for their meaning, Eiji is offered so many and contradictory opinions – varying from 'Be very careful what you dream' (*n9d* 385), to 'Trust what you dream. Not what you think' (*n9d* 389), to the insinuation that dreams might be messages sent to us from the dead (cf. *n9d* 392) – that the search for an ultimate explanation is exposed not necessarily as futile but certainly as highly indeterminate, never-ending and always uncertain. The hope for a revelatory power of dreams is repeatedly exposed as misguided. After having seen ultimate truth in a dream, learning 'the secrets of hearts and minds, quarks and love, peace and time' (*n9d* 411), Eiji awakens remembering only a single word: 'Mumps' (*n9d* 413). Similarly, John Lennon has rejected a 'search for enlightenment' (*n9d* 398). Dreams do not reveal, nor teach or enlighten. They might nourish, energise and entertain, though. They can offer release, escape and a manifestation of our desires and thereby keep us sane. It is a misconception to believe, so the novel seems to suggest, that reality and dreams can always be easily separated. Dreams pervade reality; they arise from it but also contribute to its creation.

Still, the novel is by no means unambiguously optimistic about this. As we see in its engagement with a criminalised capitalism, dreams can be turned into commodities, they can mislead and deceive and as often serve to maintain a status quo as to undermine it. Eventually, as the novel offers its last blank chapter to the reader, it emphasises most clearly the communicative role of dreams and stories, the creative force that may arise from this and the responsibility we all share in dreaming ourselves and our world. While finding as yet only rather tentative and oblique expression in *number9dream*, this point is made much more decisively in the conclusion to Mitchell's next novel, *Cloud Atlas*, which forcefully asserts our agency in creating, or dreaming, our world:[12]

> If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, if we *believe* divers races & creeds can share this world as peaceably as the orphans share their candlenut tree, if we *believe* leaders must be just, violence

> muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass. I am not deceived. It is the hardest of worlds to make real. (508; original emphasis)

Eiji's trajectory of maturation and search for a meaning of life, suspended still at the end of *number9dream*, here, finally, may have found adequate expression and an answer. It is, eventually, in this recurrence to the *Bildungsroman* form that both the novel's postmodernist foundation and its reconstructive endeavours come specifically to the fore.

Taking common genre definitions as a measure, *number9dream* must appear to present a failure of the typical *Bildungsroman* trajectory. The *Bildungsroman*, as Abrams and Harpham describe it in their *Glossary of Literary Terms*, takes as its main subject 'the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from child-hood through varied experiences – and often through a spiritual crisis – into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world' (229). While the novel clearly follows its protagonist's development in such a way, every single one of the moments of maturation in Eiji's trajectory is involuntary, botched, or merely disappointing, and the central search for his father, which, as the story progresses, turns out to be less a quest for identity but increasingly one for meaning and atonement, continually fails, even in its conclusion. With an insistence that almost becomes tiring, the novel stages incessant encounters between Eiji and his father, all of which turn out to be fake or imaginary. Only once Eiji has given up his search, pure chance, 'a card trick Tokyo has performed' (*n9d* 370), brings him to a highly anti-climactic meeting with his father. Robbed of all his illusions, Eiji mainly feels 'disappointment that our father turned out exactly how all the evidence said he would' (*n9d* 374).

Although true to the *Bildungsroman* genre, this is an almost epiphanic moment for Eiji, it leaves him literally walking in circles in the streets outside his father's office building. As Kathryn Simpson points out, '[t]he implication of this paradoxical outcome is that his quest has been circular and futile all along' (57). Furthermore, his subsequent return home does not reintegrate him into society and family as a more sober, mature person who has shed his dreams and illusions and knows his identity and role in life. Instead, it turns into an oneiric road-trip lanced by highly over-signified surreal dreams and ends in complete isolation and uncertainty. In lieu of the stability typically achieved at the end of the *Bildungsroman* plot, the end of *number9dream* sees Eiji in a highly unstable and open 'state of suspension' (Simpson 70).

Rather than affirming the *Bildungsroman* trajectory by culminating in a new agency born from experience, this last chapter insistently recalls the limits of human agency and knowledge in face of powers beyond our control, both natural and supernatural. Eiji's dreams continue to be haunted by the anxieties, desires and feelings of guilt which have pervaded the earlier chapters, filled with treacherous or substitute father figures and failed attempts at redemption. The double absence that has propelled Eiji's search has neither been filled nor extenuated, as his father 'still has no face' (*n9d* 407) and Anju remains '[u]nfinished business' (*n9d* 393). Eiji's dreams repeatedly involve apocalyptic scenarios and show him to be at the mercy of forces he does not understand and circumstances he cannot control. In contrast to the typical *Bildungsroman* conclusion of a happy reunion and the (re-)establishment of familial bonds, the novel finally concludes with an image of complete isolation and natural disaster. Alone in his grandmother's empty house, Eiji wakes from his last dream to a news report about an earthquake that might just have erased Tokyo, and with it all of Eiji's friends and contacts there, from the face of the earth. As all his attempts to reach his friends are only met by silence, the novel ends as its story had begun: with Eiji running away once more from grief, leaving his home as he had done after his sister's death, once more completely on his own: 'I grab my bag, slide down the hallway, scrunch my feet into my trainers, and scrape open the stubborn door. And I begin running' (*n9d* 418).

Simpson, for her part, takes this atypical ending as a cause to suggest that *number9dream* could be read as a 'postmodern *Bildungsroman*' (51). She points to its insistent use of aesthetic strategies that have come to be associated with postmodernism and argues that 'it questions the viability of the conventional coming-of-age quest for self-knowledge and a secure sense of identity in a postmodern, late capitalist context even as it simultaneously tantalizes the reader with this possibility' (51). Such a reading of the novel as a postmodernist *Bildungsroman* has to end with an open question: 'It remains unclear whether, in a postmodern, hyperreal world, it is possible to represent a character that can fulfil the goal of a traditional coming-of-age hero and become *the* definitively "Real Eiji Miyake"' (70–1; original emphasis).

Following up on Simpson's perceptive observations, I would nevertheless suggest that the impossibility of such a representation is not the point the novel is attempting to make, but rather its premise. The instability of identity, which constitutes itself performatively in the moment, and the impossibility of fixing meaning are already taken for granted in the novel. Eventually, the degree of success of Eiji's story of

maturation and emancipation is not measured against some kind of ontological epiphany and subsequent mastery of fiction, which would lead to the discovery of a fixed identity of the 'Real Eiji Miyake' (*n9d* 407), but depends on his ability to appropriate, choose and transform his dreams. As a *Bildungsroman*, it is neither primarily about discovering a stable identity, nor does it restrict itself to proclaiming the impossibility of doing so. Rather, it evokes the possibility of dreaming a self that remains fluid, in a constant process of active creation – and not a passive encounter – of meaning.

While *number9dream* is thus very postmodernist in its self-conscious metafictional moves, it uses them not so much to disrupt illusion, to expose the basic mechanisms and governing structures of the fictive as deceptions or to delegitimise meaning. On the contrary, metafiction is used to explore the breadth of the world-creating potential of the fictive within and beyond the mimetic. As Childs and Green suggest, 'Mitchell's fiction offers an understanding of being as an artistic endeavour, the inscription of the self framed as a unique performance from which uniquely singular meanings emerge' ("Novels" 42). On the one hand, the novel thus makes the typically postmodernist move of emphasising the 'liminal identity' of its hero, which is 'always provisional, contingent and in process' (Simpson 70–1). On the other hand, however, its first-person narrative establishes Eiji's voice as distinct and recognisable, consistent both in his desires and in his actions. He is by no means a fragmented, inaccessible or inscrutable protagonist, obstructing readerly identification and empathy, but functions as the one unifying and coherent lens to the confusing plethora of stories and reality levels the novel unfolds. Instead of presenting itself as a postmodernist *Bildungsroman* that ultimately diffuses the search for identity in an endless series of dead-ends, I would suggest that this novel recreates identity performatively, as Eiji defines himself in the process of telling his story. While thus basing its *Bildungsroman* narrative on a postmodernist premise, *number9dream* develops reconstructive aesthetics of the 'in spite of': proposing identity in spite of its fluidity, meaning in spite of deferral, agency and even truth in spite of hyperrealism and the era of the simulacra.

With these observations in mind, I would like to conclude by briefly returning to the postmodernist film Eiji watches in the first chapter of the novel and suggest that this scene can not only be read as a turn away from postmodernist paranoia as a tired and commodified cliché, as I have done before, but also as a somewhat tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of literary antecedents. After all, the film serves as

a backdrop for the first of a number of failed attempts to encounter a father figure who disavows Eiji as a bastard child. If one would dare to take this analogy a step further, Eiji's father, who remains an eternally slippery and elusive signifier, but who is also clearly part of a powerful urban cultural elite that lightly eschew the real consequences of their actions, might be associated with all that can be criticised about postmodernism. Meanwhile, Eiji's mother is a rural low-class mistress, a repeatedly recidivist alcoholic, who is periodically under psychological treatment, trying desperately to 'reattach [. . .] to reality' (*n9d* 102). While all contacts with Eiji's father are driven by the force of the boy's desire and involve substitutes, intermediaries, mistaken identities and reversible meanings, his mother's mode of address is direct (letters, a phone call, a meeting) and confessional, revealing traumas of the past which Eiji prefers not to address. It is in this sense, perhaps, that Eiji's struggle to make sense of himself, with his life vacillating between slippery paternal signifiers and endless deferral on the one hand and maternal attempts at reconnection to and recovery of the real on the other, could also be seen to paradigmatically embody the very attempt of a new literary generation to come into its own in the interstices between the postmodernist and the neo-realist. Thus, instead of a postmodernist *Bildungsroman*, *number9dream* might be the reconstructive attempt of a new literary generation to leave their postmodernist home, to find their own place in the world and to come of age.

7
Conclusion: The Coming of Age of Reconstruction

The story I have been constructing in this study is essentially a story of generational change, in a way itself a *Bildungsroman*. A new generation of authors – one that has no personal memories of the 1960s, one that has grown up in a postmodern society and has been academically trained in literary theory – is attempting to find ways of expression that move beyond postmodernist instability and subversion. The *Bildungsroman* trajectory of *number9dream* thus effectively encapsulates the progression I have traced throughout Chapters 3–5. The postmodernist unhomely home has been left behind in *House of Leaves*, the journey in *Everything is Illuminated* became a quest for love, meaning and truth in spite of their impossibility and *Kavalier & Clay* eventually turned its back on unconditional freedom and escape in favour of a reintegration within structures of familial and social responsibility. As I have argued throughout, such a shift away from postmodernist concerns towards reconstruction can be exemplified in the novels' employment of the fantastic mode. The change of focus that can be traced throughout the texts – from ontological and epistemological questions towards pragmatic considerations which harness the paradigmatic fictionality of the mode – falls in line with the wider development in which these novels partake.

In good *Bildungsroman* tradition, let me now, in this final chapter, briefly look back to my starting point and confront the novels with those emerging characteristics of the shift which I described in Chapter 1. Moreover, since, as Kenneth Millard avers, the process of coming of age is typically 'a drama of coming to terms with the father, and with all the social and cultural governance for which he stands' (15), I will further examine the ways in which the four texts by male authors which I have discussed in detail in the previous chapters negotiate the relation between

postmodernist fathers and reconstructive sons. In all these cases, I argue, this relation is largely characterised not by antagonism but by yearning and absence. This discussion will lead me to address the noticeable absence of women from this study, both as protagonists and as authors, and I'll offer a brief juxtaposing comparison of reconstructive traits of some roughly contemporary novels by female authors. This will be followed by a consideration of the intriguing prominence of *Bildungsroman* narratives among my primary literary examples. I will thus augment my focus on the fantastic by raising some questions about the kind of *Bildungsroman* narratives the novels unfold and by questioning the extent to which their similarities may relate to the issue of reconstruction. Finally, in the last pages, I will offer some speculation on the wider cultural implications of the reconstructive shift I have traced in these pages.

Characteristics of a shift

At the beginning of the *Bildungsroman* plot which I have constructed lies postmodernism. This is not a trite observation, since postmodernism always remains present as a premise and a background against which the novels position their attempts to move beyond it. Their endeavours for reconstruction can only be perceived and assessed in relation to their literary inheritance. Only the knowledge of the origin makes development visible. However, the notion of origins itself has become untenable after postmodernism. Just as the constructedness of various origins and frameworks of meaning that are conceived by the protagonists is never hidden, the novels themselves variously construct their own versions of postmodernism as a foil for their reconstructive project. It is important, therefore, to once more insist on the fact that whatever reconstructive shift may here be postulated, it is a shift that constructs both its own 'new' position and the 'old' one it wants to escape from. From the discussion of the current debate four main features of what I call 'reconstruction' emerged: 1) a return to the real, though not, necessarily, a return to realism; 2) stylistic continuity with postmodernism, as many postmodernist aesthetic strategies are still being used but to different ends; 3) a focus on communication as an intersubjective connection that can be established even beyond questions of referentiality; 4) a careful, self-critical optimism about the possibilities of fiction. How have these factors played out in the novels and to what extent are they to be reassessed in view of my readings?

With regard to the first factor of a return to some sort of commitment to the mimetic stance and its endeavours to represent reality, my

literary examples take up an ambivalent position. Instead of restricting themselves to forms of realist narration, they deliberately turn towards various aspects of the marvellous. On the one hand, their narrative structure, in which the marvellous remains for the most part securely contained within the bounds of a fictionalised embedded narrative, could be understood as an even more decisive turn towards the real, because it is made conspicuous within the text. Juxtaposing a narrative frame which makes claims to mimetic referentiality with decisively imaginative storylines that are clearly marked as fictions within fictions reinforces the basic distinction between the mimetic and the marvellous stance and confirms the representational claims of the frame story by contrast. On the other hand, each novel, in turn, also tends to undermine this distinction. The obscurity of narrative hierarchy in *House of Leaves*, the metaleptic loops in *Everything is Illuminated*, the spill-over of superhero narrative elements into the historical narrative of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, and the return to dreams in the final chapters of *number9dream* all serve as a reminder of the constructedness and permeability of that very boundary.

Nevertheless, this reminder constitutes not so much a refutation of the representational claims made by a mimetic narrative stance but rather points to a revaluation of the benefit of genre differences. Thus, the novels all acknowledge the divergent stances and implications of narratives that lay claim to mimetic referentiality on the one hand and ones that openly defy such claims on the other, without privileging one stance over the other. If postmodernism has shown a tendency to panfictionalisation and if its engagement with genre was often characterised by parody and transgression, the novels under scrutiny are much less recalcitrant towards genre conventions. Neither ironic, nor mere tired pastiches as Jameson diagnosed for postmodern parody (cf. *Postmodernism* 16-19), the novels employ various genres in ways that are both self-consciously conspicuous and surprisingly sincere (up to the point of being celebratory), even in those moments in which genre limits and conventions are exposed. Instead of being criticised and undermined, genre differences are evaluated and valued for their diverse communicative uses and potentials.

Compare the use of academic commentary in *House of Leaves* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, for example. There are clear elements of parody in the academic endeavours of Nabokov's protagonist, who glaringly misrepresents the poem he is commenting on in an egocentric mania, relating every aspect of the poem back to himself and his own influence upon the author. Zampanò's work, by contrast, cannot

misrepresent, because it creates its own object. While there are satiric elements in its treatment of academese, this satire never extends to Zampanò himself or to his own work. Even if Zampanò's academic treatise is compromised by the fact that its object of study does not exist, this is no mere parody or criticism of academic work. Instead, it amounts to a celebration of the creative contribution of the critic. Or consider the deliberate genre choices Foer's protagonists make in *Everything is Illuminated*, the critical but benevolent appraisal of superhero stories and social realism in *Kavalier & Clay*, or the unabashed sincerity with which *number9dream* invokes and plays out its various genre references. No longer are genre boundaries invoked only in order to be transgressed, reader expectations raised only to be thwarted. Rather than to alienate and unsettle the reader, the framework of expectation which genre creates is being harnessed in an attempt to reconstruct meaningful communication. Instead of despairing over the impossibility of referentiality and criticising the constructedness and essential fictionality of all discourse, the novels explore the nature and potential of different types of such construction and their respective contribution to how we understand ourselves and our world.

Rather than a return to the real, the novels' strategic move to contain marvellous aspects within metadiegetic works of fiction constitutes a turn towards the fictive. The fantastic mode becomes a paradigm for the fictive as such, both because of its *mise en abyme* position in the texts and because its basic structure depends on rendering the processes of fictionalising acts in their dialogue between the real and the imaginary conspicuous. This turn towards the fictive, however, does not result in a solipsistic and narcissistic isolation, in fiction that only wants to know itself and ignores the world – a typical accusation against highly self-reflective experimental postmodernist texts. Nor does it focus on the fictive mainly to expose the fundamental fictionality of discourses of reality as has often been claimed for the kind of postmodernist texts which are more directly politically committed (cf. Waugh 7; Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*). Instead of pursuing an epistemological or ontological critique, the texts here under consideration focus on the constructive role of fictions and ask for their contribution to and responsibility towards the world we live in. We have seen them assessing the danger of solipsistic isolation inherent in a postmodernist refusal of meaning, raising ethical questions about representation in face of real death and pain, considering the benefits and pitfalls of escapism and revaluating the ways our lives continually shape and are shaped by dreams. Taking postmodernist tenets about the constructedness of reality and the

omnipresence of discourses as their premise, they pose various questions about the pragmatic consequences and potentials of the fictions we decide to tell.

Such a simultaneous continuity and difference constitutes the second main characteristic of the reconstructive shift: the continuity in the use of typically postmodernist aesthetic strategies. In my discussions, I have highlighted in particular aspects of self-referentiality and metafiction. Patricia Waugh influentially describes postmodernist metafiction as

> fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

Typically, postmodernist metafiction criticises fictional convention and construction. In drawing attention to the relationship between fiction and reality, metafiction tends to emphasise their similarity, and by extension, posits the fictionality of our perceptions of reality.

In my literary examples, metafiction works rather differently, focusing on pragmatic rather than ontological and epistemological aspects. If every one of the novels is metafictional in a literal sense, since they are all centrally concerned with the production and reception of works of fiction, their metafictional aspects do not primarily pursue a disruptive agenda. They clearly reinstate a boundary between reality and fiction, just as they reclaim the productiveness of genre boundaries. Precisely because a distinction *can* be made and because different genres establish different kinds of relations between the real and the imaginary, the role of the fictive within reality comes under examination. To be sure, claims to mimetic referentiality are always exposed as merely another variant of the fictive (as their fictive nature is emphasised in Johnny's and Alex's narrative unreliability, Josef's superhero life or the borderline realism of Eiji's lurid adventures). But the effect of this exposure is not to question reality as such. The questions these texts ask about escapism, about responsibility, about the ethical accountability and about the psychological threat and merit of works of fiction can only be asked because they maintain the fictive as a discourse that 'puts the world represented in brackets' (Iser 16), that relates to the real and exists within reality but necessarily sets itself apart. If the novels also draw attention

to the relationship between reality and fiction, they do so not in order to explore the fictionality of reality but the real implications of works of fiction.

Such reconstructive metafiction further differs from a postmodernist variant in its approach to scenes of creation and reception. Linda Hutcheon has argued that postmodernist 'narcissistic narratives' depart from earlier forms of narrative self-reflexivity in that they include the active role of the reader (cf. *Narcissistic Narrative* 27). 'Metafictions,' as she argues,

> bare the conventions, disrupt the codes that now *have* to be acknowledged. The reader must accept responsibility for the act of decoding, the act of reading. Disturbed, defied, forced out of his complacency, he must self-consciously establish new codes in order to come to terms with new literary phenomena. (*Narcissistic Narrative* 39; original emphasis).

Readers and their acts of reading, interpreting and even collaborating with the production of texts obviously continue to be important in the reconstructive texts I have been studying. But the fictions their protagonists read (and the fictional texts in which we read about them) do not repel them, denying them access or disrupting the lure of illusion. Instead of aiming for a disturbance of the reading process, all of the novels present us with scenes of readerly and writerly immersion, of protagonists who engage deeply and sincerely with texts they know to be fictional. Instead of a denial of illusion, one finds various exemplary processes of that willing suspension of disbelief that postmodernist metafiction so often strove to compromise and unsettle.

Despite appearances, this is true even in the case of *House of Leaves*. Granted, the constructive process of reading is emphasised both in Johnny's compilation of the fragmented manuscript and in the need for actual readers to find their own paths through the labyrinthine text. The labyrinth, as the epigraphs to the novel's central ninth chapter tell us, is '*laboriosa ad entrandum,*' – 'difficult to enter' – and '*Hic labor ille domus et inextricabilis error*' – 'here, is the toil of that house, and the inextricable wandering' (*HoL* 107). But the aim of a labyrinth, its essential rationale, is not to prevent entry but exit, not to repel but to enmesh. It is, so the third of the epigraphs to the chapter, '*laboriosus exitus domus*' – 'The house difficult of exit' (*HoL* 107). While there is much in the manuscript that defies Johnny, particularly its ever-elusive 'meaning,' he becomes entirely immersed in it, to the point at which

he completely forgets his surroundings and the passing of time (cf. *HoL* xviii). He forgets himself and his constructive agency, avidly following the story. Even though the novel thus insists on readerly agency and interpretative contribution to the construction of the text, it also forcefully recalls the opposite element of reading: losing oneself in and to the text, no longer an active labour but a passive 'inextricable wandering.'

All the reconstructive texts I have discussed depict this immersion as both a threat and a potential but in either case as the greatest power of the fictive. Instead of alienation, disenchantment and the rough awakenings of such postmodernist protagonists as Alastair Gray's Lanark (or his Hollywood version, Neo, in *Matrix*), who have to realise that all their life is an illusion scripted by someone else, we find a consideration of the merits and dangers of a willing suspension of disbelief: that simultaneous loss of and return to the self which Iser identifies as the anthropological function of the fictive. The reconstructive shift can be clearly discerned in this. Metafiction no longer seeks to expose and deconstruct fiction's underlying premises. Instead it reconstructs fiction as precarious communication and focuses on the ways in which we draw on fictions to make sense of ourselves, our past, our present and our future.

This altered thrust of metafiction is thus part and parcel of the third characteristic of the reconstructive shift: its pragmatic focus on communicative bonding. A modernist scepticism towards the possibility of communication was aggravated in the postmodernist emphasis on the arbitrary rupture at the core of the sign, on semiotic iterability and *différance*. As I have highlighted in the discussion of my literary examples, they, in contrast, exploit the paradigmatic fictionality of the fantastic mode to explore the fictive as a communication which is successful, not necessarily in the sense that it conveys a specific intended meaning, but in the sense that it triggers meaning construction, that it gives rise to processes of interpretation in a creative intersubjective connection between sender and recipient. This pragmatic focus of reconstructive texts is thus not a new form of solipsism, nor an additional turn of the screw on neoliberal individualism. If the texts foreground pragmatic aspects and appear to be more interested in the fact of communication itself rather than in the referential quality of its content, this perspective is combined with decidedly ethical considerations. Although the processes of interpretation are multiple and potentially endless, the novels invoke genre, historical knowledge and intersubjective dialogue as parameters that structure and guide forms of fictive communication. They also pose interpretation itself as an ethical task which forces the

protagonists to face their own lives and realities as much as it allows them some brief escape from their troubles and boredoms. While these ethical concerns are most obvious in the tensions between fantasy and history as they are acted out in Foer's and Chabon's novel, *House of Leaves* and *number9dream* are similarly concerned with ethical questions about the effects works of fiction have both on their readers/recipients and on the reality they are living. No less than for Alex, Jonathan or Joseph, Eiji's and Johnny's engagement with the fictive (not even to mention Zampanò and Pelafina) oscillates between escape into individual isolation and a longing for communicative connection or community. Invariably, this process is cast in terms of a coming of age that involves taking responsibility for oneself and for others.

It is in this focus on the ability of the fictive to connect and communicate, to create meaning both on an individual and on an intersubjective level in spite of its inability to access or transmit the real that the texts develop the doubtful optimism that I have mentioned as a fourth characteristic of reconstructive literature. Postmodernist critique of grand narratives gives way to individual negotiations of narrative meaning. The pasts the protagonists recover or recreate are relevant to them in spite of being more or less consciously fictionally re-imagined. But the optimism underlying such constructions is tentative and doubtful, as they always remain precarious, constantly to be negotiated: '*nomadic*' truths (*EiI* 179; original italics), 'a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation' (*K&C* 582), a reconstructive dream easily to be brushed aside by much weaker forces than an earthquake (cf. *n9d*). *House of Leaves* concludes on a similar note. Having literally covered the empty, meaning-defying walls of the house with intersubjective relations, as all the walls of Navidson's new family home are covered with pictures of family and friends, Navidson is nevertheless

> wise enough to know he cannot close on such images. They may be heart warming but what they imply rings false. [. . .] He ends instead on what he knows is true and always will be true. [. . .] he focuses on the empty road beyond, a pale curve vanishing into the woods where nothing moves and a street lamp flickers on and off until at last it flickers out and darkness sweeps in like a hand. (*HoL* 527–8)

The silences, gaps and inconsistencies that postmodernism and especially deconstruction endeavoured to make visible are here taken as the premise, the underlying loss or abyss on which the characters proceed to precariously create their representations. They call on and celebrate the transgressive potential of the fictive in selecting and combining the

real and the imaginary, always emphasising self-disclosure. As Iser has repeatedly suggested, this potential is *both* constructive and subversive. Thus the novels promote fiction's ability, by combining negation with creation, to 'make the inaccessible areas of life appear as the immediacy of its diversity' (Iser 298).

The reconstructive shift, I would argue, is thus characterised by informed non-observance. While unrepresentability is acknowledged, reconstruction does not stop at its invocation but searches for ways to accept and go beyond it. If postmodernism has replaced the modern antitheses of 'either/or' with the ambiguous and endlessly deferred 'both/and,' the reconstructive analogue can be found in a pragmatic attitude of 'in spite of.' Instead of falling silent in face of the unconditionally Other and refusing to impinge on its alterity by attempting representation, as Emmanuel Lévinas ultimately demanded, they posit the need for representation in order to develop meaningful relations. As far as this shift is ethically informed, it does not promote a Lévinasian radical ethics of impossibility but a pragmatic one of intersubjective dialogue and connection; not an ethics of the capitalised, absolute Other but one of the lowercase, plural others, interlocutors in a contingent, fluent, always precarious network of communication.

As I have argued throughout, this reconstructive shift is not a radical, avant-gardist break with literary predecessors. In that sense, the *Bildungsroman* narrative I am telling is an unusual one. After all, as Jerome Buckley argues, usually '[t]he defection of the father becomes [. . .] the principle motive force in the assertion of youth's independence' (19), and Michael Minden points to the close relation between the *Bildungsroman* plot and the Freudian Oedipus complex (cf. 13). Such filial antagonism is conspicuously missing from my *Bildungsroman* narrative about reconstruction. The achievements and insights of postmodernism are not rejected within the novels I have discussed. Even while a move beyond postmodernist paradigms can be discerned, the change that I and others are struggling to describe does not seem to fit comfortably into the logic of succession as Pierre Bourdieu has proposed it for the literary field. According to Bourdieu:

> position-takings define themselves, to a large extent, negatively, in relation to others, they often remain almost empty, reduced to a stance of defiance, rejection, rupture. The 'youngest' writers structurally [. . .] – that is, the least advanced in the process of legitimation – reject what their most consecrated precursors are and do, everything which in their eyes defines the 'old-fashioned' poetics. (240)

With a few obvious exceptions (Jonathan Franzen particularly comes to mind), the reconstructive project does not seem to adhere to this logic. Reconstruction does not reject postmodernism but sets out from its premises. Revolt and rejection, the whole concept of the avant-garde, are no longer an option for a younger generation, since the former are part and parcel of what they feel the need to distinguish themselves from. In its endeavour to kill God, the author and the patriarch, postmodernism, it seems, can itself be no father figure to its children. It confronts a new generation of writers only with the absence of fatherly authority.

Accordingly, little 'anxiety of influence' (pace Bloom) can be discerned in the words of Danielewski, who said in an interview:

> Anyone with a grasp of the history of narrative can see that *House of Leaves* is really just enjoying the fruits of a long line of earlier literary experimentation. The so-called 'originality' claimed by my commentators must be limited to my decision to use the wonderful techniques developed by Mallarmé, Sterne, B. S. Johnson, cummings, Hollander, etc., etc. – and of course Hitchcock, Welles, Truffaut, Kubrick, and so on. (McCaffery and Gregory 106)

Similarly, Mitchell shows little need either to deny influence or indeed to establish himself in contrast and relation to a literary field when he claims that '[i]dentifying my own taxonomical position within a literary tradition [. . .] has no appeal for me' (Wilson 90). This is no revolt of sons against fathers. If a lament and dejection over the impossibility of originality after the loss of faith in the project of modernity and in the aesthetic viability of modernist aesthetics was clearly discernible among postmodernists, it seems to cause the younger generation no headaches. 'God' so we read in *Everything is Illuminated*, 'loves the plagiarist' and '[w]hen we plagiarize, we are [. . .] creating *in the image* and participating in the completion of Creation' (*EiI* 206; original emphasis). Yes, everything has been done before and has by now been deconstructed, but the fictive still remains and is celebrated as an important anthropological means of communicating about one's self-understanding and about the world. After construction and deconstruction comes reconstruction.

This does not amount to a reactionary critique of postmodernism's insights or achievements. Only on the basis of these achievements can reconstruction realise its project. Only because the authority of the voice of the father has been undermined, only because the father is no longer seen as a personification of social restrictions as a matter of

course and because the present seems to be both determined by and unmoored from an inaccessible past – only on the basis of these postmodernist developments can the creative reconstructive endeavour begin. Because postmodernism has done away with fatherly authority, reconstruction is forced to take responsibility for itself and its creations.

Such pervasive lack of antagonistic attitudes is strikingly un-Freudian. Perhaps, after a century of the 'iron collar of Oedipus' (Deleuze and Guattari 45), the social realities Freud's theories were tacitly based on have finally changed so significantly that the family romance has been fundamentally unhinged as an explanatory model. Perhaps we are now seeing the beginnings of a new age in which Freud may lose his central status as 'the mythopoeic mind of our age, as much our theologian and our moral philosopher as he was our psychologist and our prime maker of fictions,' as Harold Bloom declared in 1982 (*Agon* 43–4). Perhaps Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's efforts to replace Oedipus with schizophrenic, desiring production are taking effect. But if Deleuze and Guattari's own project in *Anti-Oedipus* was clearly still an oedipal struggle against Freud as a father figure, in the reign of desiring production father figures no longer hold prime sway. While Deleuze and Guattari hailed the absolute freedom and derestriction of the schizo as the liberating potential, embodying capitalism's 'inherent tendency brought to fulfillment, its surplus product, its proletariat, and its exterminating angel' (35), my observations seem to indicate that reconstructive endeavours are based on a reassessment of the problems inherent in such a glorification. As an illness, after all, schizophrenia often goes hand in hand with catatonia. Total freedom is closely connected to total inertia. Rather than focus on the subversive, disruptive and liberating potential of the fictive, another aspect Deleuze and Guattari have described for desiring production may gradually be seen to shift into the centre: desiring production as 'the production of the Real in itself, or better yet [. . .] the Real conceived as process rather than unreachable limit' (Buchanan 50). Reconstruction, no longer anti-oedipal, is post-oedipal.

In accord with this, agonistic struggles are also largely missing from the generational relations portrayed in the novels, all of which are characterised by a post-oedipal, reconciliatory and even nostalgic attitude mirroring that of the reconstructive project itself. In their search for identity and maturity, most of the protagonists do not balk against authority figures or social, cultural or political structures that hem them in. Instead, it is precisely the absence of such structures that sets them

on their individual quests; various versions of a desperate search for precisely that voice of the father which postmodernism has struggled so ardently to do away with.

Missing fathers

'The origin of a story is always an absence,' or so one reads in *Everything is Illuminated* (133), and reconstruction, we have seen, can only begin after deconstruction has revealed the missing centre. The absence on which the constructions of meaning that are developed in my literary examples are based – that continuing underlying presence of the inaccessible that remains the premise from which narration arises and against which it is asserted – strikingly manifests itself invariably in terms of a more or less violent rending of familial ties. It is the loss of grandparents, parents and siblings and the traumatic instability and insecurity attending it that sets the protagonists adrift, like Pi in his raft on the ocean, and forces them to create their own narratives. In every single one of these coming-of-age stories, maturity is consequently understood in the context of a return to, founding of, or reconciliation with family.[1] Is this, then, a conservative, nostalgic celebration of the nuclear family, mourning its gradual disappearance? Is it the expression of a yearning for those very authority figures and hierarchical structures postmodernism has struggled so persistently to dethrone? Is the reconstructive project at heart reactionary and conservative?

A focus on the role father figures have in the novels may help to throw some light on such questions. Fathers are strikingly absent in the coming-of-age stories presented here. This absence is not experienced as liberating but rather as unsettling by the protagonists, who repeatedly express a feeling of loss and a yearning for fathers. Since the father is absent, however, identity cannot be established in contrast and opposition to him and the emancipatory revolt is replaced by projection and idealisation, whereby the missing parent becomes the alleged cause and reference point for the protagonists' identity struggles. Of course, the orphan is a staple feature of *Bildungsroman* narratives, and absent fathers are therefore no rarity. What may be more unusual, however, is that these missing father figures are not replaced by other figures of fatherly authority, such as employers, teachers, state institutions, foster fathers and so on, as is often the case in traditional specimen of the genre. Even in those cases in which they are replaced (as in the case of Johnny and his violent foster father), the struggle against the father lies in the past

and is of no central importance to the maturation process developing in the novel. Revolt came before, but the focus now is on reconciliation.

While Eiji's incessant and repeatedly frustrated search for a father is the most obvious instance of such a struggle, it finds its most nostalgic rendering in *Kavalier & Clay*. Having been abandoned in early youth by his own father, Sam remains in an unhappy marriage largely for the sake of the child Tommy: 'When Tommy was still an unknown fishboy inside Rosa, Sammy had resolved never to let him feel abandoned, never to walk out on him, and until now, until tonight, he had managed to keep the promise' (*K&C* 631). Sam can only resign as substitute father once Tommy's real father, Josef, has returned. The presence of the father in an ideal of a nuclear family is thus preserved. But the novel's valuation of family, and especially its expression of a need for fathers, is both deeper and somewhat more complex. Both the absence of the father and the yearning for him may be to some extent inevitable:

> the truth was that, for all his noble intentions [. . .] Sammy had missed out most of [Tommy's] childhood. Like many boys, Sammy supposed, Tommy had done most of his growing up when the man he called his father was not around, in the spaces between their infrequent hours together. Sammy wondered if the indifference that he had attributed to his own father was, after all, not the peculiar trait of one man but a universal characteristic of fathers. (*K&C* 631)

Even if fathers are present, their presence may be experienced as lack and indifference and the relationship towards them may always be characterised by unfulfilled yearning. Thus, Sam further suggests, the popularity of the addition of youthful sidekicks to superhero figures, which led to accusations of a latent homosexuality, might also be understood as the expression 'of a deeper and more universal wish': 'it was obvious that Batman was not intended, consciously or unconsciously, to play Robin's corrupter: he was meant to stand in for his *father*, and by extension for the absent, indifferent, vanishing fathers of the comic-book-reading boys of America' (*K&C* 631; original emphasis). While the absence of fathers finds expression both in a particular and in a general sense here, the text suggests that the *desire* for fathers may be unchanging and universal. Neither focusing on a struggle with, or revolt against, the father, nor indeed celebrating his absence as liberating, *Kavalier & Clay* emphasises the yearning and concomitant construction of substitutes such absence gives rise to.

A similar focus on absence, yearning and construction, instead of struggle and succession, characterises Eiji's relation to his father. Eiji's search is never motivated by the wish to confront his father and blame him for the psychical disintegration of Eiji's mother or for the neglect of his illegitimate children. Instead, the son looks primarily for recognition and acknowledgement and his various fantasies of reunion are for the most part versions of a more or less melodramatic reconciliation. No less dramatically, however, all of these fantasies of reunion are thwarted. Indeed, the one authoritative father figure Eiji does encounter, the Yakuza boss Molino, personifies all the worst aspects of Eiji's desire for fatherly authority. Moreover, when he finally does face his real father, Eiji has to realise that the latter offers no answer to his struggles for meaning. While *Kavalier & Clay* nostalgically re-establishes the nuclear family as ideal, *number9dream* eventually offers no substitute for the father. For Eiji, maturation is a process of emancipation not from a father but from his own desire for a father, by recognising the non-existence of the man he was looking for. Still, this does not get rid of family as a central framework of signification or imply, even more drastically, an impossibility of meaning and personal identity. Even as Eiji finally rejects his quest for his father he does not negate meaning and identity. Quite the contrary, he emphatically asserts them for himself: 'Do I mean it? My father never wants to meet me . . . So my search for him is . . . not valid? Finished? My meaning is cancelled? I guess, yes, *I do mean it*' (*n9d* 322; my emphasis). If there is no authority figure to refer to or to struggle against, its very absence becomes the point of reference for new constructions of meaning.

Absent fathers also abound in *House of Leaves*, whose cover-blurb somewhat grandiosely claims that the (fictitious) first edition of the text 'made its way into the hands of older generations, who not only found themselves in those strangely arranged pages but also discovered a way back into the lives of their estranged children.' Johnny is by no means the only of the novel's characters with a difficult childhood. Navidson's and Karen's past lives and familial backgrounds hint at stories of abuse and neglect, and Navidson's 'alienating and intensely private obsessions' (*HoL* 17) have led to his own absence from his children's life, symbolically culminating in his final lone descent into the depths of the house. Furthermore, the novel repeatedly suggests that Zampanò's story may also have arisen from the loss of a child. This almost omnipresent absence of sound father–son relations also finds a symbolically apt expression in the literalisation of visible absence presented by struck passages in the text. Most of these relate to the myth of the Minotaur, reinterpreted as the story of a monstrous child that was rejected and

imprisoned by its father (cf. *HoL* 110). The significance of Zampanò's attempt to erase this and Johnny's decision to prevent this erasure is clearly emphasised (cf. *HoL* 336).

Still, the most elaborate version of fatherly absence can be found in Johnny's narrative thread. While Johnny's relationship with his mother emerges more prominently, his tale is streaked with oblique references to his father, whose death not only traumatised the boy and turned him truant but also gives rise to those letters of his mother which continue to haunt him throughout the novel. His father's death in a car crash is a moment of erasure, a complete tabula rasa:

> the covering memory permanently hitched to everything preceding it and so prohibiting all of it, those memories, the good ones, no matter how different, how blissful, eclipsed by the jack-knifed trailer across the highway [. . .] each jagged line telling the story of a broken heart which no ten year old boy should ever have to recollect let alone see, even if it is only in half-tone, the ink, all of it, over and over again, finally gathered on his delicate finger tips, as if by tracing the picture printed in the newspaper, he could in some way retract the details of death, smooth away the cab where the man he saw and loved like a god, agonized and dies with no word of his own, illegible or otherwise, no god at all, and so by dissolving the black sky bring back the blue. (*HoL* 37)

The traumatic memory overrules all other, prior memories. Its dethroning of the god-like father figure fundamentally destabilises signification and meaning in a destruction of memory, representation and words. Johnny's attempt to recreate reality by faithfully tracing its lines results only in an erasure of its photographic representation, while already symbolically staining his fingertips with the ink that will later flow into his work on the manuscript. Johnny's occasional use of aviation emergency code to indicate footnotes, which is introduced in the labyrinthine ninth chapter of the novel, thus not only draws on a parental sign-system in order to reclaim signification (Johnny's father, after all, was a pilot) but also calls out for parental guidance in face of a nihilistic threat (of the house and the manuscript itself).

The father effectively combines in himself the initial destabilisation, the source and means of representation as well as the hope for reconciliation and meaning. Following these lines of interpretation, one may finally fit the key-shaped footnote 123 – in which Minos, having imprisoned his son, realises his love for him only when it is too late

(cf. *HoL* 110–11) – into the keyhole shape of footnote 187 on Truth & Truth (cf. *HoL* 144), illuminated by the light of love brought into the cold void of the house by Karen, guiding Navidson humbly home to his family at the novel's conclusion. The 'parentethical' aspects of the novel (*HoL* 401; *sic*), in which 'a "parenthetical" mention of youth suddenly becomes a "parent-ethical" question about how to relate to youth' (*HoL* 401), thus present themselves not only as central thematic aspects of the text (one 'key' to unlock its multiple 'truths') but also as means to establish a truth that is relational and always conflicted, '[o]n the one hand transcendent and lasting and on the other violent and extremely flammable' (*HoL* 144). Throughout the novel and on all of its narrative levels, family is thus both the site of traumatic conflict and the Archimedean point of reference for the protagonists' signifying actions.

Everything is Illuminated presents us with the only apparent exception to this reconciliatory theme of yearning for missing fathers. This novel *does* feature an antagonistic struggle of filial assertion at the conclusion of Alex's maturation process, as Alex stands up to his abusive father and expels him from the family home. But even this exception may be understood rather as a variation than as a counter-example, since absence and yearning here characterises the protagonists' relations to their grandparents. While the whole narrative arises from Jonathan's desire to reclaim his grandfather's past, Alex's new self-understanding is found in relation to his own grandfather, whose acknowledgment and love he constantly craves. Furthermore, while Jonathan frequently talks about his grandmother, his father and mother are scarcely ever mentioned. Indeed, Alex's struggle against his father does not imply emancipation from established hierarchies or a rejection of the past which liberates the future but, quite the contrary, insists on a return to or rather a re-imagination of the past. After all, Alex's maturation seems to a large extent to be based on his own recreation of a successful communication with his grandfather. In the latter's taciturn withdrawal and denial of his own past, epitomised in his stubborn claim to be blind, the old man has effectively removed himself from his grandson's life, another absent presence. Once the absence (the silenced and repressed aspects of his life) embodied in Grandfather has been made creatively present, he himself has become superfluous to Alex's maturation and finally commits suicide.

Father and grandfather come to symbolise the two contradictory premises of maturation posited by the novel: the continuing importance of ancestry and the necessity to assert one's own voice against

it. The former finds its most explicit expression in one of the dreams described in the Trachimbrod chapters:

> *The dream that we are our fathers*. I walked to the Brod, without knowing why, and looked into the reflection in the water. I couldn't look away. What was the image that pulled me in after it? What was it that I loved? And then I recognized it. So simple. In the water I saw my father's face, and that face saw the face of its father, and so on, and so on, reflecting backward to the beginning of time, to the face of God, in whose image we were created. We burned with love for ourselves, all of us, starters of the fire we suffered – our love was the affliction for which only our love was the cure . . . (*EiI* 41, original italics)

Though this dream makes Alex melancholy, he also forcefully rejects its claims: '*Of course I am not Father, so perhaps I am the rare bird to your novel. When I look in the reflection, what I view is not Father, but the negative of Father*' (*EiI* 54; original italics). This rejection of resemblance remains central for Alex's maturation and independence, as, in an enactment of Freudian family romance, he denies his father and turns him out of the family home. At the same time, the novel's central moment of anagnorisis, which results in the revelation of Grandfather's guilt, is predicated precisely on Alex's exact resemblance to a photograph of his grandfather's younger self (cf. *EiI* 226). Concluding with Grandfather's suicide, the novel thus evokes the past both as an absence that gives rise to desire, resulting in a creative construction of past and present, and to the past as a presence that has to be overcome, as the young generation '*must begin again* [and] *cut all of the strings'* (*EiI* 275; original italics).

To sum up, none of these narratives base maturation primarily on a rejection of an initial situation of suppression or an assertion of individual freedom against some sort of social, familial or cultural constriction. Rather, it is precisely the freedom of the protagonists, who feel cut off from family ties or historical heritage, which initiates their identity struggles. The proliferation of missing father figures provides one prominent expression of this situation. Experiencing their disconnection from familial and social ties not as liberating but as unsettling and isolating, the protagonists in the novels all sooner or later endeavour, with various degrees of intensity and success, to reintegrate themselves into intersubjective relationships and structures involving commitment and responsibility. The fictions they create and consume serve as primary means to establish such connections.

Beyond their recourse to the fantastic, the novels thus strikingly share another feature: their common commitment to narratives of formation. Although the *Bildungsroman* plot is most prominent in *number9dream*, elements of the genre pervade all of my literary examples. Johnny, Alex, Jonathan, Sam, Josef, and Eiji: all of them are young male protagonists who go through a process of individual maturation in which the fictions they produce and/or consume play a decisive part. That a general shift of interest towards the pragmatics of individual processes of meaning-making and intersubjective communication networks should be attended with a focus on personal maturation stories and especially on the family as one of the foundations of meaning construction is perhaps not very surprising. Indeed, several critics have remarked on the recent reinvigoration of characters and subjectivities in reconstructive fiction (cf. Timmer; Burn 23–6), while others have noted an increased interest in family stories. Kerstin Dell argues that in reconstructive family novels 'poststructuralist sophistries are as irrelevant as the conjuring up of an all-levelling relativism. Rather, they probe the possible conflicts within the family and argue for a more compassionate and responsible coexistence' (209). Similarly, Nicole Schröder notices the popularity of family tales in recent short stories, remarking that authors 'turn to the private realm' since our changed world 'requires new, additional skills of communication and of living together' and 'networks of human relations are made not in the abstract realm of the "out there," but more immediately at home' (125; cf. also MacCarthy). The intriguing tendency towards *Bildungsroman* narratives and the topic of family relations in my literary case studies thus presents itself as part of a broader development.

Nevertheless, the particular form these tendencies take here, that is, the recurring combination of embedded fantastic narratives which draw attention to their own paradigmatic fictionality, with stories of young male maturation and reintegration into a family structure, doubtlessly owes much to the similarity in age and life-situation of the authors, all of whom are young, male, Anglo-Saxon academics. It is precisely due to this homogeneity of authors and their strategies that this assembly of texts is so well suited for an illustration of key reconstructive features. It is quite striking, however, that the reconstructive endeavour is presented by these novels as a specifically male challenge. No female characters are faced with the same reconstructive task of escaping from freedom and solipsism into new meanings and relations. Indeed, the protagonists' process of maturation frequently hinges on a reconciliation with key female characters. Both Johnny and Eiji at first reject and finally reconcile with (the memory of) their mothers, while Navidson and Joseph

reunite with their spouses. Even *Everything is Illuminated* hints that Jonathan's rationale behind writing his story about Trachimbrod is at heart an attempt at reconciliation with his grandmother (cf. *EiI* 73). The reconstructive engagement with postmodernist deconstruction presents itself in all cases as an issue between fathers and sons, in which the feminine enters primarily as a negotiator and proxy, or, indeed, as a haunting spectre. But female protagonists are not only missing from the novels, they have also been noticeably absent from my own discussion so far. In this narrative of fathers and sons, where are the daughters and mothers?

Absent women

Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that reconstructive endeavours should find prominence in particular with that generation of authors which largely shares the background and gender of the most influential postmodernist authors. However, it would be quite wrong to think that female authors do not contribute to the reconstructive shift. Strong female voices that are frequently associated with the development of a new aesthetics include those of Zadie Smith, Jennifer Egan, Ali Smith and Hilary Mantel. Indeed, around the millennium female authors have published a number of novels which show some structural affinity to my main literary examples. However, none of these employs the fantastic in a similar way. This may be due to the close association of the fantastic with a female or feminist project of subversion of patriarchal structures and narratives, which women writers might have found even harder to escape and rephrase than their male colleagues. In their similarities and differences from the pattern I have explored in these pages, such novels make a very interesting subject for comparison. Although I do not have the space to discuss them in much detail, I would like to offer some observations about three such novels, Nicole Krauss' *The History of Love* (2006), Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), in order to highlight both their similarity with the novels I have discussed previously and the points at which they, significantly, differ.

The History of Love is an interesting case, since Krauss' social and educational background as well as age resembles that of the male authors I have been focusing on. Indeed, she is married to Jonathan Safran Foer. This affinity is perceptible in her novel, which like *Everything is Illuminated* revolves around the central topics of loss and separation caused by the Holocaust, and which combines various narrative voices and genres: a first-person narrative by Leo Gursky, an isolated and lonely

old man, who has escaped from the Nazis only to find the love of his life and mother of his son married to another man; excerpts from diaries by the young siblings Alma and Bird, who struggle to recover their stability after their father's death by cancer; and a heterodiegetic narrative recounting the history of the old man's first book manuscript, *The History of Love*, whose complicated trajectory resulted in its publication under a different man's name, in a different language, only to finally become the means of a culminating moment of multiple anagnorisis, in which the old man finally manages to break out of his isolation and recovers human contact and comprehension in the child Alma. In a similar fashion as the novels I have discussed in the previous chapters, *The History of Love* features a fictional text as a central plot device. This novel within the novel connects the various strands of the narrative and serves as the decisive motivating force that eventually allows them to converge. Excerpts from this fictional novel – strongly allegorical parables about love – are inserted at various places into the framing narrative, both in Alma's diary and in the third-person narrative relating the circumstances of the novel's publication.

To that extent, *The History of Love* corresponds to the pattern I have observed in my other literary examples. But it differs decisively in the fact that the inserted narrative remains always clearly delimited from the narrative frame. Even though a metafictional dimension is hinted at, since the novel and the embedded work of fiction share their title, their ontological boundaries are never transgressed. In Krauss' novel we find no indication of metalepsis. The marvellous tales of the inserted fiction are distinctly marked as the poetical expression of their author's love, and they clearly differ from the mimetic frame narratives, in style, in stance, and even in their typography. There is thus no vestige of that kind of fantastic hesitation which my other literary examples employ in their creative engagement with postmodernist ontological scepticism. The stances remain clearly separated, and no pragmatic doubt (let alone ontological or epistemological) arises. While the novel's conclusion owes its emotional leverage mainly to the retrospective revelation of the unreliability of one of its main narrative voices, this revelation poses no ontological or epistemological problems. Instead, it provides additional psychological insight into the tragedy of the old man, who turns out to have been even more unbearably lonely than originally assumed, at the very moment at which his loneliness comes to an end.

The History of Love is most certainly a novel about the power of fiction, about its ability to console and connect, to serve as an expression and monument to love and loss. It is a novel about reconnection and

communication, a novel that is explicit about the need of fiction to make some things up, but not to 'make up *everything*, because that [makes] it hard to believe *anything*' (*THL* 8; original emphasis). Just like the other reconstructive examples I have discussed, it features a protagonist who struggles to come to terms with the death of her father. But the influence of postmodernism is not as immediately palpable in this case as in my other literary examples. While in those novels fantastic hesitation was harnessed in order to both evoke and transcend postmodernist concerns, in *The History of Love* postmodernist influence can at most be felt in the multiplicity of narrative options the novel makes use of and in an unconcerned freedom in typography and page layout. While unconventional, this creative freedom is by no means disturbing, surprising or even, nowadays, all that unusual. Whereas the novels I have discussed before all continue to hover more or less closely on the brink of postmodernism and therefore offer themselves so suitably as an exemplification of the characteristics of the occurring reconstructive shift, Krauss' novel could thus be seen to have completed the transition to reconstruction. Making use of all the creative freedoms postmodernism has opened for the novelist, *The History of Love* passes by postmodernist philosophical scepticism, turning its attention instead to the pitfalls, the tragedies and the hopes of human relationships. Its aim is not to subvert certainties and pose existential quandaries. Quite the contrary, Ali Smith claims on the book-cover that the novel 'restores your faith in fiction. It restores all sorts of faith.'

Similarly clear boundaries between narrative levels, ontological realms and literary stances characterise the somewhat more complex relationship between frame and embedded tale in Margaret Atwood's Booker-Prize-winning novel *The Blind Assassin*. In this case, too, the novel shares its title with that of an embedded novel within a novel, which, indeed, in a Chinese-box structure, contains a further meta-metadiegetic narrative level. The title, *The Blind Assassin*, thus belongs to three different stories, one contained in the other. On the diegetic level, there is a historical novel spanning from shortly before the First World War to the 1990, a homodiegetic narration of its protagonist Iris Chase. The metadiegetic novel *The Blind Assassin*, allegedly the work of Iris' sister but really her own, is the story of a romantic involvement with obvious autobiographical streaks, which are widely perceived (though falsely attributed) by its readers. So far, both these narrative levels remain decidedly within the realm of the mimetic, both in their own way attempt to 'write the truth' (*BA* 345). The marvellous enters at the third level, the story that the lover tells his mistress in the course of

the metadiegetic narrative. Writing pulp fictions for a living, he invents a science-fiction story of a blind assassin who falls in love with and rescues the girl he was supposed to kill.

While this structure is quite complex and initially offers some riddles and uncertainties to the reader (Who are the unnamed lovers in the romance story? How much of it has really happened? Who has written it and to what aim?), the novel eventually provides answers to all these questions. In the end, it leaves little doubt as to what has happened, whereas it does cast doubt on who, in the end, is responsible, who is guilty, and to what degree. The embedded marvellous stories always remain clearly marked off and the comments and insertions of the two lovers which frequently interrupt the marvellous tale make sure the reader remains aware of the stories' triple fictionality and the circumstances of their narration. Even their pragmatic purpose is evident, as both entertainment and education of the loved one. The tale of the imaginary city of Sakiel-Norn, with its rigid system of ruthless exploitation and seething class-conflict has clear allegorical and didactical features, which the lovers' comments make sure the reader cannot miss (cf. *BA* 21). While for the upper-class woman these stories, as well as her love affair itself, provide a welcome escape from her stifling imprisonment in a system of patriarchal capitalism, her working-class lover not only earns his living with them, but also attempts to shake her from her inaction and to make her see the reality both of her own situation and of the exploitive capitalist class she belongs to. With its clearly Marxist and feminist political sympathies, its dedication to questions of guilt, responsibility and psychological as well as physical exploitation and abuse, and with its commitment to historical accuracy, this is not a very postmodernist novel. In the words of Iris' acrimonious rejection, '"Deconstruction" implies the wrecking ball, and "problematize" is not a verb' (*BA* 350). Even though it remains aware of the impossibility of telling the truth, of being objective, the narrative is committed throughout to the strict exigencies of testimony and confession (cf. *BA* 345).

In spite of this renunciation of postmodernism, Margaret Atwood does not seem to entirely share the reconstructive optimism of the younger generation. None of the three storylines end happily, nor do they offer similar scenes of reconciliation and reconnection as can be found in my other examples. In the case of the marvellous tale, this refusal of a happy ending even becomes programmatic:

> Our two romantic leads are wolf meat before you can say Jack Robinson.

> You're certainly an incurable optimist, she says.
> I'm not incurable. But I like my stories to be true to life, which means there have to be wolves in them. (*BA* 423)

The lovers are separated by the man's death in the Spanish Civil War, and Iris grows old as an isolated woman awaited by a lonely death, to whom the narrative even refuses the long yearned-for reunion with her estranged granddaughter Sabrina. But Iris Chase dies, perhaps significantly, in the year 1999, and the one glimpse of hope offered by the novel is a posthumous one, pointing towards a new beginning with the change of the millennium. Iris offers her tale to Sabrina as a 'legacy of infinite speculation.' Since she turns out to be not who she thought she was, she is free to reconstruct her identity, 'to reinvent [herself] at will' (*BA* 627).

But the most striking variation on my central themes is offered by another Booker-Prize-winning author, A. S. Byatt, in *The Biographer's Tale* (2000). In contrast to Atwood and Krauss, Byatt does engage explicitly and actively with postmodernist theories. Indeed, postmodernism is much more openly and decisively rejected in her novel than in any other of the cases I have discussed so far. While scepticism towards postmodernism was already discernible in Byatt's earlier and most successful novel *Possession* (cf. M. A. Adams), it becomes even more prominent in *The Biographer's Tale*, which features a protagonist who renounces theory and quits his poststructuralist PhD, tired of the repetitiveness of postmodernist thought: 'We found the same clefts and crevices, transgressions and disintegrations, lures and deceptions beneath, no matter what surface we were scrying' (*BT* 4). Instead, Phineas G. Nanson feels the urge to turn to concerns for which postmodernism can only spare condescending smiles: things, facts, precision. He resolves to take up the 'despised art' of biography (*BT* 7), undertaking to write the biography of the (fictive) great mid-twentieth-century biographer Scholes Destry-Scholes. Instead of finding much information about Destry-Scholes himself, however, Phineas discovers parts of one or several manuscripts as well as a box full of index cards with fragmentary snippets and comments about three historical figures: Charles Linneaus, Francis Galton and Henrik Ibsen. In the attempt to make sense of these fragments, and in the hope to gain insight into their author, Phineas begins to organise them into thematic clusters, pointing to parallels and resonances between the three personages.

Faced with disparate fragments of another man's work, Phineas shows a clear family resemblance to Johnny in *House of Leaves*, although, in

contrast to Johnny, Phineas never manages to assemble a coherent narrative and is left with vague echoes, disconnected elements, scattered facts and observations that never connect to a whole. The *Biographer's Tale* thus also presents its readers with multiple diegetic levels, evoking different genres and stances. But while Zampanò's work is exposed as doubly fictive, as it turns out to concern a non-existent documentary about a fantastic occurrence, Destry-Scholes' investigations reach beyond the fictive, since they concern three historical figures. While *House of Leaves*, one could say, emphasises the role of the imagination in the fictive with its turn towards the marvellous, *The Biographer's Tale* veers into the other direction: turning away from fiction, it explores biography.

However, this turn is by no means unambiguous. Very strikingly, the three longest and most coherent parts of the manuscript which Phineas discovers are enticingly imaginative. They invent weirdly fantastic experiences, visions and dreams for their three historical protagonists, and Phineas notes 'a real, urgent voice in the storytelling when the narrator got on to magic, in all three cases' (*BT* 115). Phineas' research clearly shows that these episodes have no foundation in the facts of their protagonists' lives. Thus, once again, Phineas and the reader are faced with pragmatic questions: 'What was Destry-Scholes up to?' (*BT* 192), 'What did Destry-Scholes think the rôle [*sic*] of a biographer was? Why did he tell lies and write parodies?' (*BT* 194). By pointing to the wilful flights of fancy which intrude into a genre that is strongly committed to the mimetic, indeed one that usually endeavours to eschew the fictive, *The Biographer's Tale* approaches the same issues as my main literary examples do from the precisely opposite direction. It explores the nature of the fictive, not by emphasising the paradigmatic fictionality of the fantastic, but by investigating the very borders of the fictive.

In is thus quite intriguing that *The Biographer's Tale* also combines this investigation of the nature and the limits of the fictive with a story of development for its (again male, white, academically trained) protagonist. Phineas, who at the beginning of the narrative apparently has no human connections and no life apart from his research, is forced by his investigations to approach people. He finds a job, friends, and two lovers, and as he notices with concern in the end, 'from being a story of a search in the first person [his story] has become [. . .] a first-person story proper, an autobiography' (*BT* 289). Just like in my main literary examples, a story about a creative work turns into the story of its creator. Just like in the other cases, the protagonist escapes from isolation and from postmodernist theory towards love, community and a dedication to common efforts.

But *The Biographer's Tale* differs in some decisive aspects. It is much more openly critical of postmodernist theory than the other reconstructive texts, which we have seen to be rather conciliatory in tone. It would be a mistake, however, to take Phineas' outspoken rejection at face value. After all, the novel shows its affinity to postmodernist aesthetics in numerous ways, in its fragmentary state, its ambiguities and open questions, and even in its dethronement of the autonomy of the author, as Phineas finds himself writing an autobiography against his will. But while postmodernism often drew the conclusion that the subject does not exist, that it is fragmentary and illusory at best, no more than a node of intersecting discourses, Phineas' realisation at the end of the novel is the opposite. While at the beginning of the novel, as a true disciple of postmodernism, he knows there is no subject and refuses any prompt to 'know himself,' he has to realise in the end that he cannot avoid autobiography, that his subject, his identity, intrudes in spite of his intentions. In its assertion of meaning construction in spite of postmodernist awareness, Phineas' realisation is truly reconstructive: 'I do exist on the earth, and would like to be of some use, and find a meaning or two. (*The* meaning is beyond all of us.)' (*BT* 118; original emphasis).

An even more striking difference to the other novels, however, lies in the fact that *The Biographer's Tale* is rather less celebratory of the role and power of fiction. In keeping with its bent not towards the paradigmatic fictionality of the fantastic, but to the limit-case of biography, Phineas' path to reconstruction eventually turns away from literature and fiction altogether. His weariness of postmodernism and his 'urgent need for a life full of *things*' (*BT* 7; original emphasis), as well as his two love affairs with a radiographer and a bee taxonomist lead him finally to a momentous epiphany:

> the senses of order and wonder, both, that I had once got from literature, I now found more easily and directly in the creatures. As a boy my hair had prickled at the beauty of a Shakespeare sonnet, or a Yeats rhythm, or Donne's bright hairs and brittle bones. That was gone. But I was left with the peculiar conker-leather brown of the elytra of *Lucanus cervus L*, the pink hook of strong beaks, horns and claws, stamens and pistils, the beat of demonic wing-cases, and descending circles of brilliant rose and emerald wings. (*BT* 295)

For all its rejection of literature, the lyricism of this passage goes some way to contradict Phineas' abdication. And indeed he finds that even after abandoning the biography project, he cannot stop writing and

literature remains an important means for him to make sense of the world. The last three pages of the novel show the highest density of literary quotations in the whole novel, as they arise in Phineas' mind in association with those wonders of the natural world which he has come to love and to dedicate his life to. Nevertheless, the novel concludes on another note than the encouragement to reinvent the world, which characterised my other literary examples. The *Biographer's Tale* is even more exigent in its call to responsibility and commitment to a world that exceeds the human: 'As long as we don't destroy and diminish it irrevocably, the too-much-loved earth will always exceed our power to describe, or imagine, or understand it. It is all we have' (*BT* 300).

While these three novels by Krauss, Atwood and Byatt share certain features with the novels of their male contemporaries and each shows more or less explicit reconstructive features, their approaches differ in various aspects. Perhaps most strikingly, the trajectory of the *Bildungsroman* narrative only seems suitable to the reconstructive endeavour if it features a male protagonist. Apparently, the male *Bildungsroman* story, which traditionally traces a process of differentiation, individualisation and finally reintegration into society, is particularly well suited to a reconstructive project of reconnection. However, as feminist critics have noted frequently enough, female maturation works differently. Nancy Chodorow argued that women define themselves by similarities and within a network of relations from the outset, since in contrast to boys they establish their identity not in clear differentiation from, but in partial continuity with their mothers. Thus, according to Abel, Hirsch and Langland, the female novel of development follows a slightly different, less linear pattern than the male one, and it often concerns the heroine's struggle to extract herself from a restricting network of relations rather than to escape from isolation (10–12). The *Bildungsroman* tradition thus may not have offered itself to women writers as readily as a pattern to exploit for their reconstructive endeavours. As Byatt's adoption of the *Bildungsroman* indicates, however, authors of both genders seem to find the traditional, male version of the genre conducive to their reconstructive endeavours. But what kind of *Bildungsroman* narratives do we encounter here?

A comprehensive analysis of the current (perhaps reconstructive) status of the *Bildungsroman* would require another lengthy study. In these last few pages, however, I will juxtapose the *Bildungsroman* narratives developed in my four main literary examples with the history of the genre as it has been described in seminal work done by Gregory Castle, Joshua Esty and Franco Moretti, thereby adding a diachronic perspective

on the characteristics and conditions of the reconstructive shift I have been tracing. As a genre whose history is closely interrelated with that of the novel itself, the *Bildungsroman* offers itself well to such an exemplification of aesthetic shifts over time. Moreover, because the genre is centrally concerned with an individual's formation and relation to society, a consideration of its historical development and current usage necessarily opens up towards questions concerning the relation of literature to a wider social and cultural context. While it is hardly possible to draw any larger conclusions merely on the basis of my four main literary examples, I would like to probe the novels' evocation of the *Bildungsroman* a little further and conclude this study with some speculations on the ways in which these narratives of generational relations and their role in a reconstructive reaction to postmodernism may perhaps be understood to speak to contemporary cultural and social changes.

Bildungsroman revisited

The development of the *Bildungsroman* genre is usually framed as a story of gradual disillusionment and decline. Narrow definitions of the genre developed in German studies insist on restricting it to the very specific context of eighteenth-century Germany, in which the classical idea of *Bildung* as 'a harmonious and unified inner culture formed through social freedom and a secular aesthetic education' took root (Castle 33; cf. Boes 230–3; Swales 14). Nonetheless, the genre has variously seen application within a wider European context (cf. Beddow; Castle; Moretti). Indeed, the *Bildungsroman* has widely come to figure as the emblematic literary expression of Enlightenment, which, true to Immanuel Kant's definition of Enlightenment as 'man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity,' has cast historical development itself as a narrative of formation, imagining it as 'humanity's passage to its adult status' (Foucault 38). Consequently, modernist and postmodernist critiques of the project of Enlightenment also had repercussions on that narrative genre which seemed to owe so many of its basic assumptions to Enlightenment discourses.

Contested as the genre and its definition are, Tobias Boes consequently notes a certain critical consensus to 'regard the novel of formation as a nineteenth-century phenomenon' (230–1). Although there are some canonical modernist exemplars of the genre, these are often perceived as limit-cases which ultimately attest to the increasing unviability of the typical *Bildungsroman* trajectory. As Boes summarises a typical critical position: 'the modernists' obsession with synchronic models of

human experience (epiphany, vortex, shock) and with small-scale diachrony (the stream of consciousness) are often blamed for the demise of a form that by its very definition requires narrative attention to minute and long-term changes' (231).[2] But the genre became increasingly problematic for more than just aesthetic reasons. Gregory Castle connects the failure that lies at the heart of many modernist *Bildungsromane* 'to the failure of Enlightenment thinking about the subject, subjectivity, identity, and dialectics, to the failure of a way of thinking that produced the Bildungsroman as the quintessential narrative of the sovereign and autonomous, harmoniously self-identical subject of Bildung' (26).

Having already become precarious in modernism, postmodernism's declaration of the 'death of the subject' (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 114) was not conducive to a revival of the genre. Narratives of maturation and self-knowledge seemed to have little room in a philosophical system that questioned the very ideas of both self and knowledge. Instead of stories of gradual formation and maturation, which culminate in a (re)integration of the newly matured individual into society, postmodernist coming-of-age processes are stories of fragmented identities, of disintegration, of instability, of the impossibility of character formation (both in a literal and a metafictional sense). Postmodernism favoured the anti-*Bildungsroman* (for example Günther Grass' *Tin Drum*), the *Bildungsroman* as allegory (Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*) or parody (John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*).[3]

In the course of Part II of this study, in contrast, we have seen young Johnny acknowledge his past and overcome his isolating trauma; Alex facing up to his abusive father and taking responsibility for his mother and younger brother; Josef escaping his isolating freedom and willingly (happily) excepting the chains of familial responsibilities; and, in the most explicit coming-of-age narrative among the novels, Eiji giving up his futile search and reconciling himself with his present and his past. Even Navidson, in an admittedly rather late instance of coming of age, gives up his egocentric solipsism and finds his happy ending in dedicating himself to his family. After postmodernism's emphasis on fragmentation and multiplicity of identity and its endeavour to unsettle essentialist conceptions of self, origin and coherence, it is not so much the use of *Bildungsroman* narratives as such that is surprising in these recent texts but rather that, in spite of fragmentation and instability, the coming-of-age stories they tell are all more or less successful.

Maturation in these novels certainly remains a precarious project. The focus is on maturation as a *process*, a task evolving in the present and always heading towards an uncertain future. Indeed, with only the

exception of Chabon's novel, the time of narration in the *Bildungsroman* trajectories developed here strikingly coincides with the narrative time, which always involves an active creative process, not only reporting the present but bringing forth and imagining stories. In Alex's letters, Johnny's diary-style footnotes and Eiji's stream of consciousness, no retrospective point of view puts evaluative perspective and a reassuring temporal distance on the protagonists' stories of maturation and imaginative creation. But for all their insecurities and reservations, my literary examples set happy endings against postmodernism's often apocalyptic visions. Even *number9dream*, which concludes in a state of suspension and possible destruction, also points to the creative potential inherent in this situation. Not exactly ending happily, Mitchell's novel still features a protagonist who claims responsibility and the right to determine a meaning for his own life.

Nevertheless, such a return to a narrative genre, which in many ways exemplifies much of what postmodernism has struggled against, does not amount to an outright rejection of postmodernist positions in any of these cases. After all, all of the novels indicate that the maturation processes of their protagonists are dependent on and constructed through stories which are either fictional out-right or of dubious veracity at best. Kenneth Millard's general observations on contemporary coming-of-age novels are very much to the point:

> In many contemporary coming-of-age novels the narrative moves forward in time towards a point of maturity from which it can address that unspoken origin that began it, but which is antecedent to its beginning. The origin that such novels attempt to discover and to articulate is a story of history that offers an explanation for why and how they began as they did. This origin has a privileged (ontological) status as a form of historical 'explanation', but it is simultaneously a fabricated story that is often self-consciously recognised as a self-justifying fiction that is a necessary foundation to the constitution of subjectivity. (9)

This aptly characterises the precariously reconstructed subjectivities that result from the various coming-of-age stories which we have encountered in the course of this study. In their uneasy balance between denial and assertion of ontological privilege they are no longer truly postmodernist but reconstructive.

Moreover, the search for and construction of the 'unspoken origin' acknowledges the interrelatedness of self-constitution. Self-knowledge

and maturity are not achieved by an interior quest of the individual, finding some sort of inner truth or true vocation. They can only be established through intersubjective corroboration, through communication and compromise. '*Bildung*' is here best understood in its original sense: not a mostly passive process of education, maturation and realisation of inherent potential but an endeavour to actively construct (*bilden*) and create. This focus on creative reconstruction can be clearly discerned in the trajectories of the novels' young protagonists.

Johnny's work with Zampanò's manuscript forces him to face his traumatic past (and both reconstruct and revise it), but it is only when he encounters the readers of his own work discussing himself and the text he has shaped that he finds satisfaction and peace. For Alex, it is not the knowledge about his grandfather's true past that leads to maturation, but the necessity of facing responsibility in the composition of his story. While writing his opus magnum helps Josef to come to term with his anger and loss, he needs to share it in order to be healed and to re-enter society. Eiji's personality, finally, is a patchwork of different influences, a constant renegotiation of discourses and genres that reconfigures itself continually in response to his environment. With the probable elimination of all his reference points and contacts in Tokyo, Eiji's own voice and identity, which the novel posited in its first lines and went on to carve out so precariously throughout, is once again unmoored, no more now than a blank page to be filled, the empty chapter that simultaneously closes and opens out beyond the novel.

Taking this even one step further, my discussion has shown that all the novels insist that the identities under construction within them are not only based on fictions but are themselves overtly fictitious. In all of the texts, narrative hierarchies are at some point unsettled and the generic boundaries which the novels have initially re-established are once again drawn into question. As authorship becomes increasingly uncertain in *House of Leaves*, as Alex reads about his own future in Jonathan's diary, as Josef's life is cast in terms of superhero stories, and as *number9dream* reminds us of the fact that Eiji is as much dream as dreamer, these narratives of identity construction reveal their own constructedness. But rather than disqualifying the protagonists' struggles, such reminders emphasise the anthropological necessity for meaning construction and the responsibility it involves. If the novels present us with stories of maturation through the means of an engagement with fiction, their *mise en abyme* structure returns us to our own processes of reading and interpretation, to the fictions readers themselves draw on and create to understand themselves and their world.

In the novels' focus on the role of the fictive in their narratives of formation, they do not only hark back to the foundations of the concept of *Bildung* in eighteenth-century discourses of aesthetic education, but are also closely connected to that sub-species of the *Bildungsroman* that focuses on the formation of an artist: the *Künstlerroman*. However, the role of art (or the fictive, more specifically) in these novels differs quite decisively from the one that has been so typically attributed to artistic creation in previous exponents of the genre. As a consequence of modernism's disillusionment with the Goethean *Bildungs*-ideal of a harmonious integration of self and society, the figure of the artist, according to Castle, 'by the late nineteenth century had become the most potent symbol of nonconformity and rebellion' and could be seen as 'the normative *Bildungsheld* of the modernist Bildungsroman' (23). Art served as a means to withdraw from society, to set oneself apart and to realise individual and original identity 'in terms of aesthetic education and aesthetic sensibilities' (23). 'The modern hero,' so Castle argues, 'refuses socialisation and assimilation into social institutions that do not advance his or her artistic designs' (24). In Peter V. Zima's portrayal of the *Künstlerroman*, this perspective assumes an even more martial attire, as art is framed not only as a refuge, but also as a weapon against the parental bourgeois culture it sets itself against (cf. Zima xii). According to Zima, however, this weapon has lost its effectiveness with postmodernism. In a pluralised world of fragmented ideologies, a modernist striving for ideals has become impossible, since there is no common measure beyond mere exchange value, and thus no basis for a search for aesthetic, political, ethical or religious values. Postmodernist literature, so Zima concludes, has lost its utopian dimension (cf. xiii). But it is not only postmodernist pluralism and its destabilisation of values that turned the artist's path of exception unviable and made the production of art itself seem futile. Rather, it is the loss of the very opposition of art and society on which this model was based (cf. Zima 449).

Providing a different perspective, Fredric Jameson points out that culture does not lose its former (relative) autonomy (and thus the critical distance that would enable it to evaluate and comment) in a late capitalist postmodern society because it has weakened and disappeared, as Zima had claimed. 'Quite the contrary,' Jameson avers:

> the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is rather to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our

> social life – from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself – can be said to have become 'cultural' in some original and yet untheorised sense. (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 48)

With the spread of new technologies and the rise of a prosumer culture,[4] Jameson's diagnosis has arguably only gained in relevance in the decades since it was first uttered. In a world which follows the logic of fashion, a world in which the artist is no longer the exception, as everyone becomes creative, innovation and originality can no longer serve as a sufficient basis for avant-gardist rebellion. The modernist forces of resistance have become the very foundation of a hypercapitalist culture.[5]

Consequently, and in accord with their pervasive lack of antagonistic stance noticed before, the role artistic creation plays in the maturation stories this study is concerned with does not serve to isolate the protagonists from and oppose them to society. Quite the contrary, creative fictions become the means to re-establish connections that are perceived to be lacking. Variously unmoored from historical, social and/or familial ties, the protagonists of the novels all turn to works of fiction in order to re-integrate themselves into a communal and intersubjective context. The aim of their creative endeavours is no longer to develop and establish their exceptional individuality and originality but to enter into an intersubjective and communal dialogue, to reach out in the attempt to communicate and to position themselves in relation to the society of others.

It may be possible to understand this as a version of what Franco Moretti has called the endeavour of the classical *Bildungsroman* to 'escape from freedom' (67). Moretti suggests that the success of the *Bildungsroman* in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was largely due to its ability to symbolise and contain modernity's contradictions, which he boils down to the oppositional demands of happiness and freedom. In happiness, freedom must come to an end. It is 'the opposite of freedom, the end of becoming. Its appearance [in the classical *Bildungsroman*] marks the end of all tension between the individual and his world; all desire for further metamorphosis extinguished' (23). According to Moretti, the desire to escape from the endless dynamic of freedom initially took shape in the eighteenth century as a yearning for 'the immanence of meaning in an organic totality' (67). At that early point of the genre's history, however, this desire remained largely unacknowledged. The success of the *Bildungsroman* was significantly due

precisely to its ability to give expression to an anti-modern yearning that modernity did not want to avow:

> For the modern individual needs occasionally to turn his back on his highest political values: but he is ashamed to do so. He prefers not to admit it: 'not to know' that he is doing it, so to speak. And if this can happen thanks to a system of rhetorical mechanisms to which he abandons himself without a clear awareness of what his heart and mind are doing, what more could be asked for? (Moretti 67)

Modernity, then, is all about the mobility of freedom. Yearning for the stability of happiness, in contrast, tacitly comes to seem pre-, or un-modern.

Ignoring, for now, the problems inherent in Moretti's rather patronising attitude towards eighteenth-century readers, there is little doubt that the contradiction and conflict between happiness and freedom he speaks of no longer remains unacknowledged in the novels I have discussed in this study. In their reconstructive returns to the genre, they are highly aware of the contradictions under which they assert their precarious stories of maturation. The desire to escape from unlimited liberty is no longer latent. Instead, these reconstructive texts directly engage with the problems inherent in an uncompromising urge for freedom with its radical rejection and decomposition of stable structures, an urge that is often associated with radical postmodernism. Freedom here, in its extremes, becomes a burden and a task. It is no longer the end-point and highest goal, but instead the initial challenge, the condition which demands for a realisation of responsibility.

However, if after the ever-increasing valuation of freedom over happiness that Moretti traces in his history of the *Bildungsroman* we can detect a return to a yearning for an escape from freedom and a revaluation of happiness, this return can find its fulfilment neither in a totality which has become impossible in the irreducible pluralism of a late postmodern, globalised world of hypercapitalism, nor can it be understood as a stable immanence of meaning. Both these concepts have been effectively deconstructed in postmodernism and have largely lost their viability. Instead, reconstructive texts turn towards a pragmatism of intersubjective communication to establish meanings that are never total, immanent or stable, but rather the object of constant negotiations. Not an ontological and epistemological totality which allows individuals to understand themselves in clear relations and positions within a stable world, but a pragmatics of everyday life, everyday responsibility and everyday ethics.

The implications of such a reconstructive return to the *Bildungsroman* thus go beyond a mere revival of a genre that had fallen into disrepute in postmodernism. On closer consideration, the genre itself has clear reconstructive affinities. The traditional male *Bildungsroman* plot, Franco Moretti argues, is the exact opposite of the plot of conflict. It follows the protagonist's search for happiness in a 'model of *organic integration*' (35; original emphasis) which is not based on conflict but on conversation: 'In the magic circle of everyday life language in fact appears [. . .] as a *sociable* social institution' (49; original emphasis). If one gives credit to Moretti's argument, the classical *Bildungsroman* has from its beginnings emphasised those aspects of intimate, affective and personal intersubjective communication (as opposed to public and generalised in the sense of Habermasian rational public debate) that we have seen to be at the heart of a reconstructive recovery of meaning. Coming into its own while Europe was buffeted by the French Revolution, the *Bildungsroman* was reconstructive, if not outright reactionary, from its inception. Franco Moretti emphasises this counter-revolutionary aspect of the classical *Bildungsroman* by suggesting,

> that the relaxed and pliant language of novelistic conversation has its counterpart, not in silence, but in the revolutionary pamphlet or oration. It is an antithesis that brings with it many others: the 'curbing' earthiness of concreteness against the cold and daring universalism of principles; the dialogic convertibility of the 'I' in 'you' against the rigid demarcation between orator and audience; the attention toward the patient weaving of a 'plot' against the urge to tear, the passion for 'beginning anew.' Irreconcilable contrasts that tell us a common truth – everyday life and revolution are incompatible. (52)

It is precisely this quotidian truth which reconstructive literature reclaims after postmodernist celebrations of revolutionary tearing. It is the return to the everyday, to the pragmatics of living, a reconstructive 'tactics and practices of making do, which preserves the agency of human existence [. . .] – a practice of everyday life which is compromised, mobile, mutable – but always made sane by the desire to love, to build community, to communicate the truth' (Benton et al.).

A speculative coda

Is it possible to put this recent return to the *Bildungsroman* into the larger cultural context of a world of hypercapitalism, neoliberalism and

globalisation? After all, in the opinion of many of its critics, the genre of the *Bildungsroman* figures as a prime site to illustrate the intersection of literature, self and society. Franco Moretti, for one, has suggested a direct connection between the formation of the *Bildungsroman* genre and the rise of a capitalist modernity. 'Youth,' so Moretti claims, 'is modernity's "essence," the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the *future* rather than in the past.' Youth is 'chosen over the multitude of other possible signs, because of its ability to *accentuate* modernity's dynamism and instability' (5; original emphasis). As a novel which focuses on youth but aims for maturation, the *Bildungsroman*, according to Moretti, was therefore able to engage with the contradictory forces of conservatism and endless mobility that essentially characterise capitalism.

In Moretti's opinion, the gradual decline of the genre was mainly due to its eventual inability to counteract the ever-growing force of capitalism's resistance to stability and closure. While in the classical *Bildungsroman* youth's malleability finds its limit and end in an integration into stable social structures, such integration seems less and less viable (or, indeed, desirable) in later manifestations of the development plot. Differentiating roughly between three steps in the history of the *Bildungsroman*, Moretti argues that in later versions of the genre reintegration gives way to conflict, as protagonists endeavour to maintain freedom and instability against the stability of society. But as the dynamic force of capitalism increasingly erodes and replaces traditional social structures and society itself becomes unstable, the individual can no longer find its own stability either within, or in volitional isolation from society. The constant change of youth itself eventually becomes endless, never resulting in maturity or the stability of meaning. As Moretti puts it:

> The limitless offer of 'cultural contents' typical of the capitalist metropolis presents the individual with a paradox: to realize a determined identity, thereby fatally renouncing, however, the ever new and varied products of modernity – or to plunge into the great adventure of 'self-estrangement,' but at the risk of psychic and spiritual disintegration. One either has to renounce being 'modern,' it seems, or renounce being an 'individual.' (176)

This, so Moretti argues, is the end of the *Bildungsroman*: instead of being a state of formation leading to maturity, youth's only aim is now to perpetuate itself. Change itself becomes unchanging and unchangeable. At the same time the apotheosis of individuality becomes one of

the main forces driving consumerism, with the paradoxical result that individuality itself is increasingly generalised and turned into a mass product as the individual disappears into an individualised mass culture. Capitalism finally has entered a phase of permanent flux against which the *Bildungsroman* can no longer assert its form.

Building on Moretti's insights, Joshua Esty agrees that in modernism, stories of 'frozen youth' prevail. However, Esty goes a step further by correlating this development with socio-historical change; specifically, with colonialism and increasing globalisation. The process of maturation and (variously successful) reintegration into society at the heart of the *Bildungsroman* plot, so Esty suggests, is inextricably related with the discourse of the nation as the larger social context to which the protagonists must relate in one way or another. In the modernist *Bildungsroman*, then,

> the perpetuation of adolescence displaces the plot of growth; the inability to make a fortune or stabilize an adult ego displaces the fulfilled vocational and sexual destiny; the mode of sociological or anthropological realism [. . .] displaces evolutionary historicism; the static, regressive and mixed time schemes of the colonial sphere displace the plot of national progress as a normative story of modernization. (13)

If national discourse – and thus the idea of some sort of symbolic social and cultural cohesion that bridges individual and class differences – was a prerequisite for the stories of successful harmonisation in the classical *Bildungsroman*, colonialism and its increasing awareness of the uneven time of colonial development, so Esty proposes, fundamentally unsettled the linear narrative progression of the development plot. Modernism's tales of 'unseasonable youth' thus speak to the incipient processes of globalisation:

> it announces the growing obsolescence of national allegory as a device for inscribing European nation-state formation as the end of history. Without the moralizing time of the soul-nation allegory, the bildungsroman becomes the story of modernity's unfinished project condensed into the trope of endless youth. (27)

Capitalism has entered a global phase and the nation as a bulwark of identity and stability finds itself increasingly contested. In the modernist plots of arrested development, Esty thus locates the symbolic kernel of changes that have only seen acceleration since the time of their publication: 'these texts' so he claims 'continue to engage readers

now because we are still in doubt about the outcome of an ongoing globalization process' (203). If Esty's assessment is correct, the increasing permeability of national boundaries in a globalised world and the acceleration of capitalist market-flows are undermining the very premises of progress, identity and social framework on which successful coming-of-age stories were built – resulting in those stalled and frozen youths of modernism and culminating in a postmodernist realisation of the impracticality of the genre.

But what does this portend for the *Bildungsroman* in a world that has proceeded far beyond the imperial structures of colonialism, a world that is perhaps not even postcolonial anymore but ever more pervasively global, rhizomatic, networked? Indeed, a postmodernist critique of the genre based on a rejection of the totalising and dominating stability of master-narratives of selfhood, nation and knowledge might be aiming at structures that no longer dominate our world today. We may have passed from a postcolonial and postmodern era marked by struggles about borders and binaries – the coloniser vs. the colonised, the margins vs. the centre, the self vs. the other, the public vs. the private, the individual vs. the mass – to an era in which postmodernism's own successful critique has rendered these terms increasingly ineffectual. If such binaries are losing their mutually defining power, postmodernist critique of them is no longer entirely to the point. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri propose:

> We suspect that postmodernist and postcolonialist theories may end up in a dead end because they fail to recognize adequately the contemporary object of critique, that is, they mistake today's real enemy. What if the modern form of power these critics (and we ourselves) have taken such pains to describe and contest no longer holds sway in our society? What if these theorists are so intent on combating the remnants of a past form of domination that they fail to recognize the new form that is looming over them in the present? What if the dominating powers that are the intended object of critique have mutated in such a way as to depotentialize any such postmodernist challenge? In short, what if a new paradigm of power, a postmodern sovereignty, has come to replace the modern paradigm and rule through differential hierarchies of the hybrid and fragmentary subjectivities that these theorists celebrate? (137–8)

The new form of imperialism Hardt and Negri posit here no longer relies primarily on boundaries and on the mechanisms of othering

and differentiation. Power has no longer any specific location but is manifested within relations itself: 'Whereas colonial power sought to fix pure, separate identities, Empire thrives on circuits of movement and mixture' (Hardt and Negri 199). It is a non-place of flows, networks and communications and its truest image, according to Hardt and Negri, is the free world-market.[6]

Is it possible to read the recent return to *Bildungsroman* narratives in view of this shift in power postulated by Hardt and Negri? Peter Childs and James Green seem to suggest this, when they comment on the frequent absence of parents in recent fiction, arguing that reconstructive 'struggles to reclaim personal histories and restore biographical continuity key into a wider sense of dislocation and rootlessness intensified by the pressures of globalization' (*Aesthetics* 129). In turning their back on postmodernist subversion, do reconstructive texts, consciously or unconsciously, react to a larger change in social and political power structures? Of course, I cannot hope to answer such questions conclusively on the scant textual basis of a handful of novels. But if Hardt and Negri argue that 'the deconstructive phase of critical thought [. . .] has lost its effectiveness' and that we are now facing the task of 'constructing, in the non-place, a new place; constructing ontologically new determinations of the human, of living – a powerful artificiality of being' (217–18), this echoes strikingly the focus on the pragmatics of fiction in the move beyond postmodernist subversion that pervades my literary examples.

This is not to say that those novels necessarily address whatever new order for the world one might postulate. *Kavalier & Clay*'s return to the *Bildungsroman*, for example, is clearly tinged by nostalgia, which is partly cast in national terms. Similarly, the negotiation of identity markers provided by nationality and religion are central to the trajectories of self-formation in *Everything is Illuminated*. But while the US clearly provides Josef with both the means and the space to realise his artistic creativity and even does much to dictate their genre, it is the superhero stories he himself invents that become his personal frame of reference to deal with and understand his life. And while the plot of *Everything is Illuminated* centrally revolves around cultural and religious differences and the persecution these have caused, it also makes a point of casting these differences as sites of negotiation and contact that can be creative and destructive to the same degree. Alex's and Jonathan's maturation is based as much on a recovery of their past (imaginary or not) as in their common experiences and joint narration. The point is thus not that such identity markers have become irrelevant, but that they are

both cause and effect of processes of creation. An increasing focus on such processes is at the heart of the reconstructive shift as it emerges in the novels. Indeed, I would suggest that the return to *Bildungsroman* structures under postmodernist premises, the 'in spite of' one can see these texts perform at every single stage, may arise from a basic agreement with Hardt and Negri's position: 'Difference, hybridity, and mobility are not liberatory in themselves, but neither are truth, purity, and stasis. The real revolutionary practise refers to the level of *production*. Truth will not make us free, but taking control of the production of truth will' (156).

In stark contrast to Hardt and Negri's utopian revolutionary project, however, the return to the *Bildungsroman* in the novels I have discussed also comes along with a withdrawal from socio-political issues. While in prominent postmodernist applications of *Bildungsroman* narratives, like Günter Grass' *Tin Drum*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* or Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, the protagonists' lives serve as an allegory for their nations and cultures, in the reconstructive novels I have discussed issues of self-formation and individual struggles for meaning clearly stand in the centre. Broader political or historical issues only figure as a frame and context within which personal trajectories have to be negotiated. Where the task of reconstruction draws on the *Bildungsroman* it is clearly situated primarily within the framework of small, familial communities, within personal intersubjective relations. After postmodernist deconstruction has attacked the grand narratives of nation, science, history and truth, reconstruction is here attempted at the most intimate level of individual meaning, responsibility and love.

If this is a step in the direction of Hardt and Negri's utopian project, it is a far cry indeed from the revolutionary militancy they advocate. Instead of actively engaging in a criticism of those new power structures Hardt and Negri decry, the examined reconstructive texts may even be tacitly or unwittingly complicit with them. Critique of a contemporary culture of global hypercapitalism, as Hardt and Negri practise and demand, certainly is not central to any of my literary examples. In their consideration of the pragmatic functions of fiction, political agendas seem to have largely receded into the background. Instead of broader political questions and problems, the texts' main concerns are individual and ethical. In their rejection of subversion, these texts are reconciliatory rather than oppositional, reconstructive rather than revolutionary.

If what we are seeing in recent Anglophone narrative fiction is indeed, as I have suggested, the gradual coming of age of a reconstructive

literature, this literature still struggles with the central questions of youth:

> A *Bildungsheld* has trouble knowing who he is because, *sub specie eternitatis*, he isn't sure what or where he is. What grounds his being, what should be his ultimate concern, what [. . .] is he supposed to do to enhance his sense of being alive in body and mind, to feel 'planted' in the greater, live universe around him? (Jeffers 189)

Once it has found some answers to these questions, reconstructive literature will perhaps be able to turn to that type of narrative of emergence which Michail Bakhtin calls 'the most significant one': *Bildungsromane* in which 'the world [no longer serves as] an immobile orientation point for developing man,' but in which 'man's emergence is accomplished in real historical time, with all of its necessity, its fullness, its future, and its profoundly chronotopic nature' (23). Proceeding from its focus on the individual and the family, on intersubjectivity and communication, and on the role and pragmatics of the fictive, time will show whether reconstruction might be on its way to re-encounter the world.

Notes

Introduction: Epitaph on a Ghost, or the Impossible End of Postmodernism

1 It is important to distinguish between postmodernism, as a cultural and aesthetic programme, and postmodernity, as a social and political environment. While both the end of postmodernism and the end of postmodernity have, indeed, been variously declared in a wider cultural, philosophical and social discourse (cf. Sim *End of Modernity*; Lipovetsky; López and Potter), my discussion focuses on aesthetic developments in literature, and even more specifically on the genre of the novel.

2 Jeremy Green provides a succinct collection of obituaries for postmodernism and addresses their significance and some of their problems (cf. 19–24).

3 Critics have frequently pointed to the importance of the social and political radicalisation during the 1960s as a nurturing ground for postmodernist thought and emphasised the contribution of the political situation of the Cold War to postmodernism's oppositional stance (cf. Toth 106–7; Rebein, *Dirty Realists* 4; Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram" 65).

4 A notable exception to the overall neglect of the fantastic in critical discussions of recent literature is the high popularity of ghosts, both as a literary topic and as a critical metaphor. Rooted strongly within postmodernism, the discourse of spectrality, as developed in Derrida's ground-breaking *Specters of Marx*, already opens up to such deeply ethical concerns as are increasingly coming to the fore in recent discussions (cf. Funk "Ghosts"; Toth; Adiseshiah and Hildyard, "Introduction" 10).

5 Different definitions of the fantastic are often grouped into narrow and broad, or exclusive and inclusive ones (cf. Hume 8–28). Narrow, exclusive definitions endeavour to distinguish the fantastic as a specific genre, delimited in clear structural, thematic or historical terms. Broad definitions may go as far as to claim application even beyond the strictly literary, calling fantasy a 'universal aesthetic category,' in which one 'could include philosophy and religion' (Traill 7; cf. also Chen 20; Wolfe 21). Uwe Durst provides a useful overview over narrow and broad definitions (he speaks of 'minimalist' and 'maximalist' ones) and discusses their respective merits and limits in his *Theorie der Phantastischen Literatur* (cf. 17–68).

6 I should probably note here that I will resist the postmodernist urge of putting terms like reality and truth within quotation marks. I am very much aware of the discursive nature of reality and the relativity of truth, and so on. Nevertheless, in my opinion there are limits to the practicability of such a (doubtlessly important) awareness. To say that reality is constructed and perceived differently by different subjects is not to say that it does not exist or that no basic understanding about the word's meaning is shared. I am cognisant of the fact that my own attitude thus partakes in and indeed contributes to construct the very shift I am describing in the literary texts

I study. Such a mutual interaction, I claim, is precisely how all cultural change and development is effected.

7 Matthew Potolsky expediently reminds his readers that 'when placed in global and historical context, the Western devotion to realism is an exception rather than the rule' (93).

8 While I share Gąsiorek's definition of realism, if not his terminology, the juxtaposition between the mimetic and the marvellous is disconnected from the dichotomy whose dissolution is his main concern: that between realism and experimentalism. Indeed, this juxtaposition is untenable, because it involves a category mistake: experimentalism can only be juxtaposed to conventionalism, while the opposite of realism (or mimesis) can only be the marvellous. The first pair specifies artistic policies, the second literary stances. Both mimetic and marvellous texts can be conventional or experimental.

9 My reservation is that 'code' seems to imply a certain degree of determinacy in the process of decoding. Either I understand the code and decode it correctly, or I don't and the decoding is flawed. Taking a stance, in contrast, is more flexible in that while there certainly are more or less appropriate stances, no stance can be simply wrong. 'Stance' is also better suited to my argument that the boundary between the marvellous and the mimetic stance is fluid, while to talk of different codes seems to imply that a clear distinction between one code and the other is always possible.

10 For differentiations between genres of the fantastic see for example Chanady, or Nancy H. Traill (cf. 11–20).

11 I will not attempt to unfold all the complexities of what postmodernism might or might not have meant or still mean. This has already been done with such care that I could scarcely hope to add much. For a detailed discussion, see for example Hans Bertens' *The Idea of the Postmodern* or Perry Anderson's *The Origins of Postmodernity.*

12 I am aware of the fact that the term 'reconstruction' may bring rather different associations to mind within a US-American cultural context, where the term is generally used to refer to the time period after the Civil War. I and other scholars have nevertheless found its usefulness in describing a recent aesthetic development to outweigh this disadvantage.

13 While Jameson stresses and laments contradictions and unspoken assumptions, I'd prefer to understand semantic or syntactic biases as complementary rather than irreconcilable or mutually exclusive. Different approaches can thus be probed for their respective contribution to an understanding of the mode.

14 Ryan comes to the conclusion that after the first decade of the new millennium '[t]he main wave of "novels after theory" may now be over' (208). She does not explain her reasons for this assumption, giving tacit support to the spreading suspicion that postmodernist theory is gradually losing its cultural supremacy. I, however, tend to agree with Michael Greaney's observation that '[f]or all its reputation as the *bête noire* of the creative writer, however, theory has played a significant role in the development of recent literary fiction – not simply as a butt of anti-theoretical humour, but as a formative influence and imaginative resource, a repertoire of embryonic stories and radical ideas that contemporary novelists have been ambitiously re-writing since the late 1960s' (2).

15 Like most definitions, the genre of the *Bildungsroman* is, of course, by no means uncontested. Marc Redfield, indeed, calls it a 'phantom genre,' which exists only in its inexistence (cf. 202). I, for my part, use the term *Bildungsroman* here fairly loosely since my point is not to claim that the novels I am looking at are *Bildungsromane* in the strictest sense but merely that they all centrally include narratives of development of a young male protagonist from youth to maturity. See Boes for a useful overview of the critical discussion of the genre and the term.

1 Post-post, Beyond and Back: Literature in the Wake of Postmodernism

1 The same point has been made by others, for example at various points throughout the collection of essays on *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction* edited by Kristiaan Versluys. This collection is also striking in that, published in 1992, it understands itself to be very much against the academic grain (which, according to Versluys, unanimously favours postmodernism) in its focus on realism, thus providing striking evidence of the (at least perceived) hegemony of postmodernism's institutionalisation. True to a very postmodernist unconditional valuation of subversion, however, Versluys argues in his introduction that the realist writer 'functions as a subversive in his own right' and that realism's 'task is to question everything, including the by now rather hackneyed habit of subjecting every assertion or perception to massive onslaughts of doubt and endless deferrals of meaning' (8). Similarly Gąsiorek suggests that '"experimental" works have lost any capacity to shock and that it may be "realist" works which now pack the more powerful punch' (181).

2 See also Winfried Fluck, whose debatable definition of realism, however, includes arguably fantastic texts like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Realism and anti-realism, so it seems, cannot (or no longer) be easily kept apart.

3 I cannot go into any detail here on the complex set of problems that beleaguer such a nostalgic celebration of the authenticity of margins and will restrict myself to seconding Bourriaud's warning that '[i]dentification with genre, ethnicity, a sexual orientation or a nation sets in motion a powerful machinery,' a 'system of allotting meanings and assigning individuals their position in the hierarchy of social demands, reducing their whole being to their identity and stripping all their significance back to their origins' (6). For a more detailed discussion of the value and dangers of authenticity, in particular within a postcolonial context, see Huggan 155–76; Richter; Sánchez-Acre.

4 From this perspective, the alternative which Zadie Smith prefers to O'Neill's lyrical realism, the 'constructive deconstruction' which she diagnoses in Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder* in fact emerges as a different version of the same general impulse. McCarthy's radical refusal of interiority and the radical detachment of the novel's narrator-protagonist amounts to a forceful insistence on the importance of intersubjective relations (cf. Huber and Seita 275–9).

5 A chronological divide can be perceived in this difference in perspective. Raymond Carver is one of the most important figureheads of neo-realism

and Josh Toth dates the shift towards a new realism back to the mid-1980s (cf. 2). The discourse about post-postmodernism is somewhat younger than that, arising in the 1990s and gaining increasing force with the polemic surrounding Franzen's *The Corrections* in 2001 (though Burn traces the term back as far as the year 1975; cf. 17–18). Rebein indeed agrees with an assessment of Franzen's personal turn away from postmodernism as symptomatic of a larger cultural shift in a later article, in which he also suggests that the increasing presence of MFA programmes, which tend to favour realism, propels and fortifies this tendency (cf. Rebein "Turncoat"). For a detailed discussion of the influence of creative writing programmes on the post-war US-American literary scene see Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*.

6 See also Adam Kelly's study on recent observer-hero narratives by Philip Roth, Paul Auster, Jeffrey Eugenides and E. L. Doctorow, which decidedly invest in the power of storytelling while being characterised by 'the awareness of an undecidability that is not simply a form of relativism, but rather the necessary opening to future responses, events of reading and writing, that lie beyond the present and beyond the postmodern' (*Transition* 117).

7 Intriguingly though, there is an expressly utopian strain to Eshelman's argument which, as he openly states, 'is intended less as a comprehensive map of post-postmodernism than as a kind of do-it-yourself manual for budding postmetaphysical monists' (*Performatism* xiv). It is thus left teasingly uncertain whether the epochal change Eshelman is describing is actually taking place or remains a potentiality that he would like to promote. Considering that the 'Return and rehabilitation of the phallus' is, according to an earlier article, one of performatism's traits ("Performatism"), this renders the gender politics of his argument even more dubious than the astonishing correlation of postmodernism with deistic feminine formlessness that will soon be overcome by performatist theism and its investment in the authority of the father (a mordantly ironic claim considering the fact that postmodernism has been so clearly dominated by the male author/artist).

8 One of the most ambitious and influential attempts to analyse the conditions and realities of today's world, Manuel Castells' three-volume study *The Information Age: Economy, Society, Culture* declares that the change to 'the network society represents a qualitative change in the human experience' (*Network Society* 477). Castells' suggestion that the contemporary is 'increasingly structured around a bipolar opposition between the Net and the Self' (*Network Society* 3), in a simultaneous movement towards the delocalised, and de-individualised global communicative dynamics of the network and an increasing investment in identity, might bear some relation to the tensions that manifest in recent literature between an attempt to resituate itself in the mimetic claims of realism and to highlight the modes and effects of communication.

9 N. Katherine Hayles and Todd Gannon make a similarly strong case, stressing the importance of the possibilities of digital technology for a recent aesthetic shift in both architecture and literature away from postmodernism towards what they call 'ambient emergence.' My own analysis, in contrast, remains strictly within the bounds of the traditional format of the novel of whose death and immanent total replacement by the new media I remain to be convinced. It is possible that I am therefore missing the crucial point

about the new era, as people like Kirby or Hayles and Gannon would likely claim. To declare the novel dead while so much continues to be written and read and to assume, as Kirby for one apparently does, that a new cultural shift is only thinkable in terms of a simultaneous change in medium (cf. 40), seems nonetheless premature to me.

10 While Kirby relates the biblical mode to nineteenth-century realism, the Homeric mode was relegated to children's stories like the Arthurian sagas or *The Arabian Nights*. Kirby's prime example for a recent reverse of this structure of dominance is Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Merely by looking at these examples it becomes quite clear that Kirby succumbs to a confusion of content and form in this argument. Formally, *The Lord of the Rings* shares very little with fairy tales or Arthurian sagas. Indeed, as has been pointed out by Christine Brooke-Rose, *The Lord of the Rings* created a new genre precisely by combining the *form* of nineteenth-century realism with marvellous content (cf. 254–5). Conversely, by identifying a '*new taste for endlessness in fiction*' (159; original emphasis) as a feature of the Homeric, Kirby fails to clarify its distinction from earlier serial forms, like those of Victorian realism.

11 This list does not claim to be exhaustive. It seems like another label is currently being proposed just about every other day with various degrees of rhetorical vigour.

12 Indeed, such observations have already been made concerning, for example, the humanist undercurrent in the fiction of Thomas Pynchon, Paul Auster and Don DeLillo (cf. Eve; Klepper 365; Schweighauser, "*White Noise* and the Web" 97).

13 In fact, this is an almost verbatim echo of Fredric Jameson's observations about the nature of the shift from modernism to postmodernism, which are perfectly to the point in this context: 'I must limit myself to the suggestion that radical breaks between periods do not generally involve complete changes of content but rather the restructuration of a certain number of elements already given: features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate now become dominant, and features that had been dominant now again become secondary. In this sense, everything we have described here can be found in earlier periods [. . .]: my point is that until the present day those things have been secondary or minor features [. . .] and that we have something new when they become the central features of cultural production' ("Postmodernism" 123). Jameson does imply in his essay, though, that postmodernism stands in more or less explicitly antagonistic opposition to its predecessor. In reconstruction this is not necessarily the case.

14 I should also emphasise once more that the scope of the shift I am concerned with should not be overestimated. It unfolds within a specific cultural context in which postmodernism had enough cultural prominence for the need to supersede it to arise in the first place. A linear progression of literary epochs, which is at no time more than a heuristic fiction, makes even less sense in a world in which literary production is global and immensely various. I would therefore endorse Nicolas Bourriaud's image of a 'networked "archipelago"' (23) of what he calls the 'altermodern' which 'suggests a multitude of possibilities, of alternatives to a single route' (12). From this broader perspective, the specific reactions to postmodernism I explore here are just one aspect of the richly heterogeneous and heterochronic cultural scene our time has to offer.

2 Pragmatic Fantasies: From Subversion to Reconstruction

1 The terminology used in the critical debate is hopelessly confused. Since nearly every scholarly contribution to the field adds its own definition and usage of terms like 'fantasy,' 'the fantastic' and 'the marvellous' (and the same goes for 'realism,' 'mimesis,' 'verisimilitude' and 'referentiality' for that matter), I can only hope to make my own particular understanding and usage of these terms consistent and clear. As I have already explained in the introduction, I prefer the term 'marvellous' to refer to a general literary stance that implies a detachment of fictional and extratextual world, while I use 'the fantastic' to describe a mode which combines and juxtaposes the mimetic and the marvellous, emphasising the friction between them. I avoid using 'fantasy' in order to prevent confusion with the specific marvellous genre of modern fantasy in the legacy of J. R. R. Tolkien. Many of the scholars I will quote in the following pages, however, obviously do not make the same distinctions.

2 This claim is so ubiquitous that any attempt to provide an encompassing list must be thwarted. For some representative work see Armitt *Women's Fiction*; Cooper; Hegerfeldt; Slemon; Weese.

3 Of course, as Versluys, Leypoldt and others remind us, realism has never ceased to dominate wider literary production. Its perceived marginalisation must be understood to have been largely limited to its prestige within a literary field structured by the logics of literary prizes, criticism and academic discourse.

4 As Lucie Armitt rightly notes, this central role of the reader runs counter to Todorov's own intention of structuralist rigidity. Todorov's theory thus constantly resists and exceeds itself (cf. Armitt, *Theorising* 30–6).

5 As Christine Brooke-Rose has already pointed out, Todorov's requirement that the reader must 'reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations' (69), is phrased too rigorously (cf. Brooke-Rose, 68–71). After all, the presence of both mimesis and the marvellous in a fantastic text implies precisely the presence of two different possibilities of reading, one of them an essentially figurative one. If such a reading was completely rejected, as Todorov's phrasing seems to imply, hesitation would not occur. The fantastic thus only disappears in cases in which the literal reading is entirely supplanted by an allegorical or poetical one.

6 See Nancy Traill, who devotes a chapter of her study to a discussion of the nineteenth-century discourses about the paranormal and the ways they informed the mode.

7 McHale borrows the term 'cultural dominant' from Fredric Jameson, who defines it as 'the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses [. . .] must make their way' (*Postmodernism* 6).

8 Perhaps the most striking example would be that pious Pi simultaneously becomes a practising congregant of Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.

9 This point is further driven home by the conceit of the editorial frame, which serves not only to ostensibly authenticate Pi's report but also to undermine it. The editorial narrator explicitly declares himself to be a writer of fiction who is none too slavishly dedicated to facts. Obviously looking for something other than authentic mimetic referentiality, he goes to India in

order to write a novel about Portugal: 'for the sake of greater truth, I would turn Portugal into a fiction. That's what fiction is about, isn't it, the selective transforming of reality? The twisting of it to bring out its essence? What need did I have to go to Portugal?' (*Pi* vi).

10 Though mimesis and the marvellous lean towards either the real or the imaginary, it is important to insist that the former constitute different kinds of fictive communication, which in principle are mutually exclusive while both of the latter are always involved in the fictive. Mimesis and the marvellous are therefore not to be confused or equated with the real and the imaginary. As its basis, the latter always remain in essence *external* to the fictive, which in drawing on them transforms them. To neglect this difference, as Lance Olsen does when he argues that 'fantasy is as suffused by mimesis as mimesis is by fantasy' ("Overdrive" 72), leads to a mistaken dismissal of the basic distinction between the two stances on which the effect of the fantastic relies.

11 Scholars have frequently felt uncomfortable with this fact. As Maggie Ann Bowers concludes in her study of magic realism: 'Ultimately, the problems of magical realism are inherent in its contradictory and multiperspectival form and this may, in the future, be its nemesis. As it does not impose a judgmental attitude towards either its realist or magical aspects, it allows itself to be open to multiple interpretations, and this possibly includes those that oppose diversity. Its liberating and transformative powers are latent in the work, and yet can only be activated by the act of reading or viewing by a sympathetic public' (127).

3 Leaving the Postmodernist Labyrinth: Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

1 Throughout the full-colour edition of the novel I am referring to, all occurrences of the word 'house' as well as its equivalences in other languages are printed in blue and all struck passages are printed in red. These colours have been removed from quoted passages throughout without further indication.

2 I follow the novel in its use of character names. While Karen is always referred to by her first name, Navidson's first name Will is used very infrequently. Even Karen usually calls him 'Navy.'

3 The central issue of the absence of the monster or Minotaur at the heart of the labyrinth and the characters' various resulting insertions of their own monsters (or themselves as monsters) is one of the many fascinating paths through the novel I will not be able to follow further here.

4 See Nele Bemong for a psychoanalytically informed interpretation of the novel gyrating on the notion of the uncanny at its core.

5 Some have seen this as a 'send-up of academic criticism' (McCaffery and Gregory 99) that exposes cultural and literary scholarship as an endless, quite ridiculous endeavour without any point. In face of the house's nihilism and resistance to meaning, all interpretation might seem to have become futile. But such a perspective fails to take into account that the cacophony of critical voices constitutes a major part of the novel's narrative and offers through its interpretations important means of access to the house itself. As Belletto

has quite correctly pointed out, '[t]he interpretations in the novel [. . .] are not pointing to some behemoth that will be endlessly pursued, but are rather themselves the source the book's vitality, if not reality' (109; *sic*).

6 Book VI of the *Æneid* strikingly brings together most of the major elements the novel draws on from classical mythology. Apart from the obvious connection via the theme of a journey to the underworld and loss of home, it also starts out with a description of the artwork to be seen in the Apollo temple near the Sybil's cave, which depicts the Cretan labyrinth with the Minotaur, and further refers to the story of Daedalus and Icarus' flight from the island (significant since one of the few things we learn about Johnny's father is that he was a pilot).

7 Indeed, one could also argue that Johnny's words here profess too much and should not be taken at face value, but rather as a desperate attempt to deceive and console himself. The fact that the novel does not end here but jumps back chronologically to an earlier point in Johnny's story, which finds him at a psychological low could support this much more pessimistic reading. However, as I have argued above, even this chronologically earlier diary entry eventually strikes a reconciliatory note, with Johnny finally working through the traumatic experience he had been struggling with.

8 http://www.houseofleaves.com/forum/ For an analysis of the mechanisms and contents of the forum, see Thomas.

9 Such are the functions of metafiction that have mainly been stressed in prominent discussions of the employment of the technique in postmodernist fiction (cf. Hutcheon *Narcissistic Narrative*; Waugh).

4 The Quest for Narrative Reconstruction: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*

1 In the following chapter the character in the story will be called Jonathan, while any reference to the author will use his last name.

2 Jenni Adams is one of the very few who pays closer attention to the interaction of the novel's narrative strands. Her argument develops along familiar postmodernist lines, stressing the narrative's correlation of the traumatic and the fantastic as a means to 'indicate [. . .] the possibility and necessity of other modes of knowledge and representation in the historical and fictional approach to such events [as the Holocaust]' (67).

3 The similarities of *Everything is Illuminated* to classic magic realist texts like *Midnight's Children* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* have often been noted (cf. Jenni Adams; Collado-Rodríguez; Feuer).

4 Indeed, as some have argued, the novel's representation of the shtetl could even be read as a caricature of widespread American conceptions about the Jewish past in Eastern Europe, 'a satire on the shtetl as it had come to be depicted in American kitsch' (Gessen; cf. also Jenni Adams 64).

5 Stressing the similarities between the novels rather than the differences, Collado-Rodríguez has come to the opposite conclusion, claiming that the novel 'uses the fantastic mode subversively' by provocatively suggesting that 'the Holocaust happened out of sheer necessity, with no active human agent to blame for it' (58). While Collado-Rodríguez's reading shows certain

parallels to my own, such unwavering insistence on typical magic realist subversion passes over the differences that point towards a move beyond subversion.

6 Allegory is one of the central magic realist strategies and figures prominently in both of the two most obvious magic realist intertexts of Foer's novel: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Notably though, Brod's allegorical aspects do not refer to historical reality as do those of Saleem (who embodies the Indian nation) and the Buendías (who show allegorical resemblance to Latin American history). Brod does not personify the real, historical Trachimbrod but rather the imaginary one. She is an allegory for the narrative desire which gives rise to her story.

5 Escaping Towards History: Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*

1 For a further exploration and critique of this critical reflex, see Huber "Usual Suspects."

2 Chabon explicitly draws this parallel to *Moby Dick* himself by opening his collection of essays *Maps and Legends* with an epigraph taken from Melville's whaling excursus, adding pointedly as a source description: 'Herman Melville, on the writing of fan fiction' (*Maps* 7).

3 In his spirited defence of so-called genre fiction, Chabon, in fact, is at pains to point out that the indebtedness to conventions genre literature is so often despised for applies no less to the more highly respected mode of realism (cf. *Maps* 22).

4 While 'hypostasis' has clear connotations of glorification and deification, due to its usage in theological and philosophical discourse, Singer does not make a specific point of this and rather seems to be using the term as a synonym for what is more commonly known as the rhetorical device of 'personification.'

5 In a somewhat different context, John J. Su argues in his study *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* that the role of nostalgia in recent Anglophone and especially postcolonial literature has to be revaluated as offering 'an existential life choice for individuals who admire ideals associated with premodern societies' (4). A nostalgic evocation of a lost homeland, according to Su, can serve as a productive and utopian counterpoint to a present that is perceived to be lacking and deficient. While literary form is not Su's main concern, his insights hint towards an understanding of nostalgia that allows one to conceive of a nostalgic recovery of literary realism as a deliberate act of literary positioning that is conditioned on the irretrievability of the past it evokes.

6 Because escape has so many faces in the novel, various critics have emphasised different kinds of escape in their interpretations. Behlman and Chute see the function of escape in the novel mainly as an escape from history and trauma; Punday argues that the main point is economic escape, as the success of the Escapist offers Sam and Joe freedom from economic restraints; Singer emphasises the more abstract escape from a 'seemingly inescapable difference between a sign and its object' (287).

6 Dreaming of Reconstruction: David Mitchell's *number9dream*

1 Jameson influentially discusses the connection between postmodernism, capitalism and paranoia in his seminal work *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.
2 This is, of course, also the topos Paul Auster plays with in *Man in the Dark* (see my discussion in Chapter 1).
3 One result of this has been a surprising popularity of novels that are structurally highly experimental (cf. Wilson 99–100; Bradford 62).
4 Of course, Dillon's characterisation of postmodernism as 'apolitical and antisocial' is itself highly problematic. Once again, it is not against postmodernism in general that contemporary authors develop their reconstructive approaches, but against a number of widely held ideas and prejudices *about* postmodernism.
5 Jeffers gives the following synopsis of a typical *Bildungsroman* plot: 'A sensitive child grows up in the provinces, where his lively imagination is frustrated by his neighbors' – and often his family's – social prejudices and intellectual obtuseness. School and private reading stimulate his hopes for a different life away from home, and so he goes to the metropolis, where his transformative education begins. He has at least two love affairs, one good and one bad, which help him revalue his values. He makes some accommodation, as citizen and worker, with the industrial urban world, and after a time he perhaps revisits his old home to show folks how much he has grown' (52). With some variations, Eiji's development follows these steps faithfully.
6 The penultimate chapter whose theme, according to Dutta, the author 'confesse[d] to not yet knowing,' remains the only exception to this structure, even though it, too, clearly has a central theme: *alea*, or the powers of coincidence, luck and fate.
7 A good example of this is Jonathan Boulter's very interesting reading of the novel's engagement with melancholia and the archive. While the novel's second chapter "Lost Property" clearly takes centre stage under such a focus, "Video Games" (the moving image) and "Reclaimed Land" (nightmares) scarcely play any role. "Study of Tales" (fiction) and "Kai Ten" (meaning), meanwhile, according to Boulter 'may seem also to serve only as digressions, but [. . .] are [. . .] really quite trenchant dilations upon the theme of archived, historical connections to the past' (123). Even more strikingly, Boulter claims that Eiji meets his stepmother '[a]t the conclusion of the narrative' (128), referring to a meeting that takes place at the end of chapter six. Stating that 'while the novel has two brief chapters remaining, Miyake has essentially come to the end of his quest' (129), he ends up dismissing another two entire chapters and thus, in sum total, roughly half of the entire novel as essentially irrelevant.
8 Manuel Castells speaks of 'real virtuality' as 'a system in which reality itself (that is, people's material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience' (373). This comes close to

Baudrillard's era of the simulacra, but is more pragmatic than ontological in focus. As Castells argues, complaints about a virtual reality 'implicitly refer to an absurdly primitive notion of "uncoded" real experience that never existed' since '[i]n a sense, all reality is virtually perceived' (373).

9 This depiction of Tokyo is, of course, another stereotype of popular culture, while at the same time Japanese self-representation has itself been influenced by its association with cyberpunk (cf. Posadas). A paradigm of the hyperreal, in which there is no longer an original to return to, Tokyo might thus well be the perfect setting for the novel's exploration of the discursive interrelations of the imaginary and the real.

10 In many ways, this chapter is reminiscent of Arundhati Roy's magic realist novel *The God of Small Things*, both in topic and in style. Portraying a magically tinted world from the narrative perspective of a twin pair of children, brother and sister, Roy's novel also revolves around the death by drowning of a young girl.

11 It is interesting to note that whereas the imaginary excessiveness of the Goatwriter stories were, as we have seen, balanced with descriptions of Eiji's most ordinary everyday activities, the historical journal in 'Kaiten' is combined with somewhat bizarre vignettes recounting Eiji's work at a video store, which serve as a constant reminder of the fantasy-saturated 'reality' of the Tokyo Eiji lives in. This is a typical scene: 'A kryptonite-green Jeep, throbbing with time-travel music, mounts the pavement. Lolita in the passenger seat spits cherry pips out of the window, while Dalai Lama darts in, nursing a fluffy white ferret – it sports a pink-and-lime bow tie – in one arm and three videos in the other. "Jason and the Argonauts thrilled us, Sinbad chilled us, Titanic killed us. Myths are no longer what they used to be. I should know – I wrote them." I check the return-by dates and thank him. Dalai Lama moonwalks out and waves the ferret's paw at us' (*n9d* 308). In such a reality, granduncle Subaru seems to be much more out of place than the 'hippie and his psychedelic surfboard, falling out of the sky' who introduces himself as God to an astonished Mrs Comb in one of the Goatwriter stories (*n9d* 220). As if to drive this point home, this sorry excuse for a God excuses himself from the scene because he has to return some overdue videos, (cf. *n9d* 221) and the reader might almost be tempted to start looking out for him among the number of strange customers Eiji serves in the next chapter.

12 This is perhaps in keeping with Mitchell's admission that he feels increasing ethical obligations as a writer (cf. Wilson 96).

7 Conclusion: The Coming of Age of Reconstruction

1 Christoph Ribbat notices such an integration with family stories as one of the prominent differences between earlier Holocaust narratives and twenty-first century novels like Foer's and Chabon's (cf. 210).

2 Franco Moretti, indeed, has the genre culminate and end even earlier, with George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Only in the second edition of his seminal study *The Way of the World*, published in the year 2000, did he add an appendix about the modernist (or, as he calls it, 'late') *Bildungsroman*, which, in his opinion, did 'not open a new phase in the history of the European

Bildungsroman, but [brought] it to a sudden close' (229). The First World War, so Moretti suggests, 'was the final act in a longer process – the cosmic coup de grâce to a genre that, at the turn of the century, was already doomed' (230). All other references to Moretti's study are to the first edition.

3 Such observations must be restricted to the aesthetic movements of modernism and postmodernism and should not be misunderstood to be more generally applicable. As has been repeatedly argued, the genre seems to be in much better general health if the work of writers who do not easily fit into the categories of modernism and postmodernism is taken into account (most frequently this argument is made for postcolonial and women writers). Again, Boes provides an overview of the debate.

4 With much prophetic insight and no less optimistic verve Alvin Toffler introduced this term in his futurologist study *The Third Wave* to hail the healing of 'the historic breach between producer and consumer' (27).

5 'In hypermodernity, there is no longer any choice or alternative other than that of constantly developing, accelerating the movement so as not to be overtaken by "evolution" [. . .] The mythology of a radical break with the past has been replaced by the culture of the fastest and the "ever more:" more profitability, more performance, more flexibility, more innovation' (Lipovetsky 34).

6 See Jeffrey T. Nealon for a detailed discussion of Negri's criticism of Derridean deconstruction, in which Nealon argues that '[d]econstruction [. . .] is no longer an exit from where we are; [. . .] deconstruction *is* where we are: deconstruction is the logic of value under late, later, or just-in-time capitalism' (125; original emphasis).

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