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Narrative and the Afterlife in Modern Fiction
The Meanings of Life After Death

Alice Bennett

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Afterlife Now

Only poetry can hold the . . . depths . . . of heaven . . . in one still place. The only way on earth . . . we might say what we know . . . in the all-at-once way . . . that we know it . . .

Close to me and Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven)

As an object for speculation, the mystery of what happens after death is a fertile topic with a lengthy history. In secular Western cultures today, with belief in some form of an afterlife by no means standard,¹ literary engagement with life after death has entered a new and abundant phase. Simultaneously, a movement towards less prescriptive theological positions on certain aspects of the afterlife has relegated some of the more specific architecture of heaven and hell to the level of human fictions,² thereby opening up a field for investigating the benefits of thinking abstract concepts in the human terms of narrative fiction. Fictional

¹ Asked whether they believe in life after death, around 50% of people in the UK answer yes: in an Ipsos MORI poll in October 2007, the figure was 47%; in a Populus poll in April 2005 it was 53%. Internationally, the 48% of people who believe in heaven in the UK compares with 58% in Canada, and 81% in the USA, according to Gallup polls from 2004. The Gallup polling also consistently showed reported belief in heaven to be more frequent than reported belief in hell.

² The Catholic Church, for instance, seems to be in the process of dismantling the architecture of the afterlife: Pope John Paul II gave audiences in the summer of 1999 ('General Audience: Wednesday 28 July 1999' and 'General Audience: Wednesday 4 August 1999') that suggested neither purgatory nor hell were "places" but conditions inflicted on the soul through separation from God and the necessity of purification. Heaven, on the other hand "is neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity. It is our meeting with the Father which takes place in the risen Christ through the communion of the Holy Spirit." Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI approved publication of a report by the International Theological Commission in 2007, which can be read as evidence that the doctrine of limbo for unbaptised infants has been abandoned ('The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die without Being Baptised').



engagement with the afterlife has, historically, combined elements from different religious and folk traditions, as well as addressing the immediate cultural and social concerns of the living in different periods in history. This suggests that, if narratives about the afterlife were not simply serving religious purposes then, even without faith in an afterlife as the default for many people, the literature of the afterlife still has a function. It offers a model for another world, in an alternative kind of time and space, against which this world has been conceptualised. It is peopled by characters whose status is somewhere between persons and non-persons, and who are notoriously interested in telling their own life stories. Framed in these terms, the afterlife becomes an irresistible topic for narratives that are concerned with their own fictional processes and formal conventions. After the afterlife has stopped being an item of faith for many, the logic, architecture, and, most of all, the narrative strategies associated with various aspects of life after death have been retained and repurposed by narrative fictions.

The retention of some of the conceptual and structural parts of the afterlife in the context of consciously fictive narratives suggests a convergence of concerns about telling stories and imagining life after death. Writing about the afterlife invokes debates about the processes of writing about life and shifts their grounds to a new location that is never of this world, but has both uncannily and comfortingly familiar elements. However, the inheritance that contemporary fictional afterlives are interrogating is as much a part of a literary tradition of writing about this world as of a religious and philosophical tradition of writing about the Other World. In an important sense, modern narratives are writing afterlife by situating themselves after writing about life.

Why should narrative fiction, then, and particularly the novel and its realist and post-realist legacy, be so well suited to talking about these profoundly un-lifelike ideas? What are the capabilities and conventions of narrative fiction that make an investigation of the afterlife so readily an investigation of these features as well? This thesis will argue that narrative fiction has found itself with a strange and unexpected affinity for these issues. In some ways, thinking about the afterlife has always had a narrative strand that attempts to convert something unthinkable

into terms that can be conceptualised. However, there are also strands of narrative – and the conventions of the novel most particularly – that resonate with the unnatural and un-lifelike aspects of the afterlife, and it is these which are also exposed in modern fictions of the afterlife.

This thesis aims to perform three interdependent functions: firstly, to identify and describe common features in the increasingly frequent occurrences of afterlives in modern fiction; secondly, to argue for the place of writing about life after death as a way of engaging with narrative techniques and conventions; thirdly, to suggest a context for this work in a more pervasive cultural sense of endings, which are best represented by the idea of personal death and afterlife.

The first of these functions begins in this introduction, and requires an explanation of how contemporary representations of the afterlife should be situated in the context of current thought about life after death, as well as how they emerge out of a tradition of writing about the afterlife. The field here is huge, so my intention is to trace a small number of significant and representative features to, firstly, offer a contextual framework for some of the theological issues that bear on the subject matter, and, secondly, to give a sense of some literary texts on which contemporary fictional afterlives are drawing.

The Stories of Life after Death

Introducing and summarising scholarship on the subject of medieval eschatology in their collection *Last Things: Death and Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (2000), Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman have three comments to make on the state of research in the field. Among their first observations is the idea that study of the period has imposed a modern sense of fragmented eschatology on concerns that, for people in the Middle Ages, would have been more connected. “Recent scholarship,” Bynum and Freedman note, “has tended to treat separately concerns that both medieval intellectuals and ordinary people would have seen as closely linked: death, the afterlife, the end of time (whether terrestrial or beyond earth), and theological anthropology or the theory of the person” (1). The implication here is that, for moderns, these issues are always separated. Chapter 2 of this thesis

surveys the current state of the most prominent aspect of contemporary eschatology – apocalypse – but it is an important detail to note at this point that this division among last things has not always been the case.

One reason for the separation of eschatological elements could be the loss of a sense of imminent apocalypse, meaning that the time period between an individual's demise and the imagined end of the world was understood as being so close as to be virtually one and the same. This is touched upon in Bynum and Freedman's more detailed summary of the prevailing historical perspectives on the Middle Ages:

Study of medieval attitudes toward death and death rituals has tended to agree in essence if not always in detail with Philippe Ariès's sense of a shift in the central Middle Ages from "tamed death" – a death expected and prepared for, experienced in community – to a "personal death," an understanding of the moment of death as a decisive accounting for an individual self. Study of the afterlife has seen a parallel shift, in the twelfth century, from a twofold eschatological landscape of heaven and hell to an at least partially three-tiered afterlife, including the in-between space and time of purgatory, to which most Christian souls go after "personal death" for a propitiating and cleansing that may (or may not, depending on the prayer-work of those on earth) continue until a far distant Last Judgement. Work on concepts of the human person has detected in the thirteenth century a shift from emphasis on resurrection of the literal, material body at the end of time to stress on the experience of the separated soul after death, although this scholarship has pointed out that the separated soul was at the same time increasingly imaged as bodily (somatomorphic), and that ordinary piety came to be characterized by both a sense of the

significance of physical death and an emphasis on the spiritual value of somatic phenomena, especially suffering. (6)³

The divisions and issues raised here are surprisingly relevant for a discussion of contemporary thought about the life after death. In fact, these three categories of study are analogous to three major areas in today's representations of and thought about the afterlife. The first category takes in the tension between personal death and the collective end, and the narrative of a completed life imagined by the former. The second category considers the alien times and spaces of purgatory, which provide a ready-made setting to highlight the deictic differences between worlds inside and outside books. The other aspect which is of significance here is the concept of prayer-work, the idea of a debt that the living owe to the dead, and which creates a bond between them that is reinforced by a range of narratives, from ghost stories to dream visions to descent narratives. The third approach to medieval eschatology is the work on embodiment and personhood that translates, in fictional afterlives, into a concern which brings this full circle to Ariès's two deaths: to the real lives that are, today, concluded by the double endings of bodily death and brain death, one limited to the physical and hidden away, and one recorded publicly by the community and by the law.⁴

These three areas represent the major threads I want to trace through the history of the afterlife: the distinction between communal and individual experiences, the place of embodiment and physical experience of the afterlife (as opposed to the psychological, subjective or soul-experiences) and, finally, the

³ The second part of this quotation is referring to work begun by Jacques Le Goff in *The Birth of Purgatory* (1981), the third part to studies after Oscar Cullman's *Christ and Time* (1946).

⁴ In *The Hour of Our Death* (1981) Ariès describes how medieval thought about the end of life did not coincide with death: "The fact that life has an end is not overlooked, but this end never coincides with physical death. [. . .] Between the moment of death and the end of survival there is an interval that Christianity, like other religions of salvation, has extended to eternity. But in the popular mind the idea of infinite immortality is less important than the idea of an extension [. . .] the afterlife is essentially a period of waiting characterised by peace and repose. In this state the dead wait, according to the promise of the Church, for what will be the true end of life, the glorious resurrection and the life of the world to come" (604). Today, in contrast, death has become invisible and secretive, but at the same time more threatening to the cultural order, a feature Ariès identifies in the contrast between tamed and untamed death. However, I would argue that we still retain this sense of the difference between the moment of death and the end of survival through artificial means like life support, which makes brain and body death two separable processes.

relationship between this world and the Other World, which, in the case of medieval Christianity, was so complicated by the addition of purgatory. The aim here is to examine why these interlinked historical concerns should continue to be of such significance and attraction for modern texts.

The place of the individual in these creation-scale systems is reflected in microcosms of small groups and forced communities, often involving some shared institution with rules and an ordering logic. The story of different models for communities in the afterlife begins as early as Zoroastrian ideas of life after death, in an underworld in which people were enclosed within single cells or boxes. Alice K. Turner describes in *The History of Hell* (1993) how this was recorded in a descent narrative of the ninth century (18). She connects these boxes to the tradition in Byzantine art for depicting people in isolation in hell, with barriers separating them. In contrast, she argues, “chaotic and crowded” piles of naked bodies consistently characterise Western depictions of the damned. Turner describes hell as “oddly fleshy, with tortures that hurt and an atmosphere that is, particularly during some of Hell’s history, excessively gross” (3). Her story of the evolution of hell tends to make heavens sound rather dull by comparison, with the riotous depictions of hell offering titillating pleasure in graphic renderings of sin and punishment but, at the same time, casting their audience in the role of the saved in heaven, enjoying the pleasure the saved were said to derive from watching the torments of the damned.⁵ This has some very serious consequences for any modern representation of afterlives, when our best ambitions for ourselves as human beings are codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These two things are not only incompatible, but when there are hells in contemporary literature, the reader is cast into a position of disapproval, outside both heaven and

⁵ Philip C. Almond describes the mirrored logic of this ‘abominable fancy’ in *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England* (1989): “In the contrasting symmetries of heaven and hell, just as the sufferings of the damned were increased by the vision of the joys of the blessed, so also the joys of the righteous were heightened by the vision across the great divide to the torments of the wicked” (97). The phrase ‘abominable fancy’ comes from an outraged judgment on the idea by a nineteenth-century preacher, Dean Farrar, but Almond describes how it was a feature of the thought of Augustine, Tertullian, Thomas Aquinas and Peter of Lombardy, and was a belief that had “virtually disappeared” by the mid-nineteenth century, with cultural changes in the spectacular nature of punishment and suffering (97). D.P. Walker in *The Decline of Hell* (1964) situates the end of the abominable fancy as a widely held belief at the end of the seventeenth century, when it was “quietly dropped” (31).

hell, rather than taking pleasure in suffering from the satisfied position of one of the saved. The conflict between human rights and the afterlife (even heaven: “no marriage in heaven” denies us our human right to marriage and family life, not to mention the right to freedom of conscience and religious practice) summarises the essential conflict that runs through the hope for the afterlife and our hopes for ourselves as human beings: is heaven defined by being the opposite of human values, or the sum of the best of human values?

Returning to the excess and confusion of hell and the dullness of heaven that Turner implies in her study, we can see that there is certainly a logic and order behind hell if we take a quick glance over just some of the Last Judgments Turner includes in her richly illustrated book. At first sight, there is a marked difference in the stillness and symmetry of heaven and the movement and apparent disorder of hell, but there is a grammar and order that emerges on closer inspection. Two Judgments shown here are hells after Dante, and they show the possibilities for the order of heaven to be matched by an equally considered architecture for hell.



Fig. 1. Detail of the ceiling mosaic in the Florence Baptistery, 13th century. Battistero di San Giovanni; rpt. in Turner, 123.

This is the baptistry where Dante, like every other Florentine of the period, was baptised, and where he would have seen these mosaics before he was banished.

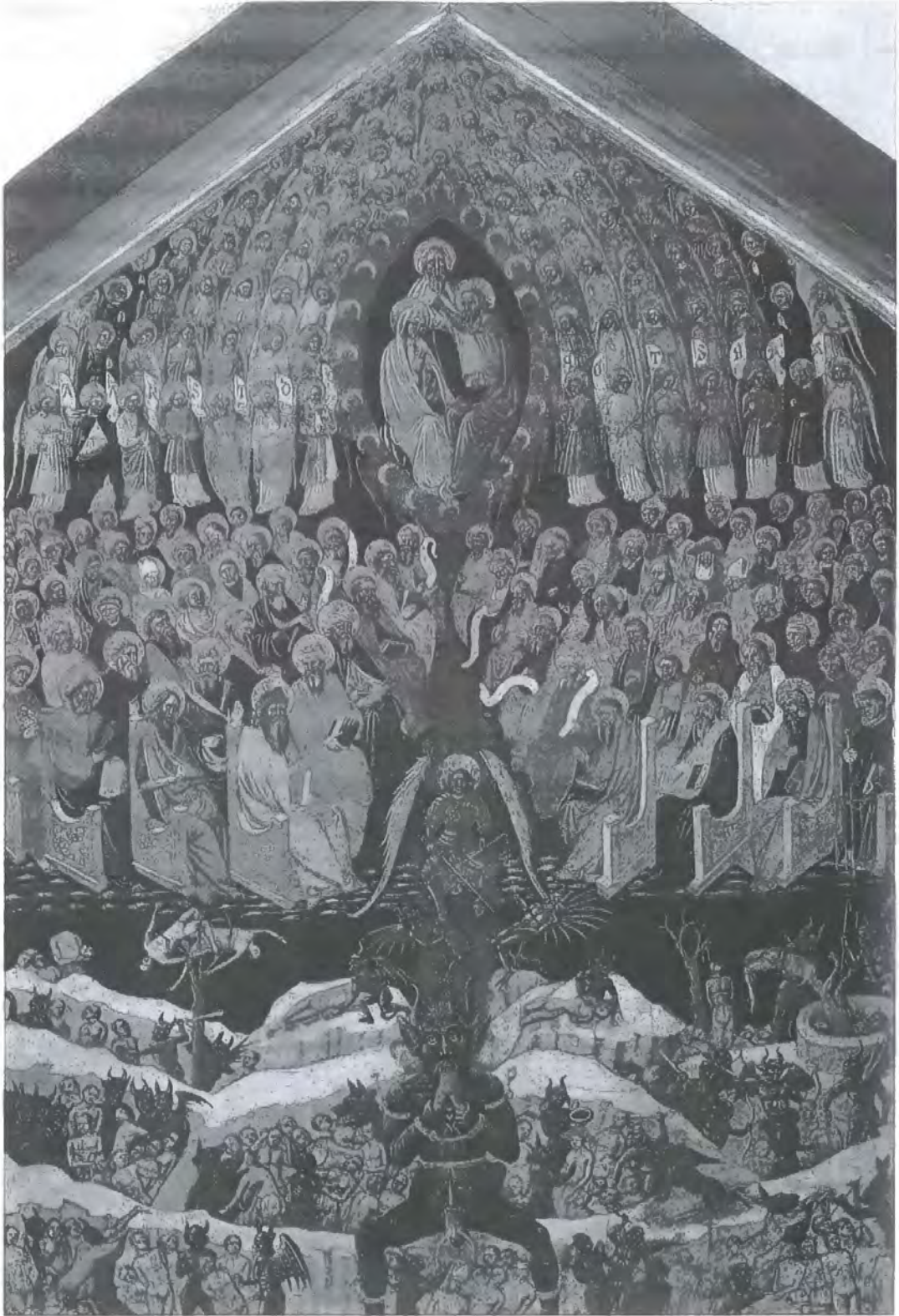


Fig. 2. Anonymous *Last Judgement*, 14th century
Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna; rpt. in Turner, 126.



Fig. 3. William Blake, *The Vision of the Last Judgment*, 1808
Petworth House, Sussex, National Trust; rpt. in Turner, 190.

In the earliest of these judgments the organisation of both heaven and hell is horizontal, with the saints above ranged in a row, and the damned below journeying into hell from the left of the picture. This irruption of an event, of time, into apparently eternal and unchanging scenes of torture is significant in adding to

the sense of activity that emanates from hell in these artworks, in contrast to the static perfection of heaven. Narrative images are, in this mosaic, of the devil's party. Figure 2 shows the architecture of Dante's *Inferno* firmly in place, compacting and collecting the damned in different, graded areas of punishment, with the circles connected by rock bridges above the pits. Again, the stories being told in the actions of the devils and the damned are contrasted with the angelic host in heaven, so impassive as to be mistaken for architectural or decorative features. There's something Escher-like in the way the negative spaces between the figures in heaven are the same colour as the devils in hell: the aesthetic and logic of one being the reverse of the other. In Blake's *Vision of the Last Judgment*, this logic and balance in both heaven and hell manifests as the moment of judging itself, as the souls are travelling, upwards on the left and down on the right, to their ultimate destinations in heaven and hell. Rather than representing the eternal end-point of the universe, Blake's painting offers the process in all its energy and movement, but still reveals the structure that lies behind the travel on the vertical axis.

These two aspects of hell – the fleshy hells that developed into the seventeenth century's Baroque "Jesuit overcrowding" (Turner, 173) and the Dantesque meticulous ordering and accounting for souls, with each sinner filed tidily within their appropriate circle – represent the poles of the worst possible outcomes for living in the world, and within a social order. There are few hells that see the damned neither crowded out by the presence of other people's bodies nor oppressed by the equivalent of state powers, either as in a horrifically overpopulated earthly city,⁶ or catalogued and controlled by an invisible power with the intention of causing maximum suffering to each individual. Both poles are ultimately united in contemporary fiction, in images of the city, the school, the hospital, the (refugee or displaced persons) camp, and, most overwhelmingly in the twentieth century, the concentration camp and the hotel.

⁶ Turner observes that the Jesuits dwelt particularly on the lack of sewerage facilities in hell, inspired by contemporary urban squalor: "The infernal stench was a human stench, and it was disgusting and everlasting and composed of filth and feces and pestilence and running sores and bad breath and everything else creative Jesuits came up with to make their wealthy clients resolve to mend their ways" (173).

We have seen how the city and increasing urbanisation added a layer to depictions of overcrowded hells, but some of the benefits of urbanisation and urban institutions were also translated into ideas about heaven, particularly in the nineteenth century and in the United States. For instance, the New York City preacher Thomas DeWitt Talmage described heaven in 1892 as a “great metropolis” with “boulevards of gold and amber and sapphire” (qtd. in McDannell and Lang, 279). In a time of urban expansion and, more importantly, town planning and brand new cityscapes, is it any wonder that hopes for the afterlife were tied up with the hopes invested and embodied in modern cities? The bestseller in mid-century America was Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Gates Ajar* (1868)⁷ which appealed to the nineteenth century’s interests in death, spiritualism, and family life, as well as to a specifically post-Civil War concern for the fate of dead loved ones. The heaven described in *The Gates Ajar* and actually visited in Phelps’s sequel, *Beyond the Gates* (1883) was largely pastoral, with the dead living in woodland cottages housing family groups and complete with pets, pianos, and audiences with famous figures from history. Coleen McDannell and Bernard Lang, in *Heaven: A History* (1988), conclude their analysis of this moment of Victorian religious feeling with the observation that, “It was the home, and not the church, which writers described as the ‘antitype’ of heaven” (272).

McDannell and Lang also offer some analysis of the systems in place in these heavens for souls whose needs were not met within the home, and had to be institutionalised. They give multiple examples of both preaching and religious novels that posit the idea of children being educated in heaven, and suggest that the efforts in favour of free schooling for all children were responsible for similar concerns in heaven (268). Phelps, for instance, describes how many of the souls in heaven “seemed to be students, thronging what we should call below colleges, seminaries or schools of art, or music or sciences” (195). McDannell and Lang also cite afterlives that included prisons, sanatoria and hospitals, presumably reflecting similar nineteenth-century interests in public health, healthcare institutions, and

⁷ McDannell and Lang note that the book had sold 80,000 copies in the US in the thirty-two years before 1900 and 100,000 copies in England, which was second only to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the league of American bestsellers. These figures are only for the original novel: Phelps’s sequels, *Beyond the Gates* (1883) and *The Gates Between* (1887) were also very widely read.

the model of sin as disease. We can draw a direct line (in this example and many others) from Phelps to today's bestseller of the afterlife, Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002), whose dead narrator is spending eternity in a perfect high school, and who recovers from the trauma of her murder through talking therapy and something approaching a support group.⁸

Of all the possible institutions of the afterlife, the concentration camp has been most often approached as an avatar of the inferno,⁹ but the hotel is an equally common trope that has received far less critical attention. The hotel has been a particularly potent and multivalent symbol because of its potential to represent any aspect of the afterlife: its temporary nature becomes a symbol of purgatory, or the *bardo* between reincarnations; its (literally) *unheimlich* qualities are exploited to full effect in the original hotel hell, Sartre's *No Exit* (1946), while, in Wyndham Lewis's *Monstre Gai* (1955) the fulfilment of all desires in the form of a perfect hotel – the angelically named Phaniel Hotel – becomes a model for one kind of heaven. The hotel continues to be a common image in more recent afterlives like Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001), D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1981), or Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989).

In an essay on Lewis's *The Human Age* (an uncompleted tetralogy, of which *Monstre Gai* is the second book) entitled 'Visions of Hell' (1966), J.G. Ballard offers a significant reading of how these institutional hells were completely altered by the events of the Second World War. Ballard's mid-century perception of the hotel and the death camp – both of which appear in the post-war books of Lewis's work, *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta* – favours a change in this sense of the institutional afterlife, once post-war consciousness had adapted to fully comprehend the implications of recent history:

A valid hell is one from which there is a possibility of redemption, even if this is never reached, the dungeons of an architecture of

⁸ In Sebold's novel the 'survivor' network is poignant and completely unironic, but these features have also been used to satirise therapy culture in texts like Will Self's *How the Dead Live* (2001) or Terry Pratchett's *Reaper Man* (1991), both of which depict post-mortem self help groups.

⁹ This is most powerfully so in the writing of Primo Levi. Critical attention to his work like Judith Woolf's *The Memory of the Offence* (1998: Chapter 5, 'A New Inferno') and Rachel Falconer's *Hell in Literature* (2005: Chapter 3, 'Auschwitz as Hell') extrapolates from his initial analogies.

grace whose spires point to some kind of heaven. The institutional hells of the present century are reached with one-way tickets, marked Nagasaki and Buchenwald, worlds of terminal horror even more final than the grave. (140)

In Ballard's reading, a hell in which the inferno rages for all without judgment is the end of the line for hell: the concept becomes invalid when there is nothing to imagine beyond indiscriminate torture. There is no ticket out of these hells, not because of eternity, but because there is no equivalent heaven. These horrifically real hells involve organisation and efficiency without the logic which was always coupled to these measures in the hells that follow Dante. George Steiner in *In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971) actually suggests that hell's dematerialisation into metaphor was *responsible* for the death camps, that the "ambiguous afterlife of religious feeling in Western culture" was to blame: "To have neither Heaven nor Hell is to be intolerably deprived and alone in a world gone flat. Of the two, Hell proved the easier to recreate" (48). Fictional afterlives then appear as a kind of inoculation against this possibility. In order to live, daily, imagining there's no heaven and labouring with a utopian hope of heaven on earth, it may be that we need to imagine and recreate other possibilities for the afterlife in fiction to prevent them materialising on earth.

In 'Visions of Hell', Ballard assesses the particular architecture of Lewis's work in terms of the organisational structures of consumer culture and totalitarian violence: the spaces are "layered like a department store, the presiding bureaucracy of demons and supernal gauleiters would satisfy the most narrow-minded fundamentalist" (140). Modernity's golden boulevards have their equivalent in the layers of an infernal department store, which skilfully combines imagery of the perambulatory tour of hell and the layered complex of organised and categorised spaces that makes up the afterlife.

This inescapably bleak view of a world in which human beings have surpassed our own previously imagined depictions of the utmost evil is worth reading in the context of Gnostic theology, which ultimately conflates earth with hell. The concept of an impersonal God, and one who has no involvement in or

responsibility for the evils of the world, is obviously an attractive one for moderns trying to reconcile the existence of a loving, paternal deity with the historical reality of genocide or the atomic bomb. Turner describes the Gnostic view of hell as “curiously modern” in its lack of egregious violence and “lurid imaginings” (48), but the theological basis seems to me just as modern as this failure of imagination after the “terminal horror” of Hiroshima or the Holocaust. For similar reasons, a painting like Hieronymous Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* also has this same “curiously modern” edge. One way of coping with the contemporary prospect of a hell, post-terminal horror, is combining the senseless suffering of mass death and the accretion of an almost unbearable level of meaning. In the example of Bosch, the minute significances in hell’s conventions (for instance, the reverse baptism of a Pope at the top right of the Pinacoteca Nazionale hell) are grossly inflated to the point of complete meaninglessness: there is every possibility that a bird-headed depiction of Satan with a cauldron for a hat and pots for shoes would have a very specific significance in afterlife-logic, but the combination of this potential meaning (just out of reach of decoding) and the surface arbitrariness forms a very modern sensibility about the afterlife, despite the painting’s origins in the sixteenth century.¹⁰

Ballard’s argument is, essentially, for a move from the details, mechanics and maps of the afterlife to a model for heaven or hell which comes from inside the individual. There has been a change from the institutionalised hell to the hell imagined as internal: “Hell is out of fashion – institutional hells at any rate. The populated infernos of the twentieth century are private affairs, the gaps between the bars are the sutures of one’s own skull” (140). We probably only need to go back to Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* or the experiences of Milton’s Satan to suggest that this is not a revolution unique to twentieth-century thought, and this is a thread that surfaces from out of institutionally organised afterlives over and over again.

¹⁰ A collection of features conventional in hell painting indicate that the bird-headed devil is Satan. For instance, he is sitting on a throne, from which sinners are being excreted into a pit, while he is eating a man (who is holding a horn in his feet and has birds flying out of his anus), and the bird-head can be sourced to the twelfth-century *Vision of Tundale*. The persistence of partial legibility in the symbolism suggests that there is some engagement with hell’s conventions: it’s not as simple as either everything or nothing signifying; profundity versus nonsense.

After hell, for instance, became filled with the torments of simply being human in the presence of other human beings (overcrowding, waste, decay: all the messy business of embodiment), rather than supernatural monsters or devils actively torturing the damned, then the next step in an afterlife characterised by the possibilities for man's inhumanity to man in the absence of God would be a turn to the possibilities for self-torture. This is matched by the neat possibility of virtue being its own reward in heaven. Ballard goes on to advance the position that "the hells that face us now" (the piece was originally published in 1966) do not take on the mechanics of the bureaucracy of punishment through an institution, but deal with "the very dimensions of time and space, the phenomenology of the universe, the fact of our own consciousness" (144). These are always the issues at stake in narrating the Other World as it is manifested in other places and other laws of time and space.

Both the internal, subjective sense of an afterlife that is determined only by the state of the individual, and the idea of the Gnostic hell on earth conform to another strand in the history of the afterlife, which can be described as an oscillation between the most explicit and the most cryptic or abstract senses of life after death. McDannell and Lang call these poles the anthropocentric and the theocentric forms of the afterlife, making use of "convenient theological jargon" on the subject (353). Since the belief in an anthropocentric afterlife does not necessarily denote an absence of God (although there are some influences from Buddhism and other non-theist beliefs) it is important to define McDannell and Lang's terms further: they suggest that anthropocentric heavens stem from ancient ancestor worship and the natural desire to undo the personal losses of death, while theocentric heavens emphasise the supernatural status of heaven by removing the emotional awareness of loss, thereby directing every sense towards the presence of God. *Heaven: A History* describes itself as a work on the "social and cultural history of heaven" (xii), which leads its authors to a natural emphasis on the inter-personal relations in the afterlife; the community of saints, the models of medieval courtly love, which imagined a heavenly court based on values of romantic love; the Renaissance rediscovery of the Ciceronian reunion motif and the classical descent

narrative, prompting meetings with dead friends and famous people in literary imaginings of the afterlife; and the Victorians' heaven of home and the family group (summarised 355-356). Conversely, the history of the theocentric heaven is traced from the teachings of early Christians, as McDannell and Lang argue that Jesus, St Paul and St John of Patmos remodelled the heaven taught by the Pharisees according to two basic ideas: "the priority of orientation toward God with direct experience of the divine, and the rejection of ordinary society structured by kinship, marriage and concomitant family concerns" (44). For me, the story of the afterlife told here is one of its contested ownership between, loosely, mass culture and the theologians. There is compelling drama in this conflict between the investment of the best hopes of human beings in the sum total of human and divine love, and the concept of perfection in an order that is the opposite of everything human.

As McDannell and Lang's study shows, there has been an ever-present problem with identifying the contents of heaven: too little information and the afterlife becomes abstract and irrelevant to the lives of ordinary people, too much, and heaven becomes mawkish and ridiculous, while hell becomes pantomime or pornography. However, there are some very orthodox figures who are arguing for a middle ground that avoids explicit depiction of the afterlife but maintains the emphasis on relationships and community that seems to lie at the heart of the anthropocentric model. Pope John Paul II, in a General Audience address given on 21 July 1999 and archived on the Vatican's webpage, discussed heaven in terms of the individual experience:

It is always necessary to maintain a certain restraint in describing these "ultimate realities" since their depiction is always unsatisfactory. Today, personalist language is better suited to describing the state of happiness and peace we will enjoy in our definitive communion with God.

Personalist language that talks about an individual relationship with God is one possibility for uniting these anthropocentric and theocentric poles.

The final story I want to offer for the history of the afterlife is related to this oscillation between human values and divine (implicitly non-human) values, and involves processes by which the concepts of the afterlife have the potential to leach into the world of the living. The border here is particularly thin between the world and purgatory, which can be most easily associated with this story, in the same way that heaven and hell are better fitted to concerns about the points at which individuals (as human bodies or in social institutions) meet. Where hell and heaven are largely spatial ideas, purgatory's conceptual framework is a temporal one, and it occupies a position most genuinely after life: time goes on there – after a fashion – which is the supplement to and copy of life time; the dead go there immediately after death rather than having to wait for judgment and the end of time entirely; its logic is the human logic of debt and repayment, and so on.

The first aspect of purgatory to note is that it has long been recognised as the best fit for the properties of narrative. Even if hell might be the most lurid and compelling, purgatory is easier to narrate. In *Génie du christianisme* (1826), written after his reconversion back to Catholicism, Chateaubriand commented on the affinities between purgatory and certain aspects of its representation in art:

It must be confessed that the doctrine of purgatory offers Christian poets a type of the marvellous unknown to antiquity. There is nothing more favourable to the muses than this place of purification, situated between sorrow and joy, which implies the union of confused feelings of happiness and misfortune. The gradation of these souls in their sufferings – more or less happy, more or less brilliant – according to past sins and according to their proximity to the double eternities of pleasure or pain, could supply topics for art. Purgatory surpasses heaven and hell in poetry because it presents a future missing from the primary locations of the afterlife. (II: IV: xv, my translation)¹¹

¹¹ In the original: "On avouera du moins que le *purgatoire* offre aux poètes chrétiens un genre de *merveilleux* inconnu à l'antiquité. Il n'y a peut-être de plus favorable aux Muses, que ce lieu de purification, place sur les confins de la douleur et de la joie, où viennent se réunir les sentiments confus de Bonheur et de l'infortune. La gradation des souffrances en raison des fautes passées, ces âmes, plus ou moins heureuses, plus ou moins brillantes, selon qu'elles approchent plus ou moins de

Some of the features of purgatory that Chateaubriand identifies here are not unique to this aspect of the afterlife. For instance, the satisfaction that comes from allotting punishments that uniquely fit the crime is equally possible through hell or reincarnation (as in the karmic return of Will Self's *How the Dead Live*, when the narrator is reincarnated as her own granddaughter, and forced to live with the next-generation consequences of her failed parenting). However, the other element expressed here is purgatory's unique placement in the light of the possibility of both development and endings. Those features vital for narrative – the passage of time and the occurrence of changes within that time – cannot be found in heaven or hell. Purgatory offers a shape to a narrative of development and change, but it is also the closest to earthly time: one of the theological objections to purgatory is that it is just an extension of life, when people ought to have already oriented their conduct towards God when given the opportunity.

In *The Persistence of Purgatory* (1995), Richard K. Fenn makes an argument for the importance of the temporality of purgatory to our lives, right up to the present day, and suggests that the relationship between purgatory and life is one of the most complex of all the relations between life and afterlife. It is also the most preoccupied with narrative properties. Fenn argues that purgatory changed our notions of time, and that the modern sense of urgency and responsibility about time – manifested in worries about lateness, wasting time, running out of time, appointments and, of course, deadlines – comes directly from our continued investment in purgatorial thinking.

One principal theme which this thesis explores is the way that thinking about the afterlife encourages a displacement of thinking about life. In *The Birth of Purgatory* (1981), Jacques Le Goff teases out many of the conceptual reconfigurations that had to occur in order for the doctrine of purgatory to truly take hold, including advances in cartography, theories of justice, and new techniques in finance and accounting. These came together in a new understanding of space, and particularly of time, that made purgatory's relations with the world

la double éternité des plaisirs ou des peines, pourraient fournir des sujets touchants au pinceau. Le purgatoire surpasse en poésie le ciel et l'enfer, en ce qu'il présente un avenir qui manqué aux deux premiers."

into something revolutionary. According to Le Goff, not only did purgatory destabilise the idea of a boundary between life and death, it also “became an annex of the earth and extended the time of life and of memory” (233). The relations between the dead and the living became more complicated, with suffrages offered by the living and visitations coming from the dead to walk the earth. With this complexity, argues Le Goff, came narratives that linked the two worlds, from ghost stories to death-bed ‘accounts’ of lives that attempted to total the time that would be spent in purgatory, and therefore the requests for prayers that should be asked from survivors in a last will and testament. The culmination of this relationship is identified in *The Birth of Purgatory* as the simultaneous developments in a certain kind of heavily emplotted, individualist narrative and purgatory:

The success of Purgatory was contemporary with the rise of narrative. More than that, the two phenomena are related.

Purgatory introduced a plot into the story of individual salvation.

Most important of all, the plot continued after death. (291)

Plot is analogous with Chateaubriand’s identification of purgatory’s future as a necessity for narrative thinking.

Returning to the place of purgatorial thinking today, in Fenn’s analysis of the subject, we can see that these narrative and temporal configurations still retain a powerful hold. Fenn’s argument is informed by Charles Taylor’s view, in *Sources of the Self* (1989), that modernity saw the emergence of a “radically reflexive” self. In Fenn’s reading of Taylor, “the impulse to self-reformation [. . .] appears in the widespread belief in purgatory” (qtd. in Fenn, 84):¹² self creation is constantly in progress in operations rooted in purgatory; through narrative, through taking responsibility for the self, through making the most of time. Moreover, in Fenn’s work, the reflexivity of the self is also linked to the special time of purgatory, which involves a casting forward to the self in the future, and an envisioning of the present self as past. He finds that, “To remember the future was not only the quintessential act of Christian piety; it defined modernity” (12). This is modern

¹² Taylor’s study is of similar importance in Rachel Falconer’s *Hell in Literature*, in which she connects the self-reforming narration of the descent into and return from the underworld to Taylor’s arguments about the radically reflexive self: “The prominence of the katabatic model is, I think, directly linked to what Taylor calls the ‘inward turn’ of modern identity” (27).

thinking, on which consequentialist ethics, insurance, loans and investments, and the plotting of the novel all rely.

The other significant change in thinking about the afterlife, which occurred from the mid-nineteenth century onward, was the introduction of Buddhist and Hindu thought about life after death into Western cultures. This involved a separation of the theory and practice of these religions, with Buddhism in particular being considered as an ideally textual construct, with its practice a degraded and secondary concern.¹³ Only one of the contemporary texts considered in this thesis has a wholly Buddhist perspective (just as only one involves an Islamic afterlife) but the idea of reincarnation and karmic justice is an influential and powerful one. The stories of the afterlife considered above have established a movement from explicit, external punishment and reward to a concept of being punished or rewarded by sinfulness or virtue in themselves: a distinction between being punished *for* sin and being punished *by* sin. Some of these ideas were already invested in purgatory, in a return of the early Christian ideas of thinkers such as Origen, who argued that there must be a place for redemption even after death and, given the possibility of infinite time, the potential for universal redemption.¹⁴ Universal redemption, brought about through repentance after death, is fundamentally incompatible with the vicarious atonement that is central to the message of Christ. This means that, as in Fenn's analysis, when the doctrine of purgatory is introduced, life and afterlife again become a continuous, unbroken opportunity for redemption.

Reincarnation and purgatory do involve some comparable ideas about the self: within Buddhist thought, the most damaging spiritual error is *attavada*, the belief that the self is distinct from others and from the world, yet karma also has to be worked through without the possibility of atonement by a third party. Similarly, purgatory can be seen as both a force for encouraging collective responsibility for

¹³ This is the view of Philip C. Almond in *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (1988), who suggests that the function of Buddhism in British thought in the nineteenth century was as part of a constellation of ideas about Eastern cultures, primarily functioning as foils for Western self-conceptualising.

¹⁴ Origen (C185-C254) was eventually posthumously excommunicated by the Synod of Constantinople in 543.

the fate of the dead, but also a new form of individualism that was deeply concerned with self-responsibility and self-creation.

One of the explanations offered for the interest in reincarnation in Philip C. Almond's *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (1988) is the rise of religious pluralism in the increasingly secular society of the nineteenth century (34). Conversely, Alasdair Gray, in his novel *Lanark: a Life in Four Books* (1981), also attributes the imbalance that favours the infernal imagination to increasing secularisation: "modern afterlives are always infernos, never paradisos, presumably because the modern secular imagination is more capable of debasement than exaltation" (489). We have seen above that other analysts of modern afterlives have found that hell has attracted more attention than heaven, but we have also seen an increasing interest in purgatory and reincarnation as concepts which have a more attractive potential for change and development. Both of these have been attributed to increasing secularisation, and the dominance of secularism in the present is the point from which I started this discussion. According to Charles Taylor's analysis in *A Secular Age* (2007), the major features of secularisation do not just include the option of choosing between many possibilities for the expression of faith or, more often today, spirituality, but a move from transcendence to immanence or, in the terminology I have taken from McDannell and Lang, theocentrism to anthropocentrism as the primary value system. In Taylor's words: "we have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as unproblematically outside of or 'beyond' human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it (in a wide range of different ways) 'within' human life" (15). If, like Alasdair Gray and many other writers, we are going to rank aspects of the afterlife in terms of their rate of occurrence in contemporary fiction, purgatory, rather than hell, would probably come out on top. In a secular age, however, the significance of afterlives is their status as fictions rather than beliefs, and the self-consciousness that arises from this is inseparable from a consideration of formal elements, narrative conventions, and the practice of metafiction.

Narrative. Afterlife. Modern. Fiction

In the poem *Close to me & Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven)* (1995), the poet Alice Notley wrote the lines that head this chapter:

Only poetry can hold the . . . depths . . . of heaven . . . in one still place.

The only way on earth . . . we might say what we know . . . in the all-at-once way . . . that we know it . . . (54).¹⁵

This is a challenge to narrative, but one which this study will show many writers have been ready to face, precisely in order to explore the outer limits of what narrative is capable of conveying of the “all-at-once” knowledge offered by the afterlife. There is an important network of interactions here which leads me to investigate the conflict about the nature of the afterlife as a conflict of ideas about time and its expression in words, manifested here as an association which pairs poetry and eternity, narrative and time. In the terms of one history of the afterlife, McDannell and Lang’s *Heaven: A History*, poetry can be categorised with the not-human aspects of heaven, the theocentric, while narrative, and particularly the novel, would fall on the anthropocentric side of their division.

In other work by Notley, historical and fictional narratives are conflated, with both being equally culpable in the manufacture of distance between lived time and its representations. In *The Descent of Alette* (1992), all books that record or represent life are responsible for dividing up the wholeness of time and creating death:

“Books” “books ruined us” “Scrolls & tablets” “created time,”
“created” “keeping track” “Distanced us from the” “perpetuation” “of
our beautiful” “beginning moment . . .” “only moment” “Created
death” (132).¹⁶

As this thesis will go on to show, texts engaging with life after death are always aware of the objection that writing about life after death colours living existence, and discussion of the techniques of the modern novel has regularly linked them to an awareness of mortality at the expense of other ways of experiencing time and

¹⁵ In the quotations, all unbracketed ellipses are in the original.

¹⁶ Falconer, in *Hell in Literature*, has a powerful and convincing analysis of this poem in the sixth chapter of her study, in the context of a discussion of women writing descent narratives.

life. In the introduction to the volume in which *The Descent of Alette* is published, *The Scarlet Cabinet*, Notley suggests that poetry (“including prose that is poetry, novels, stories that are poems” [v]) is important in a society filled with extraneous, wasteful material because it can convey truths less wastefully, and less *humanly*:

Poetry has had many uses in the past which are denied it now. It told stories, for example, often more quickly & more *essentially* than prose does – & taking up less bulk of pages, less of the physical & psychic space of the outer world. Movies, & most novels, are simply more dominating than poems are. They *impose* their stories, they impose minds upon us. Poetry’s involvement with music formalizes it, beautifies it, its aesthetics are more like nature’s, less like a human’s. (vi)

The mythic sense of a poem like *The Descent of Alette* is an attempt to make the physical existence of the poem superfluous, to create “a holy story, that is told again & again, that is known in the air, that satisfies without the temporality of successive pages, the terrible linearity of all these successive books” (vi): the ideal poetry, then, is outside time when it is re-experienced and recalled in the mind, rather than when it is read. In an email dialogue with the poet Claudia Keelan published in *The American Poetry Review* (2004) Notley mischievously indicates exactly the type of novel which has proved her point in its dominating bulk of pages when she mentions Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, calling him one of the “big-fattome male novelists” (16).¹⁷ Perhaps the project of writing a novel, which inevitably takes up a lot of physical room in the world, is somewhat abated by choosing to set it in the Other World, where its conceptual space, at least, will not overlap?

The non-narrative and unnarratable aspects of life after death are always encroaching on the territory of narratives of the afterlife, and quotations from Notley’s poetry counterpoint my arguments at the beginning of every chapter of this thesis: the areas where narrative and the afterlife are a good fit for each other become even more significant after consideration of the many areas where they are

¹⁷ I think Notley also realises the appropriateness of choosing that particular big fat tome, after her own engagements with the underworld in *The Descent of Alette*.

impossible to unite. In opening a study of narrative, novels and the afterlife by referring to poetry that denies narrative the capacity to write about the afterlife, by a poet who has condemned the novel as an essentially wasteful form, I want to venture that this is a continuation of the debate which has been conducted among theologians for centuries about the correct way of representing the afterlife to ordinary people.

The specifics of narrative in the form of the novel are under investigation here, but it is important to note that the most powerful models for twentieth-century writing about the afterlife mainly have their origins in drama. I have already mentioned Wyndham Lewis's *The Human Age*, which was initially created as a drama for broadcast on BBC radio. Alasdair Gray's *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* and J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* both make (more or less) explicit reference to Lewis's work in the afterlives they imagine.¹⁸ The other two major influences from the earlier part of the twentieth century are Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* (1946) and the plays of Samuel Beckett, whose tramps and moribunds can be seen in characters like Ali Smith's homeless woman, Else, and Lise, who narrates from her bed during a long illness.¹⁹

No Exit famously identified hell as other people, and the torture of that particular afterlife relies upon the preservation of identity, which the history of the afterlife has shown to be a central concern. Alongside Sartre's hell, which takes institutions and relationships of ordinary life and turns them hellish in infinite time, I want to place Samuel Beckett's characters, who are less the living dead and more the dead living. Beckett's settings, particularly in his dramatic work, occupy curious places, halfway between life and death, yet the overall effect is of the deathliness of life, rather than the liveliness of death. Scholarship on the place of

¹⁸ Gray lists Lewis in his index of plagiarisms (489), and Elizabeth Costello's life after death takes place in a camp where she has to face a bailiff and give an account of herself, as is expected of the characters in *Childermass*: she describes the camp as "a purgatory of clichés" assembled out of other texts appropriate to the afterlife of a writer (206).

¹⁹ These last are from *Hotel World*. The sentence constructions in Smith's novel are also reminiscent of the narratives in Beckett's *Trilogy*, particularly *The Unnamable*, as the process of disappearing from the world is narrated.

death and the afterlife in Beckett's work is wide-ranging and meticulous and I do not have the space here to give all these issues the full attention they deserve.²⁰

Steven Connor discusses the differences that are generally identified between dramatic and novelistic processes in *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (1988), noting, "It is conventional, for instance, to oppose the living art of the theatre to the dead or abstract experience of private reading" (116). Dead men walking in the theatre are perhaps even more revolutionary than dead men speaking in the novel. However, I want to argue that the influence of Beckett on more recent fictions has been from both the "living" art of his plays and the dead words read from his novels.

Connor analyses *Waiting for Godot* in terms which will resonate in every chapter of this thesis:

To reappear, to be on stage again, is in itself to allow the shadow of absence or non-being to fall across the fullness and simplicity of *Dasein*. It opens up the dual anxiety of living in time, an anxiety expressing itself in the two questions: 'am I the same as I was yesterday,' and 'will I be the same as I am today?' [. . .] To reconstitute the day in memory and representation is to open that gap between the original and its repetition which can never entirely be closed, either for the characters or for their audience; we can never be sure again of the simple factuality of the day and its events. What is more, the present moment will come to seem more and more dependent upon recapitulation in the future. So, when Vladimir sees the boy for the second time, he is concerned to make sure that he will indeed tell Godot that he has seen them. Despite the uncertainties of memory and recapitulation, it is not simply enough for Vladimir to be there: he must confirm this simple past tense by reference to an anticipated retrospect. (119)

²⁰ John L. Murphy's recent essay 'Beckett's Purgatories' in *Beckett, Joyce and the Art of the Negative* (2005) begins with an excellent overview of previous scholarship in this area (110n.3), particularly the range of work on Beckett's debt to Dante and medieval Christian thought.

These are the problems at the heart of a fictional afterlife, a second life that ghosts the first one, casting both in the role of the inauthentic or repetitious. In the form of a novel, it demands to be read always with an eye to its own end, which replaces the present with an anticipated retrospect. In terms of presence, not only are both being displaced by the pre-eminence of the other but, when they are represented in narrative, the complexities of tense and temporality complicate the prospect in very different ways from a dramatic presentation. This is the complaint that Notley makes about books: when they “Distanced us from the” “perpetuation” “of our beautiful” “beginning moment . . .” “only moment” “Created death”, they were also forcing us to view directly the divisions that were opened up in time by the repetition of the world in its representation and in the recounting of events.

The only one of Beckett’s novels which seems to come down on the side of the living dead than the dead living is *How It Is* (published in French as *Comment c’est* in 1961 and in English in 1964). In *Beckett’s Dying Words* (1993), Christopher Ricks describes it as “the strangest of Beckett’s novels, the one which makes as if – feints as if – to convert his trilogy [. . .] into a tetralogy” (3). However, the intervening period in Beckett’s work was filled with the dramatic works, *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, that most interrogated the dramatic consequences and possibilities of having figures from the afterlife present on the stage. *How It Is* is a very different text from the earlier trilogy of novels, with its present-tense narrative and division into stanza-like sections reminiscent of Dante’s *terza rima*. The change seems to be from an investigation of the possibilities of dead or almost-dead voices in the novels, to the implications of presence and the present among the dead in Beckett’s dramatic works. *How It Is* reads like one of the first attempts to put these performed discoveries onto the page.

Finally, amongst all these dramatic precursors there is also the figure of William Faulkner who, along with the impossible voices explored by Beckett, provides the most significant influence on much of the narrative experimentation going on in these novels. Brian Richardson discusses Beckett and Faulkner in *Unnatural Voices* (2006), a study of “extreme forms of narration” that cannot be covered by the conventional categories of narrative theory (ix), and which can only

occur in the context of non-mimetic narrative fictions, not within non-fiction discourse. The work of both authors, Richardson suggests, features voices which are permeable, blending with other consciousnesses and speaking in ways which would be impossible if their narratives were understood as world-reflecting rather than world-creating. Richardson's "unnatural" imagines any kind of narration in which a voice does not match up with a single, human speaker and seer, whose discourse is implicitly rooted in nonfictional traditions of biography or autobiography (76). Dead narrators are always unnatural, and heterodiegetic-extradiegetic narrators describing other worlds are even more so: their narratives cannot exist in the natural world, and their only possible status is as fiction. Faulkner's Addie Bundren and Quentin Compson are at the head of a line of dead narrators who have populated contemporary narrative fiction.

The formal divisions that demarcate the study of the novel are matched by the need to give some justification for the chronological barrier I have placed at the beginning of my study. When I use it here, the term modern (like the term life) is always subject to a prefix that will consign our present to an imagined past. Like life, too, modernity is supplemented with extensions and additions. This makes the distinction between the modern and the contemporary a fraught one for me: essentially, I have worked with a distinction between texts as they have influenced and texts as they have been influenced. Here is an example, from the conversation between the protagonist and the author at the end of *Lanark*:

The index proves that Lanark is erected upon the infantile foundation of Victorian nursery tales, though the final shape derives from English language fiction printed between the 40's and 60's of the present century. The hero's biography after death occurs in Wyndham-Lewis's [sic] trilogy *The Human Age*, Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* and Golding's *Pincher Martin*. (493)²¹

²¹ "Victorian nursery tales" are an unexpected source shared by many of the afterlife narratives considered in this thesis. Lewis Carroll's delight in over-applied logic and paradoxes, the shape-shifting and blurring between inner states and the physical world that occurs in *The Water Babies*, and the moral logic behind magical events in the work of George MacDonald all offer other worlds that are filled with the same processes as fictional afterlives. The pleasures that are coming from freely operating invention, even whimsy, in these texts, combine with the faceless menace and powerlessness inherited from Kafka and from twentieth-century consciousness of the proximity of

The influencing segment of the texts considered here can be mostly defined as “English language fiction printed between the 40’s and 60’s of the present century” (and the printed is an important point of note for two of the texts listed in this quotation). Adding Beckett and Faulkner (with a fair amount of elasticity in these dates), and the earlier works of Muriel Spark offers a loose division between the more recent novels of the afterlife and the ones which have shaped and defined this popular subject and its techniques. For a reference on the chronology of all the primary texts used in this thesis, and a guide to some of their relevant structural features, please refer to Appendix I.

This thesis investigates the interaction between narrative experimentation and the afterlife in modern and contemporary novels. The points of contact between life after death and the narrative conventions of the novel are numerous, and it is these that are exposed as texts begin to experiment and examine the basis of their tools for imagining worlds and human beings, and for telling events, thoughts and emotions. In this vein, there are three overlapping areas which are covered here. Chapters 2 to 4 are concerned at the widest level with the features of narrative that orient it towards its own end. More specifically, Chapter 2 challenges the status of apocalypse as the dominant paradigm (in the wake of Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*) for making the connection between narrative endings and eschatology. There is a place for the afterlife in a field of study of narrative endings which has been skewed dramatically towards the apocalyptic, and this can be best established by identifying the ways in which death and the afterlife could be a more effective model for reading. Among these advantages is an emphasis on the multitude of individual stories, ends and meanings, rather than a single, totalising revelation. This opens up a space for reading which is collaborative and creative, rather than a work of decoding the text’s pre-ordained signs and portents. Using the work of Paul Ricoeur, the second half of this chapter suggests an alternative model for the relationship between living and reading, which is informed by ideas raised by life after death. The

totalitarianism. This combination is largely responsible for a particular tone (identified above as the dynamic between meaningfulness and meaninglessness) that can be found in texts that describe the details of life after death.

closing arguments of the chapter rely on a reading of Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* (1959) to establish the possibilities of living and reading with a memory of death.

Developing out of this reading of Ricoeur and influenced by the work of Peter Brooks and Mark Currie, Chapter 3 begins to investigate certain aspects of plotting and narrative ordering in time, in order to assemble some ideas about the place of causality in narrative. The afterlife provides a unique backdrop for this investigative work as it is rooted in a relationship of cause and effect: the meanings that come from any afterlife are an effect of conduct on earth, whether reincarnation, punishment or reward coming about through having to live with yourself for all eternity, or the convoluted mechanisms of categorisation that place the dead in exactly their deserved spot in the afterlife. However, narratives of life after death also encounter a displacement of causes and effects due to the strange temporal relations at work between life and afterlife. The novels considered in this section engage with structural issues of narrative including past-tense narration and prolepsis, and set the investigation of these structures against the problems of cause and effect in the afterlife. Ali Smith's *Hotel World*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2001, 1973 and 2005, respectively) all present re-readings of what it means to anticipate endings in life and in narratives. Smith's novel reinterprets the meanings of the *memento mori* established as a model for reading in the previous chapter, and *Gravity's Rainbow* explores the insidiousness creep of the afterlife into living in ways which are related particularly to ideas about predestination.

In Chapter 2 the paradoxical temporal relations considered took the form of the *memento mori*, the memory of future death that reverses the temporal order of ordinary remembrance. Chapter 3 explores a wider sense of causal processes that are inverted or destabilised by what I have termed the after effect: the consequence that genuinely (not theoretically) precedes the cause, and which relies on accepting the proposition of life after death to unfold the full consequences of its logic. Without the afterlife, narrative's requirements for reversed memory can be translated into ordinary anticipation and hope or fear (as in Peter Brooks's terminology of the anticipation of retrospection in *Reading for the Plot*) but in

narratives about life after death this reversed causality is transferred into the happenings of the plot itself, thereby inflecting reading processes with the logic of the afterlife. The final section of the chapter explores the place of prolepsis in these inverted causalities through a reading of Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, a novel that explores both readers' knowledge of a famous story in the retelling, and the confusion in narrative time that occurs in revisiting the afterlife of these well-known stories.

Eternity is a central feature of heaven and hell, so story, plot, or even the unfolding of events all have a problematic status in this context. In Chapter 4, this problem comes to the fore, with a consideration of the plot shapes and conventions involved in writing about the dead. The chapter considers a wide variety of novels that employ a dead narrator for all or part of their narration, by contemporary authors including Robertson Davies, Susanna Moore, Amy Tan, Alice Sebold, Glen Duncan, Neil Jordan and Gilbert Adair. All these texts frame their narratives according to a dynamic that involves both life writing, or configuring the self through narrative, and finding a narrative that has space within it for the voice of one of the dead. The first possible narrative shape investigated is the descent narrative (which has been very thoroughly analysed in terms of writing the self in Rachel Falconer's *Hell in Literature*); a form which meets a problem in the afterlives of the self-narrating dead, whose descent into hell would have to be eternal and irreversible. Dead narrators are generally, instead, going through a period of purgation before their final fate or ultimate extinction.

At the centre of this chapter is analysis of two plot formations – the detective story and the ghost story – and their attendant narrative conventions, which have a place for the dead to occupy, but not usually a voice for them. In the texts considered, these plots are half-accepted and half-refused, and it is this ambivalence which characterises contemporary dead narrators' play with these genres. The final section returns to the idea of writing the self, but in the form of memoir, autobiography, confession, or therapeutic narrative, which shapes life into a tellable possibility from beyond the end. Chapters 4 and 5 also begin analysis of the technique of the dead narrator, and it is significant that the plots of the generic

traditions listed above are all either directly related to the practice of life-writing, or to forms that often work by silencing the dead. The two strands running through this chapter, then, are the idea of writing into gaps in earlier narratives to provide a voice for the dead in genres when their silent presence is central, or to fulfil what seems to be the ultimate unspoken aim of life-writing: to narrate a completed life from after death when there is no possibility of further supplementation. Life-writing is present as a model from the earliest example of the technique of the dead narrator: Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis's experimental novel, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881). Narration by the dead therefore reveals gaps in all of these structuring plots, which demand to be filled by dead voices. However, the extension to life which is provided by the afterlife ultimately undermines any attempts to fill these gaps and provide an unassailable ending.

The model of the afterlife at work here – an extension to life which is, in turn, offered closure in a second death – is most compatible with the idea of purgatory, or even reincarnation, and the narratives close at the point of translation into eternity. This reinforces the idea of a fundamental mismatch between eternity and narrative. For comparison, Chapter 7 considers narratives which do attempt to convey something of eternity, and something of their struggles with it too.

Chapter 4 focuses on the place of first-person, dead narrators voicing silences in established generic traditions, and in Chapter 5 the discussion moves to a consideration of the special status of the dead narrator in the often-binary categorisation of narrators into first-person, limited, and third-person, omniscient narrators. Narrators are contested figures, whose strange and non-human abilities have seen their personhood and humanity probed from all angles, including criticisms of the divine model for omniscience, and possible substitutes for the term 'omniscience' offered in the concepts of transparency and telepathy. In order to break down these distinctions between the properties and personhood of narrators, Chapter 5 analyses the status of dead narrators in Muriel Spark's *The Comforters*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Transparent Things*, and William Faulkner's *As I*

Lay Dying (1957, 1972, 1930), and a mind-reading dead character whose narratorial position is up for examination in David Foster Wallace's 1997 novel, *Infinite Jest*. One of the properties that first-person dead narrators share with more conventional third-person narrators is their ability to read minds, and travel across space unseen by the characters. The dead narrator appears in fiction as a way of destabilising these categories, and contesting the idea of considering narrators as persons or as human beings. The parallels that are drawn between the techniques for narratorial knowledge and the knowledge attributed to the dead reshape the reading of any previously 'omniscient' narrator.

After this disturbance in the ordinary categorisations of hetero-, homo-, extra- or intradiegetic narrators, the position of the dead in narrative fiction's diegetic terms is at stake. If a dead narrator can read minds, can travel across time and space, and knows the beginning and end of the story all at once, yet is invisible to characters, what level of narration and what world is he or she inhabiting? Chapter 6 considers the strange kinds of space at work in the afterlife, with a focus on the issues of perspective and point of view raised by the embodied or disembodied narrator. The importance of the spatial elements of narrative's deictic movement from this world to another is complicated by a move to an afterlife, whose status as part of our world is fraught with complexity. Moreover, the afterlife only contains a temporal distinction from life within it, yet the Other World or the underworld are more common markers of life after death than the after world. Changes in the way that space has been perceived throughout history have altered the understanding of time in the afterlife, from alterations in cartography and painting techniques to differences in the understanding of the physics of space, to the changes in spaces and their perception in modernity and postmodernity. The introduction of the techniques of perspectival art to sixteenth-century Turkey is the subject of Orhan Pamuk's 1998 novel *My Name is Red*, and three of the novel's multiple narrators tell their change of point of view from life to death. Mapping and cartography feature strongly in the representations of life after death in novels by Alasdair Gray and Will Self, and the television is explored as an agent of connection between distant worlds in Thomas M. Disch's *The Businessman* (1984).

One option for representing eternity is to imagine still images of the afterlife where spatial distances and orientation, rather than situation in time or the unfolding of events and processes, lends meaning to the individual elements. However, this is a difficult prospect for narrative fiction. Chapter 7 investigates the intersection of experimental fictional ideas with ideas from modern physics, and contrasts the techniques employed by four texts: William Golding's *Pincher Martin* (1956), Wyndham Lewis's tetralogy, *The Human Age*, Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (1967), and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1991). These attempts to narrate eternity take a range of forms, from a focus on subjective time, the time controlled by institutions, repeated, circular time, and reversed or oscillationist time. The endeavour of defining time in the light of what it is not has a venerable tradition, but what time is and what we experience as time are, today, understood as being two different things. Starting with a division of time and eternity, this chapter explores the proliferating others against which time has to be defined. The place of attempting to narrate what is 'other than time' represents a movement towards narrating what is other than the world and what is other than life, or, what is after the world and what is after life.

The final chapter of this thesis investigates some of the wider cultural implications of coming after in terms of post- and meta-, two prefixes that signify coming after, but which have very different connotations. They are both powerfully united in novels which are concerned with life after death. The contemporary sense of continuing life much as normal after the end of history, of humanism, of religion, and of the present (via postmodernity) is at least partly responsible for the ease with which the dead have started to talk in the novels we read. In parallel with this life in death and death in life, is post-fiction: metafictional texts that are forcibly aware of their own fictiveness, but also of the specific set of techniques and conventions that have to be accepted by the reader to retain the privilege of claiming to be true. Fiction about the afterlife treads an interesting line in metafictional terms, by coming at the end of a ready-made tradition of writing about another world, which has never made claims towards a realist depiction of our world as it is. Metafiction therefore serves as both a way for the contemporary

fictionalist to write an afterlife without the risk that it could be taken seriously and become an item of belief, but it is also an investigation into the tools and techniques that are used in narratives that are making mimetic claims.

It is this combination of narrative experimentation and a rich tradition of artistic representations of the afterlife that gives modern novels about life after death such an important place at the intersection of convention and novelty. Artistic predecessors, the earlier dead, are revisited in complicated temporal and referential relationships between texts and ideas, which ultimately reveal new liveliness in familiar techniques.

Chapter 2

Dead Endings: Making Meaning from the Afterlife

It transfers . . . in a flash . . . from you to . . . there, the reader – And back. That's it! 'And back.' You feel it . . . come back.

Close to me and Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven)

We can read death and the end of a novel in similar ways; expecting both with certainty and, perhaps, having hope for a revelation of the meaning of what has gone before. This chapter explores how the extra-temporal position in an eternal afterlife can be equated with the position of the reader at the end of a narrative, as comparison with the experience of reading allies the afterlife with the time after the end of the novel, when a succession of events can be understood as a whole. However, in emphasising the place of the afterlife as a model for the end and after of a narrative, it is important to situate both as tools for making sense of the world and of life. In reading and the afterlife, meaning is constructed as part of a hypothesis for an unknown future, but one which feeds back into making sense of the present. Reading about the afterlife forces these connections to the surface.

This chapter also examines Frank Kermode's authoritative study, *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) and the models of narrative and eschatology which have sprung from it.²² Kermode's thesis – that narrative fictions, and specifically their

²² If Kermode's work marked a turn towards examining a culture of endings which runs through everything in Western literature, Barbara Herrnstein Smith's 1968 study, *Poetic Closure*, established the formal concerns and critical vocabulary for the examination of textual closure which goes with this. Later studies of narrative closure cite both as the impetus behind a reaction against the critical emphasis on open endings: for instance, Richter *Fable's End* (1974), Torgovnick *Closure in the Novel* (1981), and Miller *Narrative and its Discontents* (1981).

endings, are the most prominent among the tools used by human beings to make sense of time – is one of the most important theoretical starting points for this thesis. Throughout *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode suggests the imaginative investment in literary fictions is analogous to the experience of living and its concomitant faith in the fiction of an ending which will provide a moment of revelation. The study concentrates on the apocalyptic sense of an ending, with the focus on the complete span of time in which an individual life is situated. Kermode finds that it is the apocalyptic model of imagined but deferred endings that gives meaning to the present, and allows for ways of thinking about time that turn it from a simple succession into a patterned and meaningful shape.

Concern about death and the end of the individual is therefore only significant as it instigates a search for the meaning of a life within a wider teleological pattern. Kermode notes that, “The physician Alkmeon observed, with Aristotle’s approval, that men die because they cannot join the beginning and the end. What they, the dying men, can do is to imagine the significance for themselves in these unremembered but imaginable events” (4). The sense made of a life is therefore imagined and extrapolated into a wider pattern for all time, taking in an apocalyptic model of endtimes as its ultimate goal. However, as this chapter will discuss in detail, the dynamic between the “unremembered but imaginable events” that create and destroy the world is just as applicable to the beginnings and endings of the individual life. Living in anticipation of the end, like reading, demands both memory of the unremembered (discussed below in the figure of the *memento mori*) and imagination of the profoundly unimaginable: the non-existence of the imagining self.

My focus here is on the place of death and the afterlife in the apocalyptic model which Kermode establishes for fictions. He argues for a historical movement from imminent to immanent endings, transferring the focus from the drama of a single, monumental apocalypse to fictional endings, which become “images of the grand temporal consonance” working through every moment (17). This smaller scale allows for multiple, narrative fictions of endings, which are subject to constant revision to make them fit for their purpose. However, Kermode’s

argument is that these follow the same patterns as older, mythic, apocalyptic models, but their potency is reduced by no longer having a single common ending. I want to use Kermode's emphasis on coherence and making sense, but to investigate the gap in his analysis where the individual death would become a model for making sense of fiction's many separate endings.

Distinguishing Afterlife and Apocalypse

One important difference between fictions of apocalypse and fictions which take death as their model of ending is in apocalypse's perpetual postponement, while the fact of our own death in the future is a certainty. We may need to believe that the end is always (but not quite) nigh, but that does not mean it will necessarily take place within our lifetime, while death can hardly do anything but. This is a crucial feature in the mapping between fiction and the afterlife: the sense of certainty in awaiting an end, and the expectation of making sense of what has gone before from after that point. In an apocalyptic model, the impending eschaton event takes place at a completely indeterminate point in the future. When reading a novel we can see the number of pages left ahead with much more reliability than our own life expectancy.

The second difference is in memory, and the potential for certain kinds of afterlife which are wiped out by the total destruction of apocalypse. In *Words* (1964), Jean-Paul Sartre reveals his childhood fascination with envisioning his future reputation and the discovery of his works of genius after his death. This awareness of his own end – which led him to orient all his actions in the expectation of a future narrative – was paired with the desire for the kind of immortality enjoyed by famous writers of his boyhood who were “not dead: at least, not quite; they were transformed into books” (42). However, this mode of immortality was also accompanied by a fear of apocalyptic endings which would wipe out his hopes of eternal life. Towards the end of the autobiography Sartre admits, “To reassure myself that the human species would perpetuate me it was agreed in my mind that it would not come to an end. [. . .] Today, in my disillusion, I still cannot envisage the cooling of the sun without fear” (155). When the earthly

immortality of the writer is substituted for the eternal life of the saint, this relies on other human beings maintaining the materials of the library and the archive.

As Sartre's logic shows, making meaning from life according to the anticipation of the individual death can preclude the same organisation according to an expectation of deferred apocalypse, because the fictions attached to life ordered by death are distinguished by the need for life to otherwise continue as normal. In Sartre's terms:

[I]t matters little to me if my fellow-creatures forget me the day after my burial; while they live, I shall haunt them, elusive, nameless, present in each one like the thousands of millions of dead of whom I know nothing and yet whom I preserve from annihilation. But should humanity ever disappear, it will kill off its dead for good.

(155)

In order for life to make sense after its ending, human values for this sense still need to exist in the universe. This seems to me an important difference, and one which is responsible for the uncertainty around how similar life is to the afterlife. The division in afterlives between those which emphasise the break between earthly and divine values, and those which imagine the continuity of human values and experience is in complete contrast to the always seismic nature of apocalypse. Fictions such as Muriel Spark's *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973), in which the protagonists fail to realise they have been dead for years, could not be scaled up to the aftermath of an apocalyptic experience. Apocalypse is defined by its complete break with what has gone before, and there is no sense of ambiguity or continuity with apocalyptic experience or apocalyptic thinking. When the purpose of all life appears through apocalyptic revelation there is no indication that it should be in human terms, since this is the end of all human values and the beginning of a divine order. In contrast, the afterlife contains a trace of life maintained inside it.²³

²³ The genre of post-apocalyptic narratives seems to turn this distinction on its head, by suggesting that human beings will survive and build a new society on our terms, rather than bringing about the Kingdom of God. However, this can also be read as simply another postponement of the real apocalypse (of both the revelation and the destruction) to a later date.

Kermode argues that the apocalyptic model came first, and was diluted to become a plot shape for death, describing the way “the type figures [of apocalypse] were modified, made to refer not to a common End but to personal death or to crisis, or to epoch” and so “literary fictions changed in the same way – perpetually recurring crises of the person, and the death of that person, took over from the myths which purport to relate one’s experience to grand beginnings and ends” (35). Kermode argues for the Reformation as the locus of this sense of immanence over imminence in endings, when a change in the perception of historical time undermined any terror of immediate future destruction. He writes that, in this period, apocalyptic fears were “absorbed by tragedy” which replaced a collective drama with a personal one (35). This categorisation of fictional models relating to personal death as having their origins in an apocalyptic model is problematic for me because it leads to some blurred distinctions, and finds narratives which explicitly take death as their model being subsumed into a wider category of apocalypse.

Even if we accept Kermode’s movement from apocalypse to individual death, it would be possible to place the original tipping point at a different time. Jacques Le Goff, in *The Birth of Purgatory*, suggests a waning in millenarian thinking that was responsible, in part, for the development of purgatory to fill a gap opened up between death and the end of the world (1981: 227). On the other hand, M.H. Abrams places the shift in early Christianity:

Christian thought readily extended the reference of Biblical eschatology from the end of the human race to the last day of the redeemed individual. [. . . An] important and dramatic phenomenon was the tendency, grounded in the New Testament itself, to internalize apocalypse by transferring the theatre of events from the outer earth and heaven to the spirit of the single believer, in which there enacts itself, metaphorically, the entire eschatological drama of the destruction of the old creation, the union with Christ, and the emergence of a new creation – not *in illud tempus* but here and now, in this life. (1971: 46-47)

Abrams's argument indicates that the features of the apocalypse (a break with ordinary, continuous time, a reversal, a revelation) were transported into an internal framework of salvation, and that this move to the human level was part of a wider humanising tendency in religious thought, culminating in Romanticism. For Abrams and Kermode, in contrast with some of the analysis of the history of the afterlife considered in the introduction, the ever-increasing tendency towards the human scale is clearly one-way. However, the twentieth century alone seems to demonstrate a fluctuation in popularity and power between eschatological dramas of personal and global endings.

There are other ways of reading an oscillation (rather than the single evolutionary movement Kermode suggests) between the personal, or tragic, ending, and the communal, or apocalyptic, ending. In Don DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991) for instance, the central character, the novelist Bill Gray, suggests that writing somehow changed after Beckett from a narrative of tragedy to a narrative of disaster: "Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings. This is the new tragic narrative" (157).²⁴ In some ways, contemporary narratives of the afterlife suggest a return to the early twentieth century's focus on personal tragedy, as in Beckett or Sartre's concern with the death and afterlife of individuals. Somewhere in between we got caught up in all the attractions of the apocalyptic, which seems to represent a degraded form of the tragedy, for DeLillo's character at least.

We therefore have a reading of literary history in which the afterlife features in contemporary narrative fiction as a resurrection of personal tragedy, which was eclipsed by the mid-century's predominant narrative of apocalypse and disaster. After Beckett, the "major work" was apocalyptic, but narratives of the afterlife have continued as a counterpoint to this major theme. And even as the spectacle of "midair explosions and crumbled buildings" has become a defining reality of a new century, the fictional narratives of the dead continue to multiply. However, this picture is more complicated than a simple opposition or reversal in the dominance

²⁴ In DeLillo's novel, the alternative position is that novelists are failing to cope with the new world because only terrorists are prepared to "live willingly with death" (157), where narratives have been failing to do so.

of either apocalypse or afterlife as a model for narrative and for eschatological musings. Returning to DeLillo's novel throws up a complex web of connections and attractions between the individual and the group (in *Mao II* "the future belongs to crowds" [16]) and between death, apocalypse and individual acts of terror that have the potential to bridge the two. In an interview originally published in 1991, DeLillo himself describes the "polar extremes of *Mao II*, the arch individualist and the mass mind, from the mind of the terrorist to the mind of the mass organization. In both cases, it's the death of the individual that has to be accomplished before their aims can be realized" (Passarro: 81). So, the afterlife of the individual is both terror and the crowd.

In recent studies which use Kermode's work on endings there has been some overlap between those which focus on the apocalyptic and those which examine personal endings, but this overlap has not always been helpful. To illustrate some of the boundaries I want to establish, I am going to focus briefly on two studies in endings which weigh the immanent and imminent apocalypses against each other in establishing their methodology, and which show the places where studies of the apocalypse have to defend their boundaries.

Firstly, despite a title that hints at a wider concern with endings, W. Warren Wagar's *Terminal Visions: Literature of Last Things* (1982) makes a feature of its restriction of focus only to "the literal end of the world" (11). Wagar suggests that the sense of the apocalyptic taken from Kermode is actually rather too wide, and has led to studies of apocalypse which lean too far towards the symbolic, meaning that "almost all serious contemporary American literature [. . .] qualifies as apocalyptic in this radically immanentized sense" (11).²⁵ Wagar contends that critics have generally lacked respect for speculative and science-fiction, meaning that they deliberately ignore the examples of literal endtimes in these fictions in favour of more symbolic examples taken from the literary mainstream.²⁶ The study

²⁵ Wagar's dissatisfaction here is specifically with John R. May's *Toward a New Earth*, but he widens the critique to other critics of "the apocalyptic dimension in modern fiction," particularly Kermode, as well identifying as R.W.B. Lewis and Northrop Frye.

²⁶ Wagar is a futurist and has also published a number of science-fiction short stories, including a contribution to the anthology *Afterlives: An Anthology of Stories About Life After Death* (1986), which describes the fight among souls to be reborn in the body of a woman recovering from heart surgery.

suggests that science-fiction imagines perfectly good apocalypses, yet critics are going for their examples of the apocalyptic to needlessly abstract sources. If this is the case, then the tendency for critics to choose the “radically immanentized” over the literal apocalypses could be a result of the long-standing discomfort with explicit references to all last things, which makes all kinds of unsanctioned revelation seem in slightly poor taste, whether sentimental or horrific. Wagar’s argument implies that one consequence of Kermode’s work for studies of apocalypse is a tension between these two ways of approaching the apocalyptic. In plotting out a space for my own work, then, I want to make sure to balance between the conceptual or theoretical aspects of imagining afterlives and the literal expressions of these other worlds. In the same way as an immanent apocalypse concentrates on revelation without explicit disaster, representations of the afterlife can become meditations on time, on communication, or on haunting, as well as having a literal focus on the details of a heaven or a hell.

The second example of a study of contemporary apocalyptic writing uses far less literal criteria for its category of apocalypse. Lois Parkinson Zamora’s *Writing the Apocalypse* (1989) compares Latin American and US novels which use and rewrite apocalyptic models, yet there is a strand in many of the texts she considers that concentrates as much on death as on apocalypse. In her conclusions, Zamora notes the emphasis on the individual in the US texts, while the Latin American texts discussed concentrate on a sense of community and shared history (179). However, this seems to me to be a result of the inclusion of some works that are not necessarily concerned with the apocalyptic.²⁷ Zamora’s reading of John Barth’s *The Floating Opera* notes how the principal character’s name is a play on near-death (“almost Tod”) and describes the narrative’s “avoidance of endings” as “a protest against individual ends” (101). Not only is this a thematic focus on death rather than apocalypse, but a recognition that the fiction is also working to a structure of individual endings. Zamora classifies Barth among those who modify the apocalyptic model rather than conforming to it, yet, to me, he seems to be working

²⁷ Zamora’s work includes a number of brief but very interesting discussions of the place of death and narration using examples from Marquez’s *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (225); Fuentes’ *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (100); Cortazar’s short story ‘Moebius Strip’ in *We Love Glenda So Much* (107).

to a different model of endings altogether. In contrast with Pynchon – another apocalypse-modifier discussed by Zamora – Barth does not offer another model for the end of the world, but shifts the question of endings to a focus on the individual. The justification of the inclusion of Barth in the study is his employment of the “apocalyptic style” so that apocalypse becomes “a formal question rather than a philosophical one” (5). When shifted this far towards a concern with individual and multiple endings – the fact that everything ends, rather than an imminent sense of the end of everything – how can this concern with plural endings be reconciled with the monolithic force of the apocalyptic?

In the study, Zamora notes the totalising potential of apocalypse, which establishes a telos for all history, pushing to one side a modern understanding of multiple histories with overlapping narratives. A final, catastrophic terminus to time would simply end all these multiple histories, but the revelatory and signifying aspects of apocalypse forces a unified meaning on every history. Attached to this is a gendering of the apocalypse, as Zamora suggests that “apocalyptic modes of conceiving history and narration are less attractive to women than to men” (7). It is not only that she finds that the male writers have a tendency to cast female characters in the roles of anti-apocalypticists, but also that women just do not seem to use apocalyptic models. Significantly, Zamora ponders whether this might not be a result of the connotations of apocalypse as a reading of history: “Perhaps the macrocosmic and totalizing political intent of apocalyptic visions is less compelling for most women writers than psychological relations on a more intimate scale?” (7).²⁸ There is quite a difference in the claim of a text which states some equivalence between its own end and the end of the world, and between its own end and the end of a single life. In contrast with these observations on the apocalyptic, women do write using death and the afterlife as a model for the end, and in ways which subvert the idea of a totalising end of history, but there is also a strong thread running through many of these afterlife narratives of women mastering and rewriting motifs of sexual violence and murder (this is something

²⁸The work of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood or Marge Piercy provides counter-evidence against the assertion that women aren't attracted to apocalypse as a form – but it is framed as a tendency, not an absolute and, by comparison, afterlife narratives do seem more gender-balanced.

explored in more detail in Chapter 4). The claims of the individual life to a place in the novel is enough here, without making efforts to take in the future of the whole world. While the gendering identified by Zamora is not particularly marked in the texts considered in this thesis, it is reasonable to suggest that narratives which use the afterlife as a model are recognising difference and plurality as well as a unifying concern each with our own end.

These two examples of studies of the apocalypse which start from Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* give some indications of the blurred parameters which are found at the edges of apocalypse studies, when apocalypse becomes symbolic and can therefore take in the individual ending too. As I hope to demonstrate here, there are subtleties and ambiguities about the afterlife which involve all kinds of symbolic supplements to living, beyond a literal story about life after death. Conversely, the afterlife as a model for endings can take in lots of things that apocalypse (because of its scale and power, or because of its unrepeatability) cannot cover.

The more recent studies of apocalypse take their cue from Derrida's expansion of the possibilities of the apocalyptic in his essay 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy' (1984). Derrida examines a hyperbolic trend for the adoption of this apocalyptic tone in predicting that the end is nigh for philosophy. The influential essay has also added to a consideration of the apocalyptic as a "condition of all discourse, of all experience even", rather than being limited to a narrative mode or generic category (27). Derrida argues that the apocalyptic tone is a challenge to all communication, radically disturbing the process of reading by forcing the acknowledgment of the impossibility of the reception from the future to the past, from a point beyond the world itself. So apocalypse moves to the level of discourse and the tone itself is separated from the actual playing out of any of the apocalyptic events, as the apocalyptic tone is about "apocalypse without apocalypse, an apocalypse without vision, without truth, without revelation . . . a closure without end, an end without end" (34-35). This complete separation of ends and endings, meaning and closure makes the event itself virtually irrelevant to the imagining of it, and the sense that can come from it.

Malcolm Bull examines the problem of matching these two senses of ends together in his introduction to the collection, *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* (1995). For Bull, “Most visions of the future fall somewhere between a pure eschatology of unmotivated disaster and a pure teleology of interminable purposefulness” (1). In the category of “unmotivated disaster” or Derrida’s “apocalypse without apocalypse” – the catastrophe lacking revelation, and vice versa – are some of the literal endtimes fictions Wagar explores which seem to work to logics of complete destruction rather than signification. For instance, Wagar notes a fascinating feature of certain texts which express total endings by a system of grim classification to make sure nothing escapes the end: he describes how death travels progressively by subterranean levels in Mordecai Roshwald’s *Level 7* and by degrees of latitude in Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach*, while in Edward Bryant’s ‘Among the Dead’ the classificatory impulse turns encyclopaedic and the apocalypse comes in alphabetical order (70). This seems to me to be the ultimate in apocalypse without apocalypse because it has all the disaster but none of the meaning which needs to be decoded from the future to the present.

Malcolm Bull’s exploration of the mismatch in attempts to “make ends meet” takes an important turn when he invokes Augustine’s argument that, if the individual was able to move from time to eternity, then perhaps the world could too: “if the telos of the individual life can coincide with its terminus, there seems no reason why the ends of the world should not also meet” (2). This is the opposite of the explanation in *The Sense of an Ending*, which describes the individual ending only getting meaning from its place in the sweep of the whole world’s movement towards its own end. Kermode does acknowledge Augustine as one of the “early precedents” for a tendency towards taking apocalyptic terrors as “a figure for personal death” rather than vice versa (25). However, the general precedence of apocalypse over personal death is a significant part of Kermode’s argument, not just a historical concern: the place for immanent endings – for crisis and personal last things in relation to the sense of an ending – is as a diluted modern microdrama, which can only be a “blurred” copy of an original “sharply predictive apocalypse” (26). In Kermode’s choice of words there is a suggestion that the

modern, diffused apocalypse is less easy to understand, less *sensible* in its workings and in its endings: blurred fictions are always more difficult to read. This is obviously important, when the purpose of fictions of endings is to make sense of the world.

Similarly, fictions about the afterlife are fictions of future coherence and meaning; for answers, not just for good outcomes: hells are as conceptually attractive as heavens. The consolation of the afterlife is not continued existence or another chance at redemption (if this was the case what positive benefits would there be for heaven?) but the hope that something will, on a personal level, 'justify the ways of God to men'. Afterlife is inescapably tied to our desire to find meaning beyond the chance series of events which make up a life. From obituaries to biographies to the origins of the novel in forms of life-writing, the desire to make a narrative from a completed life is very strong.

Making sense is something which is much more a part of death and the afterlife than of apocalypse, perhaps precisely because of the afterlife's supplementary quality. The 'after' of apocalypse is totally different and separate from what has gone before: it is the end of time and the end of everything. An afterlife beyond death is fictionalised and humanised, making it a continuation of at least some of the previous existence. In this sense it is also an indeterminate and suspended end, providing only a provisional kind of closure. Taking a model of fiction from this leaves a sense of an ending which retains the revelatory qualities of apocalypse, but without its total annihilatory potential: an afterlife is partial and supplementary, making sense of an ending but undermining any claims to finality or unproblematic closure. If another life can be added to an apparently completed existence, why shouldn't endings multiply indefinitely?

Sense After the End

As I have been trying to show, laying out a division in eschatology between apocalypse and the afterlife is largely an artificial exercise, but I hope I have staked out some clear area between quite abstract considerations – which have applications in wider discussions of various endings – and rather more concrete

categorisations of the explicit differences between afterlife and apocalypse. I now want to begin to consider more systematically the place of readers in a model of narrative endings and the afterlife. I am going to examine some different models of reading, taking in formalist and hermeneutic models which see making sense coming through recollective interpretation, and moving into a more phenomenological approach to reading which emphasises how it functions in the light of an awareness of ending.

If, as in Kermode's formulation, books are "fictive models of the temporal world" which are "humanly serviceable as models only if they pay adequate respect to what we think of as 'real' time, the chronicity of the waking moment" (54), then this leaves little scope for the inclusion of other varieties of chronicity. What if, in order for 'real' time to function in our fictions, there has to be a hypothetical, supplementary time beyond it, which is also a fundamental feature of fictional narrative in the form of the novel? Discussions of time in fiction often include analysis of other concepts of time, and these can be associated with aspects of the afterlife.

For instance, Kermode's analysis does explore ideas about time which are clearly not those of the chronicity of the waking moment. He offers Aquinas's concept of *aevum* as both an analogue for and an actual source of the idea of spatial form, which had been theorised as a model for meaning in modernist literature.²⁹ *Aevum*, the time of the angels, is the third order of time, between ordinary time and eternity, in Kermode's words, "between *nunc movens* with its beginning and end, and *nunc stans*, the perfect possession of endless life" (71). In this time between human time and eternity, which is characterised by the non-material nature of the beings that inhabit it, there is none of the decay caused by duration. This intermediate category of time allows for succession and free will in the actions of

²⁹ Joseph Frank's work on spatial form often establishes the need for an atemporal, if not eternal, position for the reader, who can only assemble all of the textual pieces into a meaningful spatial form after reading is complete. This period after reading – when elements of the plot are reassembled outside the narrative's time – is associated with a kind of afterlife. For instance, in his original work from 1945, collected in *The Idea of Spatial Form* (1991), Frank quotes Proust's description of how "the permanent essence of things, usually concealed, is set free and our true self, which had long seemed dead but was not dead in other ways, awakes, takes on fresh life as it receives the celestial moment brought to it" (22).

angels and souls in purgatory, and was adapted to include certain features of human experience, not least “the time-order of novels,” which Kermode goes on to identify with the “characters in novels” who are “independent of time and succession, but may and usually do seem to operate in time and succession” (72). The time after reading, when connections are made across a whole as a complete plot is revealed, can be read as more analogous to eternity, when all the elements of the narrative, which apparently unfolded in time, are known and available for consideration, and time in the fiction has stopped. This aspect of the afterlife in narrative fiction will be considered in detail in Chapter 7, which involves a discussion of how these different, often incoherent and incompatible, times are assembled under the aegis of afterlife temporalities. Simply put, in novels set in heaven or hell, the afterlife comes to represent everything that is not the ‘real’ time Kermode identifies. The problems with this for a model of reading are twofold. Firstly, aligning the period after reading with eternity means that it becomes almost the antithesis of reading, when all the elements of a fiction are present at once and the activity of reading in time is eclipsed by the final knowledge of the whole. Secondly, the attempts to define time against something other than time (eternity, aevum, subjective temporality) ends up exposing the lack of certainty about what ‘real’ time is, and what this means for the time of reading.

This dual problem of the aporias of time and the attendant necessity for reading to gain some understanding of time from narrative is at the heart of Paul Ricoeur’s monumental study *Time and Narrative* (1983). Ricoeur argues for the synthesis of emplotment as the dominance of order over temporality, something which can also be profitably associated with the afterlife. In the notion of *muthos*, inherited from Aristotle, plot mediates between concordance and discordance, with the logic of emplotment ultimately providing the unity lacking in the order of chronology. “Emplotment,” Ricoeur observes, “is the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession” (II: 65) and thereby gives meaning to events successively occurring in time. This is exactly how narrative “consoles us in the face of death” (I: 72) and is therefore a reason for the relation between narrative and the afterlife. However, Ricoeur’s model of configuration is a process

requiring the reflective grasping of the unity of a plot as a single thought by synthesis, rather than holding together many things all at once in the mind, which has important consequences for the processes of memory and reading. The synthesis, or “grasping together” Ricoeur identifies is not without time; it is “as though recollection inverted the so-called ‘natural’ order of time” (I: 67). We therefore have a distinction between a possible model of reading where there is no time after the end of the narrative, and one in which the action of recollection inverts time, not so that it runs backwards, but so that the end dominates over the beginning. Learning to read this way goes hand in hand with a way of understanding time itself, which is the same end-inflected logic as living with the idea of an afterlife that makes sense out of life.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope brings together the spatial and the temporal in a way which is defined by genre.³⁰ This is relevant to this discussion in that, according to Kermode’s explanation of *peripeteia* in *The Sense of an Ending*, genre is one of the factors in shaping our expectation of the path the plot will take, and from which it should subsequently depart in a well-plotted narrative. In ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’ (1981) Bakhtin writes:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indications are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (84)

The chronotopes which I want to focus on here relate to Bakhtin’s analysis of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Discussing the poem with other visionary literature like *Piers Plowman*, Bakhtin explores the spatial arrangement of these works on a “vertical axis,” to the extent that “one might even say that in such works time is utterly excluded from action” (156). In Dante’s work this is clearly related to the

³⁰ It is worth noting in passing just how many of Bakhtin’s chronotopes have something of the afterlife about them. The chronotope of “everyday life” is, paradoxically, described as “the nether world, the grave, where the sun does not shine, where there is no starry firmament” (128) in contrast with the life and renewal of the chronotope of the natural world, while the chronotope of early autobiographies has its source in the narratives of civic obituaries, the *encomium*.

simultaneous vision we have already associated with eternity, and Bakhtin describes how the verticality of Dante's structuring allows for extra-temporal connections:

The temporal logic of this vertical world consists in the sheer simultaneity of all that occurs (or 'the co-existence of everything in eternity'). Everything that on earth is divided by time, here, in this verticality, coalesces into eternity, into pure simultaneous coexistence. [. . .] To 'synchronize diachrony,' to replace all temporal and historical divisions and linkages with purely interpretative, extratemporal and hierarchized ones – such was Dante's form-generating impulse [. . .] (157)

The vertical world of an eternal afterlife is in the same relationship to the fiction of end-oriented living as the synchronic grasp of a unity is to the diachronic forward motion of reading. The other aspect of Bakhtin's approach to *The Divine Comedy* which is relevant here is in his explanation of why Dante felt it was necessary to represent his vision in this "vertical" fashion. Rather than offering a theological explanation in terms of the doctrines of eternity and hierarchy, Bakhtin suggests something more in line with Kermode's fictions for men in the midst, interpreting their own time in terms of an imminent end.³¹ Bakhtin observes that Dante (and William Langland in *Piers Plowman*) has "a feeling for the end of an epoch" which is accompanied by a desire to give a complete encyclopaedic vision of all the elements of society before they are destroyed (156). This is an ending that is less apocalyptic and more like the end of a life: there is no destruction wreaked on the unprepared, an apocalyptic tone of warning or glee, or a sense of expectation that meaning will be revealed in divine terms. Instead, Dante offers the kind of

³¹ This is also interesting in the light of Jacques Le Goff's analysis in *The Birth of Purgatory*, which takes *The Divine Comedy* as its example of purgatory in its most fully realised form, and which also sees Dante's "vertical world" as a response to social change. Le Goff argues that, as well as coming "to alter time in the afterlife and hence the link between earthly, historical time and eschatological time" (2) the birth of purgatory was also part of a change in concepts of space, which he calls "the spatialization of thought" (3). "Purgatory," Le Goff writes, "was one of a group of phenomena associated with the transformation of feudal Christendom, of which one key expression was the creation of ternary logical models through the introduction of an intermediate category" (227).

accounting of a life that wants to list and record all its elements, like the deathbed confession of an entire culture.

Bakhtin's analysis of Dante identifies two chronotopes in tension, each dominated by either the spatial or the temporal. His own image for the shape of the narrative of *The Divine Comedy* is of a tree or a forked path, with "horizontal time-saturated branches at right angles to the extra-temporal vertical of the Dantesque world" (158). Dante's vision is therefore of the vertical, the spatial, but the souls he encounters are desperate for their access to historical time and a chance to tell their stories in chronological order. In alternative terms, Dante's structure is opposed to the time of ordinary human experience, but the souls maintain their attachment to human ordering through narrative, seemingly in denial of their environment. Rachel Falconer's approach to Bakhtin's argument, in *Hell in Literature* (2005), is useful here, as she categorises the extra-temporal structures of hell as part of the suffering of the damned. In her analysis Falconer crucially identifies the two chronotopes: "one realist and historical and the other extra-temporal and evaluative" (47). These descriptive terms allow her to use Bakhtin's distinctions between Dante's visionary, vertical time and the historical time of the damned to suggest that their lack of spatial "evaluative" perspective might be precisely what is keeping them in hell. The problem here, however, is that the souls in heaven are just as eager to relate their histories (Cunizza in Canto IX of the *Paradiso*, for instance) and, while it is probably true that it is their earthly concerns which have prevented them ascending through heaven, they know that "here there's no repentance" (*Paradiso* IX: 103): the souls in heaven cannot advance any further even with an extra-temporal and evaluative perspective.

At the end of the poem, however, Dante has a moment's access to the beatific vision, which does seem to offer him a kind of extra-temporal perception which is characterised by stillness, wholeness and eternity. More significantly, Dante's access to this perfect understanding through the love of God is expressed in the terms of the meaning transmitted by plot in a narrative:

In that abyss I saw how love held bound
Into one volume all the leaves whose flight

Is scattered through the universe around;

How substance, accident and mode unite

Fused, so to speak, together, in such wise

That this I tell of is one simple light. (*Paradiso* XXXIII: 85-90)

This is making sense of the contingencies of life at the most profound level, but it needs a position outside life and its time to make it possible. Rather than the moral sense of an evaluative perspective which Falconer offers for this extra-temporal position, I would modify this slightly and suggest it is the inability to read the plot of their own lives and their relationship to the rest of creation which torments the souls in hell. The events of their existence remain accidental and meaningless because of their separation from God. As Dante ascends through heaven, the souls there have more and more access to the meaning that comes from being able to grasp the plot of the universe from after the end of their own lives.

Between hell, where there is a lack of meaning, and the satisfaction of heaven's complete meaning, purgatory occupies an uneasy central position. Its punishments are not eternal and its time is more like a continuation of Bakhtin's time of "everyday life" and the netherworld. Purgatory's place in the order of the universe was defined spatially, between heaven and hell, but its essence and its distinction from these other categories of afterlife existence was temporal. Le Goff illustrates this problem with the example of the relative lack of imagery associated with purgatory. His explanation is the difficulty of representing an "intermediary, temporary, ephemeral world" (289) in the pictorial art forms that had come to represent heaven and hell in scenes from the Last Judgment. In this context it makes sense that narrative, a form that knows about time in ways that painting does not, should have been particularly associated with purgatory. Le Goff notes that there was an "extraordinary outpouring of narrative literature" in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and goes on to make a commanding assertion about the place of narrative in the development of purgatory: "The success of Purgatory was contemporary with the rise of narrative. More than that, the two phenomena are

related. Purgatory introduced a plot into the story of individual salvation. Most important of all, the plot continued after death” (291).

My understanding of this aspect of Le Goff’s argument relies upon Peter Brooks’s definition of plotting as a mode of ordering experiences which combines forward temporal movement with the retrospective generation of meaning. Brooks writes about the experience of reading with the sense of an ending in *Reading for the Plot* (1984), dubbing it “the anticipation of retrospection”. It is this function which I would argue the afterlife serves in relation to living. In order for retrospection of a completed life to be anticipated we have to posit the existence of an afterlife. If human fictions of time require the provision of an end for their meaning, they also require a retrospective position, however hypothetical, from which to ‘read’ the meaning of the arbitrary span of time which constitutes a human life. Brooks finds that it is the hypothetical achievement of retrospective knowledge which motivates reading, and which develops in the context of imagining our own lives from beyond their end:

To imagine one’s self-composed obituary read at the Judgment Day constitutes the farthest reach in the anticipation of retrospective narrative understanding. It is one that all narratives no doubt would wish to make: all narrative posits, if not a Sovereign Judge, at least a Sherlock Holmes capable of going back over the ground, and thereby realizing the meaning of the cipher left by life. Narrative thus seems to imagine in advance the act of its transmission, the moment of reading and understanding that it cannot itself ever know, since this act always comes after the writing, in a posthumous moment. (34)

The imagined (or we could even say implied) reader is cast as posthumous only if the narrative is read as life, or at least living time. The afterlife time of retrospective understanding is, in Brooks’s explanation, linked to readers’ anticipation of their own deaths, with the final and perfect meaning coming from God’s judgment on a completed life.

In Le Goff's explanation of how the birth of purgatory was related to the rise of narrative plot, he calls on stories of contact with the souls of the dead, which are described in great detail in his study. This communication is exclusively with souls in purgatory, since intercession from the living can only be effective for the dead who have hope for a change of state and promotion to heaven. Introducing this contact between the living and dead is a *memento mori*: a memory of the future, working by the same action as the anticipation of retrospection. The plot of individual salvation also conforms to Brooks's model for plotting as both the deferral of and the desire for the end, as purgatory adds further complexity to the story of salvation, but is also a means of bringing about the end of personal time. If purgatory introduced plot, perhaps it did so also by creating the only place where the synoptic, evaluative vision from outside the time of the narrative could allow for salvation by revealing the plot of our lives. The question, then, is whether the birth of purgatory, in introducing a plot into the story of individual salvation, also introduced the practice of reading our lives for the plot, in anticipation of retrospection. Dante certainly seems to suggest that contact between the living and the dead promotes this, as the souls he encounters are eaten up with retrospection, and the hope for the salvation of future readers is in the *memento mori* of Dante's work itself.

The strange time at work in a memory of the future seems at home in the temporality established for the reader, in which the present of the narrative is, according to Brooks, "a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place, already in wait for us to reach it" (23). In order to situate this in less counter-intuitive terms, I want to turn for a moment to Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" (1936), in which Benjamin famously notes that "death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell" (93) and which Brooks discusses in his study. As he begins to extend his analysis to the specific form of the novel, Benjamin quotes from Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* (1916), to demonstrate the place of memory as the fundamental tool for organising time. Lukács argues that the novel enacts a struggle against time, which is concluded by the actions of "hope and memory; experiences of time that are victories over time" (124). In

Benjamin's analysis of this passage, he emphasises the role of memory in making sense of time, and offers novels as a synthetic form of the deathbed recollection: we do not have access to our own death, but we can read about the completed lives of other people, and gain entry to this sense of meaningfulness that comes from retrospection.

I am more interested in hope, the other experience of time that Lukács pairs with memory, and which Benjamin sets to one side in his analysis. This is Brooks's anticipation of retrospection, as the reader looks forward in time with the hope of grasping the unity of a life in memory. Benjamin emphasises the novel's epic inheritance, and its relation to memory is connected to this, while Brooks's analysis frames the novel from the perspective of Aristotelian drama and focuses on plot. These two approaches represent aspects of narrative as recounting or as plotting, and as awakening memory and hope in the reader. Like Benjamin, Brooks does touch on the place of the awareness of death in narrative fiction, but suggests that it is plot itself, rather than memory, which makes sense of lived experience: he finds that "narrative has something to do with time-boundedness, and that plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality" (22). For me, this means that plot and hope are the *internal* logic, but they necessitate retrospection, memory and an afterlife, which are a kind of external equivalent vital for their function. The anticipatory outwards-turning of this logic results in the curious temporality of a memory of the future, and the hope of a terminating coherence.

In Ricoeur's analysis, the place of the reader is vital in engaging in an active process of synthesis, as well as using the time from novels to refigure our understanding of time. Similarly, a fundamental part of Brooks's anticipation of retrospection, which acts to interpret the end-oriented time of fictions while they are still in progress, is the requirement for an implied reader to perceive the plot in its fullness, and allow the mechanics of the plot to function. The closest Frank Kermode seems to come to hypothesising a place for an interpretative consciousness is in his debt to Wallace Stevens's "supreme fiction" of a God whose purpose is to give coherence to existence, and we could imagine as a sympathetic reader to the plot of our lives. The problem here is not just the other,

contradictory, role of God as an ordering, plotting consciousness – God as author – but also the divine experience of time: omniscient beings would never be able to experience the anticipation of retrospection Brooks identifies as key to reading for the plot. Kermode’s analogy of fictional ending and personal ending is limited by the lack of a place from which to read a life. I think the problem is really the extent to which Kermode’s sense of an ending requires a (projected) final interpretation. In Brooks’s analysis of narrative we read “in a spirit of confidence, and also a state of dependence, that what remains to be read will restructure the provisional meanings of the already read” (23). This implies the most complete, no longer provisional meaning will come only with the end. Both Kermode and Brooks, however, quite rightly place the emphasis on the narrative present’s *awareness* of the future end – refusing dominance of the end’s synoptic vision – as they formulate a model for reading in progress, not for final interpretation. However, in the analogy that gets made between narrative and life, and reading and the afterlife, the final interpretation and the temporally situated process of reading are both equally important.

If the reader is experiencing an afterlife in the final realisation of emplotment, and the anticipation of this in the processes of reading, who or what is it that has died? In Maurice Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature* (1955) he describes the process of reading in ecstatic terms: “the happiness and innocence of reading, which is perhaps in fact a dance with an invisible partner in a separated space – a helplessly joyful dance with the ‘tomb’” (197). He uses the figure of Lazarus to represent the reanimation of the text itself as reading finds it half-resurrected but, most importantly, still half-dead and entombed:

To roll back the stone, to obliterate it, is certainly something marvelous, but it is something we achieve every moment in everyday language. At every moment we converse with Lazarus, dead for three days – or dead, perhaps since always. In his well-woven binding sheet, sustained by the most elegant conventions, he answers us and speaks to us within ourselves. But what answers the call of literary reading is not a door falling open or becoming

transparent or even getting a bit thinner. It is, rather, a ruder stone, better sealed, a crushing weight, an immense avalanche that causes earth and the sky to shudder. (195)

As well as indicating an afterlife-inflected account of the dead speaking “within ourselves” (something I will examine in Chapter 5), Blanchot also views reading as a resurrective act, creating a life after death for the text, but which also foregrounds those elements that still remain buried. The reader is positioned in a place of confidence, anticipating “a delight in fullness, certainty of completion, a revelation of the unique, inevitable, unpredictable work” (194). This seems to be reading from hope or, more accurately, faith, as the book writes itself as a system we believe will make sense come the end. There seems to be some risk involved in a helpless dance with the tomb, but Blanchot’s reader is emptied out and surrendering to the action of the text, as though to the power of a providential God. There is some kind of death for the reader there, in surrendering the individual self for the sake of the completion of the text; a kind of communion of the faithful. The risk implied in the reader’s dance does suggest there may be some element of uncertainty in the outcome of our reading; even when we give everything of ourselves over to a text, there is still the possibility that it will not end coherently. The dance with death is another figure of the *memento mori*, and reflects the ambiguous play of that concept, taking in both the fear of annihilation and the hope of coherence.

Roland Barthes’s ‘The Death of the Author’ (1968) also offers an influential model of the reader that is touched by the afterlife. If the birth of the reader comes “at the cost of the death of the Author” then we are faced with something other than the end of a plot opening up a posthumous moment for the reader (148). Barthes describes how the idea of the Author is inseparable from the idea of a before and an after, which places the text’s origins with the Author, and with the before. Without the Author, “The temporality is different. [. . .] There is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*” (145). Reading

becomes an act of creation from pre-existing pieces: more like Frankenstein than Jesus raising Lazarus, or Sherlock Holmes reading a corpse.³²

Living with a Memory of Death

The final relation between reading and the afterlife which I want to examine here takes up what Nicholas Royle calls the “strange temporality” that he identifies at work in the word ‘memento’ in a discussion of Muriel Spark’s novel *Memento Mori* (1959). His essay, ‘Memento Mori’ in *Theorising Muriel Spark* (2001), approaches the title by way of its *OED* definition, and he comments on its uneasy pairing of two seemingly irreconcilable demands: “How is ‘memento mori’ split, split in this way between warning and reminder? Fissured between future and past, to what time would ‘memento mori’ belong?” (196). I concluded above that this is the same temporal split as occurs in the reading of narrative, which requires the anticipation of retrospection, a projection into the future that imagines the present as past. The doubled warning and reminder are also significant in terms of Brooks’s use of the analogy of the death drive as the desire for narrative endings: making them half-threat, half-promise; that which is most desired but must also be avoided.

Mark Currie has examined the idea of the reordering of experience according to the reading experience of narrative in *About Time* (2007) (returned to in more detail in Chapter 3, this study bears significantly on my argument at this point). Part of the study’s central thesis is that the anticipation of retrospection which forms such a vital part of reading narrative fiction has seeped back into life, with the self-contained fictional “temporal loop” of anticipation/retrospection becoming part of the ordinary experience of time. Currie describes the “hermeneutic circle between presentification and depresentification that makes us live life as if it wasn’t present and read fictional narrative as if it were” (86): life, even as it is being lived, is imagined through the lens of a narrated past, and viewed from the perspective of the end. Developing out of Ricoeur’s virtuous hermeneutic circle between living and reading, which sees each advancing the other in terms of

³² Barthes’s description of the text as a “tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (146) becomes very macabre if we continue with this metaphor.

thinking about and representing the world to ourselves, Currie's hermeneutic circle has some positive consequences, and some more concerning aspects for our experience of the world and of time. The imagination of the already-written future, just waiting for us to reach it, which separates narrative and life, is also the difference between going on a trip to the afterlife, like Virgil or Dante, and going there forever after death. This difference between narrative and life, Currie notes, is where the hermeneutic circle is produced, and the same applies in fictions about the afterlife: the mismatch in their temporality and the temporality of life is what makes them a useful model for thinking about temporality in general.

This depresentification – for which reading for the plot is responsible – is associated with the influence of the time of reading's "posthumous moment" on the reading present, but this can also be applied to the case of a genuine belief in the afterlife, and the real anticipation of posthumous retrospection. In this sense, Currie's depresentification of experience could be something which has been prepared for by centuries of religious focus on afterlives. The other half of Currie's hermeneutic circle is the presentification of fictional narrative: the reading of fiction as though it is real and taking place in the present. Has fiction therefore degraded to the status of myth, even as the afterlife has moved from a myth to a critical fiction? And are centuries of focusing attention on the promise of future eternal life partly responsible, providing practice in the depresentification of experience? Or is this sense of displaced times only heightened in postmodernity, embodying a sense of the "future anterior" in the same way as the *memento mori*?³³

Richard Klein, in 'The Future of Nuclear Criticism' (1990), identifies a similar time-sense in contemporary thought, but links it to a concern with an apocalyptic future, bringing this discussion in another circle. Taking up Derrida's point on the unsettling consequences of apocalypse for discourse Klein asks, like Derrida, what pleasure or profit, "what bonus of seduction or intimidation" there is in the apocalyptic aesthetic. He describes a position for the voice of the "nuclear sublime" which has some significant consequences for my own exploration of reading from a place projected after the end:

³³ See Jean-Francois Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). An attempt to answer this question forms the first part of Chapter 8.

The nuclear sublime is that all too familiar aesthetic position from which one anticipatorily contemplates the end, utter nuclear devastation, from a standpoint beyond the end, from a posthumous, apocalyptic perspective of some future mourning, which, however appalling, adorably presupposes some ghostly survival and some retrospective illumination [. . .]. From a godlike perspective, beyond time and finitude, in the infinity of a pious fiction, future total nuclear war is contemplated. (77)

Klein offers nuclear criticism as an investigation of the problems of living in a world which is inflected with the nuclear perspective's "standpoint of temporal narrativity," that can only view the future as past (78). Klein's formulation of this perspective rather neatly allows me to separate the posthumous perspective from the apocalyptic tone, and it is a useful distinction to make. Without the apocalypse, that "all too familiar aesthetic position" of posthumousness is shifted enough to unsettle it and remove some of the seductive or intimidating qualities that come attached to the apocalyptic tone. A posthumous perspective does not have to be apocalyptic, and the "ghostly survival and [. . .] retrospective communication" can be maintained without the privileged position of the single survivor. All the complexities remain in the position from the afterlife, with less of the potentially manipulative prophesying and single revelation from the apocalyptic tone. Like Currie, Klein argues for an expression of a concern with temporality in postmodernity which engages with the problems of imagining the present as past and the future as future anterior. However, Klein asserts that the important feature of literature's nuclear, apocalyptic concern with the future anterior is in the promise of destruction for the archive, erasing all collective memory. For the mortal individual and for the reader, the anticipation of an ending takes on a different stance because of its small scale and because of its mundane inevitability: the end of a novel and the end of a life are the end of one thing, not the end of everything.

Reading with a memory of death

With this context for the temporal elasticity of the term *memento mori* in mind, the final section of this chapter will examine a text that allows for some examination of the practicalities of reading with the anticipation of death. Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* (1959) embeds this interpretative position within its plotting, and illustrates the equivalence between the functioning of plot and living with the awareness of death.

The novel describes a group of friends who have all reached their seventies and have begun to receive anonymous telephone calls in which the speaker reminds each of them that they will die. Among these unfortunate pensioners is Charmian Piper, formerly a well-known author whose work is enjoying a revival. While the other characters are troubled and angered by the caller, Charmian is serene in the face of the *memento mori*. Her own explanation for her nonchalance is that she has never forgotten her death, despite her failing memory after a stroke. Spark offers two sources for Charmian's familiarity with this forward memory: the practice of her faith and her experience of literature. Her brother Godfrey believes that Charmian is accustomed to novelistic plotting: he thinks that "her novelist's mind by sheer habit still gave to those disjointed happenings a shape which he could not accept, and in a way which he thought dishonest" (51). Their friend, Henry Mortimer, argues in favour of remembering death nightly, with the view that death "should be part of the full expectancy of life. Without an ever-present sense of death life is insipid. You might as well live on the whites of eggs" (130). This is not a religious stance; for Henry it is "nothing more than the truth" (131). But there is a different truth and a different meaning in dying at different ages and in different states of life and, if we were to have a foreknowledge of when we would die, we might order our lives differently.³⁴

The distinction between *memento mori* with and without an afterlife is very significant: Mortimer would try to heighten the experience of his life with the expectation that this is all he has, while Charmian might try to live well according to

³⁴ This is one of the objections raised to the novel in Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001) (examined in detail in Chapter 3), which tells the story of the untimely death of a teenage girl. The novel concludes with an affirmation of the importance of remembering to live over remembering to die.

her Catholic values and in anticipation of judgment after her death. However, what Godfrey recognises is the common teleological ordering occurring here, which works itself backwards in time through life and narrative, making meaning out of experience. There is slippage in his idea of Charmian's fiction and her faith, and both stand accused of shaping the events of life in a dishonest way.

Charmian argues that the Catholic Church teaches its followers "to consider each night our actions of the past day" (91). In the context of an argument with Godfrey over the best methods for retaining the faculty of memory, Charmian suggests this review based on judgment and self-evaluation, when Godfrey's perspective is solely on memory as recollection. "It is a great aid to memory," he argues, "to go through in one's mind each night the things which have happened in the course of the day" (91). The difference between "going through in one's mind" and "considering" involves an element of making sense out of experience which introduces a plot to the day's events. Furthermore, Charmian's evaluation of her day is meant to help her lead a better life; she concentrates on her own actions where Godfrey remembers things which have happened to him. This connects her evaluative recollections with the four last things of the catechism which Spark chooses as an epigraph for her novel: "The four last things to be ever remembered are Death, Judgement, Hell and Heaven." Daily judgment of her actions reminds Charmian of her death and final judgment, but is also part of the constant feedback loop in which the things she does become the object of later judgments, and her impulses should be modified according to the anticipation of this retrospective activity. Spark identifies judgment with reading a narrative, and therefore the *memento mori* is the specific reminder that actions in the present will be the object of future retrospection and judgement. The final paragraph of the novel allows the reader to find out how the characters meet their ends, although its choice of a narrative standpoint in time is curiously arbitrary, with some of the characters still alive. This time-jump seems like a pastiche of the novelistic ending which sees individual characters receiving the ends they deserve, as the deaths of all the characters are narrated without emotion or judgment, and from this point in time which is also consciously unplotted and arbitrary.

Nicholas Royle's ingenious analysis of the novel reads its concluding paragraphs as a "check-out" for the "bizarre textual supermarket in which all characters are required to have an age-tag like a price and a sell-by date" (2001, 199). However, the most important aspect of the command *memento mori* is in the fact that age cannot constitute anything as definite as a sell-by date. The choice of a lifespan for the novel looks like it works in the same way as for the characters, with an ending that does not necessarily come once everything is completed. Royle examines the difficulties in reading the phrase '*memento mori*,' and among the "strangeness" he identifies is the question of the consequences for action there could be in remembering our deaths: "How can you remember what has not happened and indeed never will be something that you could verify as having happened to you? As if it would be possible to say: Look, I have died! It's a good job I remembered" (197). In the time covered by Spark's novel the benefits of remembering you must die are limited to responding with unruffled calm to prank calls, but she does also gesture towards an afterlife in which it would be possible to look back on life lived with and improved by the awareness of death, in the repetition of the catechism's four last things. Remembering death is aided by an afterlife that includes judgment, offering life as something to be assessed and interpreted from after the end.

So, how should we go about living with a memory of death? Inspector Henry Mortimer's response in *Memento Mori* is to suggest that "to remember one's death is, in short, a way of life" (131). Italo Calvino's *Mr Palomar* (1983) asks the same question in its closing meditation 'Learning to be dead.' Mr Palomar concentrates his attention on what it means to exist in the world by pondering observation and subjectivity, but his final consideration is the anticipation of his absence from the world. As Mr Palomar discovers when he tries to practise while he is still alive, "being dead is less easy than it might seem" (109). The first problem he encounters is that death is not just a return to non-existence, because there remains the fact of our having lived and therefore exhausted all potential we might have possessed. Learning to be dead involves Mr Palomar "convincing himself that his own life is a closed whole, all in the past, to which nothing can be added" (111). For the living,

the past is not a closed whole, and they can use their present to change it by taking actions which will remake the past backwards from today. In Calvino's novel the example given to illustrate this is of a man reading a novel in middle age and regretting not having read it in his youth. Calvino observes that these regrets are unfounded because of the way the present reorganises the past:

These statements do not have much meaning [. . .] because after he has read that book, his life becomes the life of a person who has read that book, and it is of little importance whether he read it early or late, because now his life before that reading also assumes a form shaped by that reading. (111)

Experience is therefore shaped in both directions by actions and events, and this is a lesson informed by the way reading re-orders the past. Narrative could be an exercise in detaching the mind from successive chronology and turning it towards eternity, like a *memento mori* or Aquinas's idea of *aevum* as a kind of time which the soul can model and aspire to even in life.

The extent to which the afterlife and narrative fiction share common features suggests that they are both responsible for – or according to Kermode's thesis, both manifestations of – anxieties about successive human time. However, Kermode's distinction between fictions and myths could also redeem narrative fiction from its dehistoricisation of experience. Wallace Stevens' supreme fiction, eventually coinciding with the truth, can provide the necessary corrective and, just as Muriel Spark's Inspector Mortimer says, belief in endings could become more than an article of faith because it is "nothing more than the truth." In this example, the refusal to believe in fictional and eschatological orderings of time brings us further away from what is true, and only the fictional practice of remembering the future can make us more aware of reality. The faith which is required by both religion and reading means a casting forward for future meaning, which is not totally credulous and accepting, but which does have a sense of a future outside our experience which is working in the present. With the implication of a potential supplement after all endings, the afterlife therefore becomes the symbol of the

enlivening and enriching possibility of working with hypothetical and invented concepts of the future we use to inform the present.

Chapter 3

After Effects: Retrospection and Causality

They don't have, here . . . cause and effect, or one, two, three . . . Or, like, nothing, then something. They don't have . . . thoughts made up out of words . . . Or if blah blah, then blah blah. Or, like, it must have been like this . . . because . . .

Close to me and Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven)

In 'An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative' (1966), Roland Barthes suggests that narrative fiction is based on the *post hoc* fallacy, in which *post hoc*, after the fact, is misattributed as *propter hoc*, because of the fact. This fundamental explanatory error is highly applicable to the afterlife, which can be considered a consequence, a causal effect of how life is lived. At the heart of *The Divine Comedy*, for instance, is the effect of a life's sins or virtues made manifest in the specific experience in the afterlife. The idea of the afterlife extrapolates a *because*, a *propter hoc*, from the *post hoc* of a completed life, and this is achieved using the same mechanisms for making sense of experience that result in narrative. In this chapter, I want to consider the place of causality in afterlife narratives, and investigate the implications of engagement with causal processes at work in narrative and in the afterlife in contemporary fiction. The kinds of exemplary models of cause and effect that narrative generates so well could be said to reach their ultimate fulfilment in the afterlife's explanatory promise. While, initially, as we saw in the previous chapter, some of these mechanisms of anticipatory feeling seem equivalently functioning in both religious hope and narrative fiction's sense of an ending, there is also a more complex relation of causes and effects that I want

to consider here. Afterlife narratives invoke a tradition of supernatural causes and effects which are disconnected from each other and displaced in time, in contrast with unidirectional, human time, which is characterised by the reliability of cause and effect. So, even as afterlife narratives are the realisation of narrative's potential as a tool for making sense of life (in the form of the ultimate account of a completed life), they also form a field in which the sequences of causation which would allow us to extrapolate causality are profoundly unfamiliar. In this chapter I will be examining three intersections of causality and narrative in the afterlife: narrative tense, predestination, and prolepsis, which illustrate the ways that narrative techniques are used out of their mimetic context to narrate the afterlife.

Alongside the causality that can be relied on when we draw inferences about events unfolding among the living, I want to offer an alternative causality, extrapolated from the afterlife and appearing in fiction, which takes its models of causation specifically from the most extreme forms of double predestination, in which the actions of a life are determined, effected, by an individual's already pre-ordained status after death. I am terming this process – by which what comes after has effects on what comes before – the after effect. In this is combined the disruption to cause and effect which comes from the value and significance placed on the afterlife, as well as the narrative 'special effects' in the form of experimental techniques, which are a manifestation of this concern with what comes after. Novels involving the afterlife are often used to expose the after effects which are already at work in the conventions of narrative temporality; in prolepsis, in tense, in retrospection and in anticipation.

The first section of this chapter begins with the idea of the *memento mori*, which was established in the previous chapter as a reflection of the forward memory of narrative's anticipation of retrospection. Through a reading of Ali Smith's novel, *Hotel World* (2001), the first section of this chapter will offer a second alternative to the *memento mori* model of reading. Smith's novel offers a critique of the values of Spark's *Memento Mori*, which is accompanied by a re-evaluation of the novel's suggested reading mechanisms. Furthermore, *Hotel World* suggests that the afterlife, and the non-realist, non-mimetic, narrative techniques

that are invoked to represent it, are by no means subject to cause and effect, or to narrative's favourite logical fallacy.

All three of the intersections of events and effects in successive time which I want to discuss in this chapter (tense, predestination, and prolepsis) are related to the double time scheme of narrative. Classical narratology usually suggests narratives establish two parallel views of time, which allow for a kind of double present in the form of a present for the narrator and for the characters. Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1972), for instance, begins by establishing double temporality as the basis for his analysis of the mechanics of narrative. Genette uses a quotation from Christian Metz's *Film Language* to illustrate these temporalities:

Narrative is a . . . doubly temporal sequence . . . There is a time of the thing told and the time of the narrative (the time of the signified and the time of the signifier) [. . .]. More basically, it [the doubly temporal sequence] invites us to consider that one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme. (qtd. in Genette, 1972: 33. Unbracketed ellipses in original)

Genette calls the time in a narrative a "pseudo-time" which is stolen from the present of reading time. In *About Time*, Mark Currie's study of apparent time-reversals in contemporary narrative, a related displacement of the "real" present by the "quasi-present" read into the novel's preterite tense is also suggested. Both the time of narration and the time of the thing told seem to be living off the time of reading, the "real" present, and tense is one enabling tool in this process. In Genette's quotation from Christian Metz, the double meaning of the term "time of" – could it signify a specific era like the time of the Romans, as much as the temporality of narration or story? – multiplies the already-divided temporality approached by Genette: these are not just events taking place at two different times, their sense of what time *is* functions differently. The marker of the two time schemes, one in the terms of the other, is tense.

These two "times of" have also been significant for the tradition of writing about the afterlife. For instance, Dante's knowledge of the fate of the hell-bound Boniface VIII, who did not die until after the purported timescale of Dante's

journey, could only be explained by eternity placing his afterlife in a completely separate timescale from his ordinary life. Dante is informed of Boniface's fate by another denizen of hell, Pope Nicholas III, who shares this atemporal position (Inferno XIX: 52). Dante famously used the hindsight of his position, writing after the timescale that he gives to his narrated events, to employ an element of prophecy in his work: imagining a future that he already knew to be past. Moreover, the manipulation of timescales between the time of narrating and the time of the events narrated also has a long history in afterlife writing, in which *The Divine Comedy* has a significant place. It is equally common in medieval dream visions and descent narratives (among the most famous of these being the mid-twelfth-century *Vision of Tundale* and *St Patrick's Purgatory*) which see their narrator-protagonists coming back, Rip van Winkle-like to find time has continued to pass in the 'real' frame-world, while they were in the eternity of the story-world, or the story-world of the afterlife had continued to unfold in time while it stopped outside in the 'real' world. The difference in temporality between the world and the afterlife is therefore as reflective of the double temporalities of the time of the narrator and the time of the thing told as the temporal gap between the world(s) inside the text and outside the text: the time of telling versus the time of reading.

This chapter considers the capacity of written narrative to investigate certain aspects of the afterlife and its own processes, through some ongoing comparison with the techniques of film and television. The popularity of screen depictions of heaven and hell, and the use of dead narrators, are far too numerous to give a full account in this thesis, but there will be some reference in this chapter to the use of the dead narrator in film particularly. This forms part of the investigation here of other ways of representing the afterlife, as begun by the brief investigation of some possible differences between poetry and the novel in the introduction, and which will be taken up again in Chapter 6, which looks at the narrative potential for investigating the afterlife in the forms of mapping and painting and, conversely, for using the afterlife to investigate the conventions of these media.

After the first focus on narrative tense, the second part of this chapter will shift focus to the idea of predestination. I want to build on the significance of tense in thinking about narrative and the afterlife and consider predestination as a model for narrative processes, particularly in terms of a wider model of causality, rather than simply within the terms of a pre-existing narrative future (or what Peter Brooks calls “a future we know to be already in place” in *Reading for the Plot*). If, when we are reading, the narrative’s present becomes our present, and the narrative’s past inhabits the same mental space as our memories, is there any significance in the fact that the narrative’s future is also known from the outset? In discussing the *memento mori* mechanism of reading, the analogy was established between the patterns of thinking that have to be employed in thinking about life within the terms of a coming afterlife, and narrative’s potential to conform to a similar shape in its awareness of its own ending. As a model of reading, this means that we read (and are meant to read) with the awareness of a future already in place. Essentially, causation still happens forward in time in these models, but we are being asked to imagine, hope and anticipate in ways which work in the opposite direction. Models of predestination extend this human experience to establish an alternative system of causation which is imposed from outside, where causes really can produce effects multidirectionally in time. So, God intervenes in the world from eternity by way of predestination, which damns or saves in the afterlife from before birth (from our, temporally situated, perspective), making the effects of a future judgment felt in the way a life is lived. If actions are predestined, they are predestined to fit a divinely ordained plan which is realised in the afterlife, and life is just an effect, preceding its ultimate cause at the end of life and the end of time. Cause and effect become disordered because of an influence from outside the bounds of time itself, which subordinates life to what comes after it.

These two intersections of end-influenced narrative causality are separated by the role the afterlife plays in each. In the first model, identified in Chapter 2 and involving the *memento mori* action of reading, completely natural human processes like anticipation, hope and fear see us imagining the future and pondering potential outcomes of actions in the present. These can fairly unproblematically be

associated with models of narrative, as in the examples from the previous chapter, which saw narrative imagined as both the anticipation of retrospection, as well as a preventative response to a chaotic world which is always threatened with its own destruction. In the second model – explored in this chapter and involving the processes of double predestination – supernatural causes are exerted on the living and render ordinary causality, rooted as it is in the before and after of lived temporality, redundant. Dead narrators and the afterlife emphasise this second model of the after effect, by setting up worlds in which this is really, genuinely happening, rather than simply being a feature of narrative thinking.

In *About Time*, Currie identifies a problematic tendency in narrative theorists who write about this kind of causal reversal to habitually conflate examples of the first kind of anticipation and forward memory with the kinds of supernatural time reversals I am setting up in a second category. Currie argues that the influence of the future on the present is always and only the *imaginary* future, meaning that the Derridean logic of supplementarity that describes this causal inversion, “often borrows some melodrama from the obfuscation of this difference [between actual and imaginary futures], implying that the linearity of time is somehow denied by this most mundane of mind operations, the protention” (43). To reiterate, Currie is at pains to note that, in a similar mechanism in Derrida’s concept of the archiving archive, “it would be a mistake to think that the second law of thermodynamics was in any way at stake in this” (74). Generally, this is a psychological effect, but, in writing about the afterlife, this mechanism in both narrative and in living becomes realised by a world in which cause and effect are radically disrupted by what will come after, and by eternity’s lack of before-and-after time: the linearity of time is getting denied, the second law of thermodynamics is really at stake. The text which investigates these issues most productively is Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), and this will come under consideration in the central section of this chapter, demonstrating the aspects of life after death on which my discussion hinges.

The third aspect of an after effect is examined in the area of prolepsis. Prolepsis is inseparable from consideration of tense, and also relies on the idea of

the narrator's present being different from the narrative's present, with the narrator and narratee in a common time, usually after the events described are over and can be transmitted all at once. Once again, the issues of predestination and foreknowledge are pertinent here, and prolepsis combines the issues of predestination and tense with explicitly causal implications: the future told in a proleptic excursion is there because of its relevance to the narrated present, and that relevance is often a consequential relationship of cause and effect. The final section of this chapter examines a text that makes use of prolepsis in association with some problems that arise when inhabiting both the afterlife of a character and the afterlife of another text: Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005).

The Effects of Tense

J.M.E. McTaggart's categories of tensional and non-tensional time – a distinction that eventually led him to conclude that time was inherently paradoxical and, ultimately, to deny its existence in *The Unreality of Time* (1913) – offer a useful way into looking at the problems of tense and the afterlife. Tensional time's past, present and future, and non-tensional time's before and after suggest a double time scheme that is useful in disentangling the relations between the afterlife and narrative. It is my assertion that the ways of thinking about time associated with both narrative and the afterlife require an acknowledgement of this doubled awareness of time, and that they also make it particularly apparent.

At the beginning of this chapter, I chose to refer to Roland Barthes in the present tense, according to the critical practice that maintains the presence and, implicitly, the relevance, of these words, written by a now-dead thinker over thirty years ago. If we return again to Barthes's quotation that opened this chapter, this time to give it in full, it is clear that there is some connection here between tensional and non-tensional time, and narrative's action in imparting uninflected events with meaning which comes from an awareness of their place in an irreversible causal chain:

Everything suggests, indeed, that the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes

after being read in narrative as what is *caused by*; in which case narrative would be a systematic application of the logical fallacy denounced by Scholasticism in the formula *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* - a good motto for Destiny, of which narrative all things considered is no more than the 'language'. (1966: 94).

Barthes' explanation of the processes of Destiny here is a significant one, when considered in the light of his position in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) that "The Novel is a Death; it transforms life into Destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an oriented and meaningful time" (32). To reiterate: the novel is what happens after life has died because it turns life's blankly successive events into "oriented and meaningful time". Non-tensional, blankly successive time being turned into tensional time is the reading of consequence into the consecution of before and after. Narrative, as the most comprehensive extrapolation of the *post hoc* fallacy, is also the greatest tool for processing non-tensional into tensional time. And, as Barthes suggests, the afterlife's processing of the succession of a life's events is the mirror of the relations between the novel's transformation of life into destiny, into death. However, there is also a distinction at work here between living, when time is tensed into past, present and future, and recollecting, when the time of the past is recalled as before and after. Narrative is what turns this recollected life back into tensed time again.

In this section I want to consider the role that narrative tense plays in the construction of narrative time, with particular reference to the place of cause and effect in that construction, and how that balance is upset by writing about the afterlife. If, as Barthes says, the novel is a death, is this only the case when its subject is life? In writing about the afterlife, many contemporary authors take the opportunity to examine the conventions of narrative tense as they write about worlds where time does not operate in the ways that realist narrative techniques were developed to represent. However, I want to argue that this is more than simply a meta-fictional exercise in examining tense conventions. The interrogation of cause and effect, applied to life and the afterlife, can lead to a powerful reconsideration of how to live, but also of the purpose of reading and writing. If, as

suggested in the previous chapter, the purpose of fictional endings is to turn our thoughts to our own end, this has the potential to become profoundly life-denying. Similarly, where the project of realism establishes the novel as always 'after' life, non-mimetic writing about the afterlife can suggest a status for fiction other than an effect caused by life: it refuses to be either after or caused by the fact, by inhabiting the most extreme 'after' possible.

Ali Smith's *Hotel World* is in many ways a tribute and an answer to Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*; it is concerned with narrative tense and its relationship to human time, as well as the place of death in ordering life. The novel is divided into six sections, each titled with a tense and narrated in a corresponding way: past, present historic, future conditional, perfect, future in the past, present. It presents the stories of five women whose lives are somehow connected to one branch of the Global Hotel where the first narrator is killed in an accidental fall from a dumb waiter. This first narrator, Sara Wilby, is doubly future-oriented by her name, but this also suggests a kind of fatalism which is incompatible with the logic of the *memento mori*: there is no need to remember death and act accordingly in the present if what will be, will be. *Hotel World* suggests that the instruction to remember you must die is a very different matter for the elderly protagonists of Spark's novel, who can assume that most of their lives are behind them, than for a young girl like Sara, whose death is unexpected, unthinkable and, in some important ways, unimaginable. There is a difference between shaping a life in anticipation of death in old age, however universally horrifying the end of existence might be, and planning for possible death every single day. In her chapter of the novel, Sara's teenage sister explains this difference with reference to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and its discussion of death days:

[I]t is like like reading a book yeah like say you were reading a book any book & you were halfway through it really into the story knowing all about the characters and all the stuff that's happening to them then you turn the next page over & halfway down the page it just goes blank it stops there just aren't any more words on it & you know for sure that when you picked up this book it wasn't like

that it was like a normal book & had an end a last chapter a last page
all that but now you flick through it right to the end & it's all just
blank nothing to tell you yes that is a bit like what it is like. (190)

The end of a novel is always the first kind of ending – it never comes unexpectedly and too soon – and Smith's novel challenges the closural associations of anticipated personal demise. Unlike the signs and portents that should come with apocalypse, the individual ending is unanticipated and unanticipatable, yet also inevitable.

Hotel World has four epigraphs, which freefall down its opening page in a pattern which comes to emblematised the shape the novel suggests for life. The first is from Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*, but is referenced only by author, almost suggesting this one sentence, "Remember you must die", represents everything she wrote. Smith's novel rewrites the *memento mori* in favour of an alternative mechanism that, while it acknowledges the inevitable shaping power of endings, refuses to accept their dominance over what comes before.

At the other end of *Hotel World*, on the penultimate page, Sara's valedictory instruction, "Remember you must live," is distorted and echoed in another series of sentences that fall down the page, and seem to decrease out of sight and earshot. The text decreases, and is typeset to convey a voice falling away and fading from the reader:

remember

you

must

live

remember

you

most

love

remainder

you

mist

leaf

These lines capture the *memento mori's* unspoken supplement, which implies its opposite, because remembering death always also means remembering life. The final variation seems to move further towards nonsense and a breakdown of language and meaning, but it also reveals the most about Sara's situation in an afterlife which is a remainder of her previous existence. These nonsense words are also clarified with reference to the final section of the novel, which closes with an image of a tree with birds landing on it as "rainwater jolts off the branches and falls, a miniature parody of rain" (236). Sara's afterlife experience has made her suspended, desperate to swoop and fall just so that she can hit the ground and feel something solid again: life is rain, with a predictable, cause-and-effect gravitational result; the afterlife is mist; something between hanging and falling. The novel imagines the fall as a symbol of what it means to be alive and to live by this kind of certainty, in which we must necessarily hit the ground. The mist and the afterlife introduce a third element into the binaries of hanging/hitting the ground and living/dying, which involves an extended fall as a model for life. In a novel which is so concerned with verb tenses and the action they represent in narrative, it is also significant that this final line (remainder you mist leaf) can be read as containing no verbs, suggesting a kind of un-narratable transition into an eternity without action.

The first and last chapters of the novel form a framing pair which takes in a variety of possibilities of narration. The opening chapter, entitled "Past" is narrated by Sara's disembodied voice, after her death has consigned all of the possibilities for her life to the past. Her narration opens with a nod to *Mrs Dalloway* and an acknowledgement that her story can only start with her end:³⁵

Wooooo-

hoooooo what a fall what a soar what a plummet what a dash into
dark into light what a plunge what a glide thud crash what a drop
what a rush what a swoop what a fright what a mad hushed skirl

³⁵ Like many aspects of the Sara's narrative, the opening "Wooohooo" is also common to Quentin Compson's narrative in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Both characters also visit a watch shop and have trouble with time before their deaths.

what a smash mush mash-up broke and gashed what a heart in my
mouth what an end.

What a life.

What a time.

What I felt. Then. Gone.

Here's the story; it starts at the end. (3)

Where Woolf's novel opens with the shock of the plunge into another living mind and the subjective time of memory and association that comes with it, Sara's narrative plunges the reader into a story, into an existence which is more about words than about life. The tense of Sara's existence after death is troublesome, as she is unable to situate herself in time. The earliest definitions of time associate it with movement or the possibility of movement, but Sara's suspended afterlife means she is outside time, no longer defined by actions like falling or the time travelling of ordinary duration. In observing the hotel receptionist, Lise, Sara notes that her "life could be about to change. [. . .] Life, about change" (30). Sara's suspension between falling and hitting the ground, hanging between living and death means that she has no capacity for change, no access to the ordinary before-and-after of human time, and no dynamic place in narrative as an actant, in the terms at the centre of A.J. Greimas's model in *Structural Semantics* (1966).

The following chapter will examine the place of some specifically generic associations that are made use of in writing about the afterlife, but one that is particularly significant in terms of *Hotel World* and its exploration of tense conventions is the ghost story. This is very much reflected in the novel's employment of tense to reflect the action and non-action of haunting, and the temporal status of the afterlife. To show how tense is used differently in Smith's novel, it is worth quoting an explanation that David Herman cites in *Story Logic* (2002) to demonstrate the implications of verb tense for narrative. Herman uses work from the study of natural-language narrative, which attempts to define when utterances are narrative and non-narrative. One major distinguishing feature is verb tense, which encodes events in time in a specific way. For instance, Herman quotes a summary from Livia Polanyi, which gives the associations that go

alongside the situation of narrative events in the past tense: "The 'narrative line' in English language stories is 'built up through simple past-time event clauses. These are main clauses that encode instantaneous, non-iterative, positive, completive occurrences in the past'" (31). Events in the afterlife cannot be described as occurrences that fulfil any of these criteria.

Herman's *Story Logic* has the project of producing a preferential or fuzzy logic for narrative theory, in order to refine narratology's tendency toward binary models, which fail to account for the range of narratives in existence. In the example of verbal tense as a marker for action Herman, quite significantly, uses the example of the ghost story as a counter-example which exposes the necessity of a fuzzier approach to this aspect of the theory of narrative. He suggests that the model of narrative as a series of ("instantaneous, non-iterative, positive, completive") occurrences, that are signified by verb tense, is less preferred in the generic case of the ghost story. Instead, ghost stories establish a preferential hierarchy for indefinite time periods over definite time periods. In practice, this means that tellers of ghost stories (and, in Smith's novel, a ghost-storyteller) "regularly use nonindicative verbal moods (not *went*, but *would go*, *used to go*) in their tales, thereby suggesting that certain temporal and ontological properties of storyworlds inhabited by supernatural presences cannot be definitively known" (33). The fuzzy time-status of dead people, then, is reflected in verbs that mark their actions as uncompleted, unsituated in time, and iterative. Moreover, this can also be a reflection of narrative's tendency to assume the opposite status for everything in the lives that it is telling. As part of Smith's project in this novel of emphasising the continuous, the inconclusive and the unfinalised, the use of non-completive sentence formations becomes a very powerful tool, as I will discuss below. If narrative generally has a preference for the formulation, "read lives as completed, but also as a kind of present: remember you must (in the future) die", then Smith sets up another, counter-logic, that says, "read lives as in-progress, and as unsituatable in time: remember you must live."

Sara's syntax reflects her status in the afterlife, outside this ordinary successive time characterised by movement and changing states: "From summer to

autumn I did all that I can" (13). There is no change in her potential for activity between the last year's "could" and today's "can" so she has no need for the past historic, and the tense shows the closing down of possibilities which go with death. These non-completive sentence formations reflect her position in time. In the same way as Calvino's Mr Palomar, Sara's ghost has reconciled herself to "finding [her]self in the same definitive state" (1956: 110) forever. She is losing her capacity for speech in the course of her narration, as she lives her final day before she goes "to heaven, or hell, or somewhere," and even as she glories in her memories of physical experience, she realises that her being is only made of words. Like one of Beckett's monologists, all she can do to maintain some level of existence is speak: "Now that I'm silent forever, haha, it's all words words words with me" (5). The novel becomes a meditation on how existence can be represented with words, and how Sara's afterlife, "all words words words", is exactly like a disembodied, retrospective and omniscient narrator.

In the final section of the novel, "Present", the narrating voice belongs to Sara's ghost after it has shed another layer of its identity. The concern with the names which attach ghosts to places means that the watch shop receipt with S. Wilby written on it draws her ghost back to life, like the deceased sweet shop owner, Princess Diana, or Solomon Pavy, "resentfully awoken and set loose again every time someone reads the poem written to his memory by Ben Jonson" (228). Or is it the book itself which has worked as an incantation to bring Sara back to life? The closing section refers to itself as part of "this book," and returns us to the following day's activities of the opening chapter's characters, in the "town where the heft and scant of this book have been so tenuously anchored" (229). This continuity reinforces the similarities between Sara's ghost's opening monologue and the detached third-person narrator who can refer to the book itself. Ghosts and narrators can both pass through walls into the private spaces of other people's homes and minds, and the movement from the ghost's preterite tense narration – starting with her unavoidable position at the end – to the narrator's final present-tense commentary only serves to show how unremarkable narration from the afterlife seems.

The possibilities of tense and a narrative position, by default, after the end, are also examined in the novel's investigation of the processes of narrative production, when it is shown that the easiest way of turning life into a narrative is to project beyond the event itself into an imagined future telling. The journalist, Penny – whose chapter of the novel is narrated in the third person, but focalised through her – writes a promotional column about the Global Hotel for her appropriately titled newspaper, *The World on Sunday*. As part of her writing process she depresentifies her experience in her own mind, “as if telling somebody about it afterwards, even though she was still actually there in the room, thinking it” and looks for problems like a damaged laptop that “might make a good story” (131). The experience of the Global Hotel, where Penny is writing for *The World* means that she has to translate an experience she interprets in heavenly terms into a human narrative. She finds that the perfections of this heaven are unnarratable, establishing the primacy of life over afterlife as a topic for stories. She looks for the right words, typing, “If you're looking for the classic place, the ideal place, the flawless place, the immaculate, no. Superior place. Transcendent, no” (130). The terms under erasure in Penny's writing show her thinking is associating this hotel experience with an imagined heaven, but her narrative presents her with the classic problem of writing about perfection, when her static, “sham” flawless room means she has no story to tell until she engages with the world and becomes “a cog in the mechanism of something really happening” (138), even if just for a short time before returning to the hotel, where she keys in the codes for pay-per-view porn and room service, and tunes in and checks out of the world around her.

This oscillating disassociation and engagement with the world are at the heart of the problem of narration from the afterlife that is explored in *Hotel World*. In the conventional extradiegetic narrator's world, there are no events unfolding (these are limited to the world of the characters) yet, in order for there to be a story to tell, the narrator has to make some contact with this world outside. There is no possibility of staying in a heaven where nothing happens. In his study *Time* (1998), Philip Turetzky describes time simply as a “boundary condition” for phenomena, and this definition has some interesting consequences for the diegetic boundary

between the time of narration and the time of the thing narrated. Turetzky gives a selection of possible roles for this boundary condition, but it is the last which interests me most, describing time as a “double limit where two sorts of time are posited, one on either side of the boundary between phenomena and what does not appear” (3). The phenomena of the perceivable world are therefore opposed to an imagined time of the afterlife which is, as yet, undetectable. However, this could just as well describe the time and world of the narrator, which is displaced by the apparent phenomena and the time of the story. There can surely, therefore, be some analogy between the time of the narrative and the afterlife, and the time of the story and life. The boundary condition of narration means that Turetzky’s definition identifies narration’s afterlife properties, as it takes place from a point where there are things which do not appear on the ‘living’ side of the boundary, not least the disincarnated narrator. As we saw in the previous chapter, however, this places us as readers in the uncomfortable position of inhabiting the afterlife of the story world, in which events have already been played out, and the time of our present is eclipsed by the time(s) of the narrative we are reading.

In the central chapter of *Hotel World*, “Future Conditional”, the story concentrates on the character of Lise, the hotel receptionist – her name acknowledging the protagonist of Muriel Spark’s *The Driver’s Seat* (1970) – who ends up on the wrong side of a boundary condition for phenomena through illness. Sara diagnoses that Lise is “ill but does not know it yet” in the opening chapter, and her section of the novel takes place some time after the two days of Sara’s dissolution which frame the narratives. As the text identifies, “it was some time in the future” (81), and this combination of tenses does not strike the same odd note as Sara’s mixed tenses, precisely because it conforms to the ordinary conventions of narrative prolepsis. Lise’s situation matches Sara’s in her apparent suspension from the changes which give ordinary life its successive elements: “Lise was lying in bed. That was practically all the story there was” (81). This suspension can be read into the idea of Turetzky’s model of time as a boundary condition for phenomena, in which the third-person narrator is not manifested outside the time-world of narration, and suggests a distinction in the diegetic worlds of the story

that allows for an extradiegetic narrator to inhabit another world, or ideally, the timeless zone of the Other World. However, even if there is no story in Lise's present, there *is* a story there to be told in the future conditional of what Lise *could* do in the time to come, something which separates her from one of the dead. In her suspended state Lise finds that grammar starts to betray her attempts to marshal her experiences without memory and change to order time: "Would've. Did. Was. Everything – cars, buses, work, shops people, everything – other than this bed she was lying in was into a different tense now" (88). She has no way of situating herself in the present tense because it has no anchor in a past or future as comparison by which to measure time passing.

The central part of Lise's section is taken up by two tellings of the same evening (also retold in the other chapters of the novel) when Lise lets Else, a homeless woman, stay in one of the empty hotel rooms. The first telling is introduced as a recollection straight from Lise's mind as it is "sluiced wide" by the action of the reader's imagination (101). Told in the third-person present, this apparently unmediated view into the memories Lise herself cannot access is then told again with an emphasis on explanation and revelation of facts beyond the materially obvious. In the second retelling we can read that Lise is repeating the words to the lobby muzak in her head, but without realising it herself, and the narrator is able to give the information that Lise will become ill and that she will recover. Most significantly for my concerns here (although I want to return to this mind-reading in Chapter 5) the second narrative begins at the end, working backwards from the final time in Lise's recollection and offering another association between telling stories and being dead, and therefore opposing both to the real business of living itself.

According to the narrator, "time is notoriously deceptive" (103) and perhaps, therefore, the reversed narration is completely acceptable, as Lise has been deceived in ordering her memory by linear time anyway. The two narratives are very concerned with the way that linearity governs the production of meaning, in stories and in living. Lise's boring job means that she is constantly watching the clock to measure the time to the end of her shift, and the beginning and end of

narrated time is marked by Lise waiting for the change of numbers on the computer's digital clock. The narrator observes:

Because time seems to move in more or less simple linear chronology, from one moment, second, minute, hour, day, week, etc. to the next, the shapes of lives in time tend to be translated into common linear sequence which itself translates into easily recognizable significance, or meaning. (103)

Sara has already posthumously recognised the wisdom that "Life about change" and Lise seems to have a sense that life is defined by change, as time and change are inseparable, but also that time and change somehow give meaning to life. Lise is pleased to have seen the numbers change on the clock because "it feels meant," as though her life is a story. The second telling of this moment places it ahead of the narration in a final prolepsis, which seems to confirm everything that is notoriously deceptive about narrated time: "In a moment she will glance at the clock on the computer and see the moment when the number changes on it, from a 1 to a 2. She will be pleased to see it happen. It will feel meant" (119). Where is the narrator situated in time here? The prolepsis to the following morning, when Lise's actions will result in one of the chambermaids being fired, has already established the strange temporality put to work by this narrative. However, the proleptic retelling of Lise and the clock seems curiously arbitrary: why not simply narrate this in the present tense along with the rest of the consecutive time which leads up to it? This seems to be another way of undermining the linear chronology whose deceptiveness is "one of the easier things to forget" (103), and which needs to be reinforced as a series of moments which can be broken off at any point: the difference between life's tensional time and the novel's tensional time is the existence of all past and future points for arbitrary presentification or depresentification. So, in a narrative, a statement like "That is then. This was now" can break the illusion of linear narrative time and connect with Sara's language, which does not have the tenses to narrate her afterlife. The narrator's time, with its prolepsis and analepsis, and ability to enter a story at any point, becomes allied

with the time of the afterlife, rather than then time of living itself, reinforcing the sense that living should not model itself on reading with a memory of the end.

The novel explores the narration of the past and of the future, and Smith also seems very concerned with the way that we live with the uncertainty of the future, which is so different from the predestined way the future is conceived by narrative fiction. Lise's sickness obscures her past from her, and her mysterious illness has no apparent cause, yet her future is apparently clear to the narrator. As a fictional character her unconscious can be penetrated and narrated, but as a human being there is no certainty that she will be walking into a Global Hotel in Ottawa within two years. It is this certainty and predestination in narrative that Smith most wants to address in reversing the *memento mori*. The concept of a *memento mori* emphasises uncertainty in the future, with death itself being the only unchangeable certainty, but remembering you must live takes in all the uncertainty which comes before death. For characters in a novel this becomes doubly charged: for instance, we know that the clock changing is "meant" in *Hotel World*, given the novel's imagery of clocks, watches and time and tense in general.

The sense of a joyously uncertain future which runs through Smith's novel is present from the opening page, in her choice of an epigraph from the architect Charles Jencks:

Traditional religions emphasize constancy, the Modernists with their mechanistic models emphasize predictability, but the cosmos is much more dynamic than either a pre-designed world or a dead machine
... each jump is a great mystery. (Ellipses in original)

This offers a model of a dynamic future with a jump and a potential fall. Smith introduces the element of risk at the beginning of her novel, a celebration of the gamble involved in living, and all the uncertainty there is before you get to the certainty of death. The "more dynamic" cosmos recognised by postmodernity must take in chance and probability and all the elements which make up life, rather than reducing life to a mechanistic cause of death, or a prelude to an afterlife.

Jeanette Winterson's *Lighthousekeeping* (2004) takes "Remember you must die" and "Remember you must live", attributed to Muriel Spark and Ali Smith,

respectively, as its epigraphs. Talking about the novel and about her writing processes in an interview appended to the Harper edition of the text, Winterson comments on the place of the fall as a shaping metaphor for fiction:

Fiction is a leap of faith.

Leaping takes energy, from the reader and from the writer, and we are living in a time when fiction is becoming more like a guided tour, a documentary, as close to 'real life' as possible, a mimic, a recording angel.

Picasso was excited when photography began its serious work in the early twentieth century, because he thought it would finally free up painting from the burden of representation. I hoped that the narrative naturalism of film, and television in particular, would free up the novel from its dreary burden of 'life as it is lived', and allow it the talismanic and imaginative properties of poetry, where language, and ambition for the form itself, would be more important, and more interesting than everyday narrative. ('Endless Possibilities': 21)

Writing about the afterlife, then, is one refusal of "everyday narrative" that attempts to convey daily living in a wholly mimetic way. Written narrative's possibilities for investing itself in other times, beyond today and beyond life, make for a powerful alternative to the present-tense, quotidian relevance of on-screen narratives. The relentless present tense of dramatic forms necessarily plays into this naturalism, making tense the central ground for conflict about "ambition for the form itself" in the novel. For Winterson, separation from the pressure of mimesis is followed by a leap into formal experimentation.

The Effects of Preterition

The place of a fall in Smith's novel certainly seems to play into the history of literary engagement with the thorny theological questions of free will and predestination. Milton's description of Adam and Eve, created "sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (*Paradise Lost* 3:99) conforms to exactly the kinds of past-future verb tense constructions favoured in *Hotel World*, and it is the imagery

of standing and falling that seems to be at the heart of this tradition of assessing predestination from both after and before the fact, with awareness of a future outcome which was already fixed from the beginning of time.

The problems for Protestants living with any level of predestination multiplied Catholicism's concern with the catechism's commendation to memory of the four last things: death, judgment, heaven and hell. The *ordo salutis*, the order of salvation that was at stake in the Reformation, represents the chain of causation at work in salvation, identifying whether the effect of salvation finds its cause in election or faith. The most logically convoluted manifestation of this balance between predestination and free will, the Arminian doctrine, was developed after the teachings of Jacobus Arminius, as a corrective to the most extreme predestinarian aspects of Calvinism, and suggested that election came about through God's foreknowledge of those who would exercise their free will to come to Him through faith. For individuals attempting to find out if they possessed the marks of the elect in their own lives, faith and works become markers of both the past (of God's foreknowledge of the present from eternity and from before their births) and the future (of God's Final Judgment and the fate of the soul).

In *Gravity's Rainbow* (1974) Thomas Pynchon has explored precisely these concerns by demonstrating the dangers of belief systems (from science or religion or a multitude of other sources which have formed the amalgam of Western thought) which gesture to a perfection and certainty beyond living. Two years after the novel's publication, Josephine Hendin described Pynchon as "the American Goya whose dazzling canvases are lit from hell, whose message is: Death Rules" (42). Pynchon's novel of Second World War rocket-production and espionage demonstrates how this has become the norm for our death-inflected culture, and our fixation on understanding the present by the light of the future means we live with one foot in the afterlife already.

In the previous section, we saw how Ali Smith's ambiguous response to the *memento mori* is contained within the concept itself, which already implies its opposite. Pynchon's interpretation of the idea of predestination, which he uses to explore afterlife-oriented fictions in a similar way, is far less uncertain: for him

there is absolutely no value in remembering you must die when the prevailing discourses are certain of your damnation. The doctrine of preterition is the dark side of Calvinist double predestination, what John Donne calls (and condemns, being an Arminian) in his 152nd sermon, the “book of death” to election’s “book of life”. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the fictions of a pre-designed world have resulted in the death of expendable preterite millions for the sake of a controlling elect who have a sense of their own predestination beyond life on earth. Even apparently noble dreams of progress like Franz Pökler and his fellow engineers’ innocent sense of their destiny leading them to space exploration are revealed as part of the same disorder which ultimately leads Pökler to the Dora forced labour camp and his “special destiny” to create the plastic casing for the rocket in which the boy Gottfried is sent to his death (431). In the text this phrase is quoted from Blicero/Weissman’s instructions, illustrating just how easily the whole war is justified by the same logic as Pökler’s sense of his own election and the general ideology of a select few somehow transcending the rest of the world.

At the beginning of the novel, Pynchon connects preterition with the gravestone epitaphs so favoured by New England Puritan ancestors of the protagonist, Tyrone Slothrop, and which feature different forms of the *memento mori*. The verses written in the metre of the Star-Spangled Banner on Elizabeth Slothrop’s tomb unite the destructive longing for transcendence (with the stars of the flag becoming another emblem of the American dualist instinct of heaven and earth, if not evidence of paranoid connections and astrological predestination) with the constant awareness of death:

Mark, Reader my cry! Bend thy thoughts on the Sky,
And in midst of prosperity, know thou may’st die. (27)

The same attention to the sky rather than the earth is responsible for the desperate pursuit of technology that promises to somehow allow us to escape ourselves and the world, at the cost of the planet and the majority of its inhabitants. “Know thou may’st die” is not a chilling pronouncement for these believers who are presumably confident in both their prosperity in life and their election in the afterlife. For the majority of Pynchon’s category of the preterite (which must include everyone killed

because the rocket engineers and chemists bent their thoughts on the sky) “know thou may’st die” means “remember you must live” because there is nothing good waiting for you afterwards.

Shortly before this flight across the Atlantic to the graves of his ancestors, Slothrop has been having his first encounter with the “sneaky hardon” that is the effect (or is it?) of his “peculiar sensitivity to what is revealed in the sky” (26). Slothrop’s paranoia means he feels there is a rocket with his name on it, and the description of the rocket fall seems to narrate his thoughts as they immediately turn to his predetermined end: “miles behind his back and up the river *memento mori* a sharp crack and a heavy explosion” (25). Preterition and election, *memento mori*, the sneaky and inexplicable hardon, the V2 rockets that kill you before you hear their explosions: these are all examples of disordered cause and effect which seem to be the result of a world “lit from hell,” or skewed by after effects. Like the optical effects of the rainbow or the Brocken spectre, after effects rely on earthly thoughts bent on the sky, or from life to something after it.

The novel also examines conflicting models of reality which are represented by Ned Pointsman, the Pavlovian, whose faith is invested in models of stimulus and response and Roger Mexico, whose worldview is a statistical model one of probabilities. In contrast to the (disturbed) cause-and-effect considerations which the novel associates with preterition and the afterlife viewed from earth, it is Mexico’s more nuanced point of view which is associated with heaven. The Poisson distribution of the rocket hits across the grid of London relies on an equation which is “only for angels” both in its reliance on the view from above offered by the map’s “ink ghost of London,” rather than people’s chances “as seen from down here,” but also because of the necessity of having access to a wider sense of time, outside a tensional perception of the present and the future (54). The Poisson equation relies on a specific time period with a beginning and an end, during which Mexico’s rocket strike frequencies are distributed across his grid. However, insert a human being with concerns for predicting specific future strikes into the equation, and the system looks like a failure: each event is not affected by the ones which have preceded it, and the squares on the grid all have an equal chance of a rocket hit at a

specific present. This feature of a Poisson process is often described as the events evolving without after effects. For people accustomed to the off/on, zero/one of dualist thinking, Mexico's probability theory seems like precognition, because the gap between one and zero is ignored. In truth, however, Mexico's position is completely anchored in the present, rather than looking to a certain future. If Pointsman's dogs are given a stimulus, they respond in a predictable way: if the rockets hit a grid square twenty times this has no effect on whether a rocket will fall there tonight. Mexico's equation demonstrates the futility of human attempts to get outside the present, when an angelic perspective does not apply to our situation. However, there remains the problem of what his knowledge can actually *do* for people living under the threat of rocket hits. One answer is that this is essentially the wrong question: the rocket threat is governed by a causal process, but cause-and-effect thinking has been implicated in Pointsman's harmful philosophy, which would rather seek ways to predict the future than take action in the present to try and stop the rockets falling at all.

We can see emerging from this that the afterlife in Pynchon's novel has two seemingly incompatible manifestations. The first is in the role of eternal rewards or punishment after life, and it is this sense which seems to be so destructive of healthy and productive living in the present. The second is identified by Kathryn Hume in *Pynchon's Mythography* (1987) as a more general concern with the "Other Side," established as an alternative category rather than a place of higher or lower values than "This Side" (132). This equality is established in the novel by quite matter-of-fact communication with the dead through séances and visitations. Conversely, the preterition/election binary of predestination comes to represent the most heavily weighted of hierarchically organised oppositions. Preterition is the most fundamental zero to the one of election in this binary view of the universe. There are no chances or probabilities of redemption in this model, but the necessity to point thoughts towards death remains all the same. Rather than positing heaven or hell as effects of the behaviour in this life, double predestination makes behaviour an effect of preterition or election. By this logic, damnation is the cause of sin.

Suitably, it is in these logical paradoxes of cause and effect that Pynchon can locate some sources of hope. Refusing to obey the gravestones' smug *memento mori* liberates the preterite and allows them to find meaning in life alone, rather than with reference to another order of being. The consequences of this for Slothrop is a narrowing of his "temporal bandwidth" (509) which anchors him to life only by the present, meaning that he shares Ali Smith's characters' concern with life rather than the afterlife. However, like Sara Wilby, Slothrop's enlightenment comes with a gradual loosening of his attachment to "This Side," until his existence becomes spread across both the dead and the living, allowing him to communicate with ghosts and gradually fade out of the novel. He is therefore able to bring the "Other Side" and "This Side" together at once rather than opposing them.

This mediating between the hierarchically organised alternatives of dualistic thinking means that *Gravity's Rainbow* enacts the same development of tertiary categories which, according to Jacques Le Goff, led to the birth of purgatory.³⁶ This is certainly one aspect of the approach taken by Kathryn Hume in *Pynchon's Mythography*, a study which argues for a mythographic patterning which co-exists with the novel's aporias and riotous chaos. Using analysis of the mythographic elements of the Old Testament by structuralist mythographer Edmund Leach, Hume is able to identify the mythographic features that shape and organise Pynchon's novel. Central to these features is the place of binary oppositions and of mediations between them. Explaining Leach's work, Hume observes:

The oppositions established in mythic narratives may always seem to be mutually exclusive but [. . .] we try to establish sacred mediating categories that resolve the conflict. If a basic antinomy is

³⁶ Le Goff, with Levi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology*, says that the move from binary to tertiary systems represented a new level of complexity to systemic thinking in the medieval period. The role of purgatory as a mediating category between heaven and hell is central to his argument in *The Birth of Purgatory*. Le Goff argues that purgatory, situated between heaven and hell, but skewed towards the former theologically, but the latter practically, is a good representative of the period's intellectual systems, with similar entities springing up between the clergy and the laity, and between the powerful and the poor: "Purgatory was one of those not quite balanced systems that are so characteristic of the feudal mentality. [. . .] To move from binary to ternary schemes was to cross a dividing line in the organization of social thought" (6-7).

alive and not-alive, we create the story of an afterlife in which the dead live forever. (27)

Hume goes on to make the connection with Paul Ricoeur's concept of the "sacred universe" in which there is a correspondence and connecting sense of the divinity immanent in all things.³⁷ The next step is clear: the association of Ricoeur's "logic of correspondences" with Pynchon's "kute korrespondences". Plotting and connections are therefore working as sacred mediating categories in the same way as the afterlife. This feeds into a sense of the world as a text into which God's meanings can be read. Not only, as Pynchon observes, does paranoia replace awareness of an ordering deity, but the metaphor of the world as a book seems to have a place in the novel's imagery.³⁸

The problem, however, is that attempts to read the world (or to translate a novel into a world) involve looking for something other than what is there; implicitly, something better. Reading the world means looking for some sign of a supernatural order, a referent beyond the physical manifestation of phenomena, and reading a novel which claims to refer to reality means forgetting the fictional nature of the text. Rather than simply inheriting the Christian sense of the world as a text referring to a divine order beyond itself, Pynchon takes the concept full-circle: the world of his novel is *only* a textual world, and is self-referential rather than indicating either a supernatural or natural order. Significantly, one of the key ways in which he suppresses the sense of his fiction as a realist depiction of a causal, orderly world is in his refusal to make events conform to cause and effect. There is no functioning causal explanation for Slothrop's precognisant response to the rocket hits, because his link works on a subconscious level "where the clocks and calendars don't mean too much [and] what's haunting him now will prove to be the smell of Imipolex G" (286). Slothrop has always been haunted by this smell

³⁷ This is from Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (1976).

³⁸ Maureen Quilligan's reading of *Gravity's Rainbow* in 'Thomas Pynchon and the Language of Allegory' (1981) identifies the tendency to "read" the world as evidence of the inheritance of Puritan thought. From the asterisk raindrops that indicate footnotes, to the "graffiti of ice [...] a legend to be deciphered by the lords of winter" (73) Quilligan argues, in a comment relevant to this chapter's secondary interest in film, that "Pynchon's reader and Pynchon's communication itself are prisoners of the book; all the filmic metaphors cannot turn the print on the page into something else" (197).

from the future, which was not used early enough to have been his original stimulus as a baby test-subject, and becomes involved in Blicero's rocket too late to have been the cause of his erections in London.

Slothrop's Puritan ancestors attempted to ascertain their own election or preterition not just through reading and making sense of cause and effect in the world, but their faith also demanded reflexive examination of their own lives for the effects of their election. The providence tradition that fed into the early forms of the novel covers the aspects of reading the world, while the form of the spiritual autobiography is responsible for the self-scrutiny in narrative modes that is still present in the contemporary novel. In more recent forms, this examination of the autobiographical past with an eye to its effects on the present and the future is more commonly informed by psychoanalysis. A comparison with another narrative that uses the disturbed cause and effect of the afterlife in a similar way to *Gravity's Rainbow* might be instructive here. In D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1981), the protagonist, Lisa, visits Dr Freud for help with apparently psychosomatic pains. He diagnoses these as hysterical responses to repressed childhood knowledge of her mother's affair, and to sexual trauma. However, by the close of the novel, it becomes clear that the pain in her pelvis and her breast correspond exactly to the wounds she will receive when she is murdered in a Nazi massacre. In the final chapter, Lisa is delivered to an afterlife which takes the form of a refugee and resettlement camp in Israel, where she still suffers from the pains, but has a new diagnosis: "Anagnorisis" (228). Her disorder has always been a narrative malady, a hint of the story's future which indicated that recognition that would only occur in retrospect, from this point after her own end. In contrast with the psychoanalytic narrative's recognition of the effects of the past, no matter how buried and reconfigured, in the present, and the necessity of retelling them as part of the cure, *The White Hotel* suggests a parallel option of causation with emphasis on the after effect.

There are fictional connections in these examples that function on a level other than that of successive time. Returning to *Gravity's Rainbow*, this is most clearly illustrated in the novel by Leni Pökler's response to her husband, the

“cause-and-effect man”, who cannot fathom her belief in astrology, even as she tries to explain that she is not claiming a causal connection between the stars and the earth. Leni argues against his objection: “Not produce [...] not cause. It all goes along together. Parallel not series. Metaphor. Signs and symptoms. Mapping onto different coordinate systems [...] Not A before B but all together ...” (159). Even as this recalls the previous chapter’s discussion of the extra-temporal element to plotting realised at the end of the reading process, *Gravity’s Rainbow* refuses to situate this at the end of a process of history, reading or time that has been serially accumulated. In Leni’s description, there are associations and correspondences between systems that do not have to come from projecting beyond their ends in time.

Gravity’s Rainbow does everything possible to destroy the insidious creep of the desire to understand the present in the light of an imaginary future, and to undermine the narrative anticipation of retrospection by which readers expect everything to become legible by the light of the ending. One of the important features of the novel in this respect is its refusal of the authority of a retrospective narrator positioned after the end of the narrative. The text is filled with different voices and is narrated predominantly in the present tense, which can be interpreted as an act of resistance against the voices of those in power trying to turn our thoughts to the end. If *Gravity’s Rainbow* itself is “lit from Hell” it is only because it is trying to expose the flipside of an end-oriented dominant discourse that is always claiming to be lit from heaven, from the stars, or from the sky.

The present-tense narration of the novel is also explicitly linked to film, and the novel closes with a reversible metaphor of the Orpheus Movie Theatre’s screen compared to a blank page, just like the one facing us on reaching the end of the book, and turning back to refer to the screen. To return to this chapter’s secondary focus on the properties of film, Pynchon’s novel seems to be offering the apparently unimpeded presence of this popular art form as a way of investigating how and why we might end up telling stories in such a different way in books, which are always displaced away from a focus on the present to an imagined future (as is film), but often also situated in a past tense that masquerades as a present. Clearly,

this is of central relevance to the way of thinking about the afterlife as a force which has effects from outside time, and from the future, on the present.

These layered times do not appear in the same way in other media, particularly in dramatic forms. For instance, the dramatic representations of the afterlife which were the early-twentieth-century precursors to contemporary fictional afterlives investigated a parallel set of concerns about time and its presentation in generic formal strategies. In an essay on these theatrical afterlives, 'Playing Hell' (1979), Thomas R. Whitaker gets to the heart of criticisms of Sartre's play, in an observation that can be generalised to other dramatic representations of life after death:

When critics say that *No Exit* lacks what is ordinarily called action, that its 'acts' are 'in the past', that its characters 'had surrendered' their 'freedom' before death, or that their 'existence after death lacks the essential condition which time possesses for Sartre', they simply forget what Sartre knew quite well: that the theatre can represent nothing but action. (172)³⁹

The properties of theatre themselves invite an investigation into what it means to represent (to make present, again) something on the stage when the action that is facing the audience is located both in the past and in an impossible present.

These issues of presence and the afterlife in drama are best illustrated by Beckett's writing. Even his most explicitly afterlife-invoking prose work, *How It Is* (1961 in French [1964 in English]), plays into the dramatic work which had immediately preceded it in Beckett's oeuvre, like the quasi-afterlives of *Waiting for Godot* (1954) or *Endgame* (1958), rather than the progressively moribund narratives in the *Trilogy* (1947-58). The difference between being nearly dead and nearly alive is an important one, which is reflected in the need to interrogate the making-present of characters on stage for its acknowledgement that these apparently living people are always quite dead in some ways. In a representation of the constant present of the stage or screen, the problem of how to end comes to

³⁹ The critics Whitaker is quoting and correcting here are, respectively, Jacques and June Guicharnaud, in *Modern French Theatre: From Giradoux to Genet* (1967); Edith Kern, in her introduction to the volume *Sartre: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1962); and Hazel E. Barnes, in *Sartre* (1973).

the fore, along with a sense of this constant present as a form of eternity. In written narratives the “quasi-present” of the narrative preterite tense offers a mode of speech that sounds like the past, in the same way as drama looks like the present, yet makes similar claims on presence at the same time. Beckett’s work, in both his dramas and his novels, exemplifies the possibilities for showing how the presentification in representation always invokes a sense of absence and afterlife. In his novels, this comes about through the use of the present tense, which can tend towards both representing the death in living (as in *The Unnamable*’s narrator’s, “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” [418]) and the life in death (indicated by the narrator of *How it Is*’s equivalent in eternity “one can’t go on one can’t stop put a stop” [99]).

In contemporary popular culture, the afterlife has a significant place on film and in television, which perhaps has some influence on the increasing popularity of the dead in recent fiction. However, one important thread that connects them is the use of the dead narrator, often in voiceover in cinema or television. The classic example is *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), but William Holden’s contemporary successors in the dead narrators of *American Beauty* (1999) and *Desperate Housewives* (2004-ongoing), find themselves reflected in an increasing number of popular novels (which are then turned into films, like Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones*; directed by Peter Jackson and released in 2009). The on-screen dead narrator is half-way between the ordinary present of film and drama and the constantly fluctuating depresentification of the novel. It is, on the face of it, the reverse of Pynchon’s technique in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which puts film’s techniques into the novel with the aim of keeping everything but the present out of the story. However, both end up showing the ways in which the techniques of these fictions handle their pre-written endings in the present of their reception.

The Effects of Prolepsis

All the novels discussed in this chapter explore the consequences of afterlife-inflected narrative techniques as the primary tool for setting out hypothetical causal relationships. They examine the centrality of patterns of causation to our understanding of the world, which are in turn wholly shaped by narrative. So far,

this chapter has considered the place of the afterlife as a way of isolating those aspects of narrative that encourage us to extrapolate models of causality from narrative examples and, while by no means rejecting this strand of narrative's purpose entirely, to bring its role into the foreground. In this way, the exploration of the specific narrative techniques which both reflect and reinforce the wider logic of after effects leads to a metafictional consideration of the processes of making these stories. The afterlife allows for a way into expressing through another world, and this is a role – as a kind of conceptual tool that is not-life, and does not have the conditions of life – which will be returned to in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7.

The final section of this chapter will examine the narrative technique of prolepsis, the flash-forward, which Genette isolates in *Narrative Discourse* as the less common of the narrative anachronies. Prolepsis can be associated with the religious structures of predestination; the narrative foreknowledge to readerly faith, which makes up the text's *ordo salutis*. It is also a confirmation of the central place of cause and effect in narrative, because of the pervasiveness of at-present-unanticipated consequences and future outcomes for the characters' actions in the content of a proleptic episode. The third aspect of prolepsis which is significant here is its power in reinforcing the narrative's main time series as a present, with prolepses and analepses interpolated as anachronies. Genette's description of prolepsis in *Narrative Discourse* relies upon the assumption that story time is read as a kind of present, and that forward anachronies are interpreted as anticipations of the future, rather than part of a past for the narrator. He explains the predominance of prolepsis over analepsis as a narrative strategy by referring to the nineteenth-century narrator, "who must appear more or less to discover the story at the same time as he tells it," but must begin the story *in medias res* but, as Genette notes in a parenthetical aside, "yet . . . in ultimas res" (67). Prolepsis is therefore the evidence of the narrator's temporal position creeping into a narrative which must otherwise maintain the illusion of presence, of a lack of knowledge about the future.

Continuing the comparisons we have been making with film and television, these media do seem to have trouble with the presentation of these anachronies, in

ways which highlight just how easily these shifts can be made in written narrative. For instance, David Lodge, in discussing the film adaptation of Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, observes that the film could never capture that novel's intricate proleptic structuring because "the grammar of film seems to lack a narrative future tense. A film can move backwards in time and sideways in space, but when it moves forward in time the 'future' immediately becomes 'present'" (1971: 126). If film necessarily makes every moment present, the voiceover techniques in on-screen posthumous narratives like *Desperate Housewives*, *American Beauty* and *Sunset Boulevard* do absolutely vital work in undercutting the presentification of the visual delivery. These voiceovers privilege diegesis over mimesis, over-riding the mimetic tendencies of TV and film. The narrator's retrospective description serves to displace screen action into the past, creating a greater distinction between the time of the thing told and the time of the narrative. Narration, as well as having a different time scheme, therefore, is also *of* a different time. The example of film illustrates this particularly well, as the ordinary presence of on-screen action is disturbed by unusual narration in the ordinary past tense of the novel.

In recent work on prolepsis as both a narrative strategy and a conceptual tool, Currie's *About Time* argues for the significance of prolepsis as a way into thinking about our experience of lived time in the terms of narrative. His analysis of three different varieties of prolepsis allows for the workings of prolepsis within a narrative to be expanded out to what he terms structural and rhetorical prolepsis, filling the place occupied by the story's future time in narrative prolepsis with the time of the narrator and the time of the reader respectively (31).⁴⁰ Each of these three prolepses extends chronologically beyond the other, yet the reader, whose time falls last in the series, will encounter the narrative from the beginning. More elegantly: "Chronologically we have a line, but phenomenologically we have a loop" (32). Where Genette commented on the narrator having to appear to discover the

⁴⁰ Structural prolepsis is the most general level of narrative's prolepsis: its tendency to make us look forward to its future. Rhetorical prolepsis involves forms which anticipate the reading of the novel, for instance, Brás Cubas's complaints about living readers who have no patience with the dead in Machado de Assis's novel. A *memento mori* could fall into this third, most extended, form of prolepsis because of its intended effect on the reader.

narrative as it was told, but actually narrating from the end, Currie recognises that this apparent discovery of the narrative is there to account for the reader's experience of the text. In this section, I want to discuss a special case which does everything possible to avoid its readers beginning at the beginning and fully experiencing this phenomenological reading loop, and which therefore has an unusual configuration of prolepses in place.

Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Penelopiad* (2005), centres on the possibilities of retelling a story which has an ending which will already be familiar to most readers, as Odysseus's wife retells the story of his return from her position in the underworld after her death. The novel was described as "half-Dorothy Parker, half-Desperate Housewives" in a publication review in *The Independent*, an indication of the widespread cultural circulation of the dead narrator.

The comparison of Atwood's novel with Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* (1970) indicates the priority of the distinction that comes about through the employment of the dead narrator, who is telling her story in the first person. Genette's position is that, "The 'first-person' narrative lends itself better than any other to anticipation, by the very fact of its avowedly retrospective character, which authorizes the narrator to allude to the future and in particular to his present situation" (67). The dead narrator is actually a far less radical departure from the tendencies of narrative convention than the present-tense, third-person narrator of Spark's novel, but both are foregrounding the workings of narrative's simultaneous retrospection and presentification.

If the normal ground of narrative temporality is the story's present, with any anachronies being defined against this, *The Penelopiad* has two factors working against a reading in this way. At the beginning of the text our sense of Penelope's present, taken from *The Odyssey*, is reinforced by two epigraphical quotations from the end of what we know of her story. From the beginning, then, if we don't already know that Odysseus will return from the Trojan War, and the maids will be executed, the quotes from *The Odyssey* are there to remind us that the end of Penelope's life has already been written, however much we might get sucked into a dramatic re-playing of it in the form of the fictive present. Accordingly, the first

sentences of Atwood's novel itself, force us from Penelope's present in Homer's *Odyssey* to another point in time, in her afterlife, to a narrative which starts with a reiteration of its temporal presence, opening with the word "now". Is the present of the novel this "now", which cannot really be called an ordinary present, given its position outside the world's passing time? The frame of Penelope's narrative is her description of her afterlife in Hades, which seems to conform to a kind of perpetual present, in which everyone continues much the same: Helen is still a "septic bitch", Odysseus is still voyaging to other worlds and returning to Penelope, she is still waiting for him, and the executed maids are still hanging and haunting him: they continually follow him and run away, but in Penelope's last, present-tense description of their afterlife, the maids' "still-twitching feet don't touch the ground" (190). Penelope's retelling of her life-story uses prolepsis to place the narrative present alongside her narrating "present" in the afterlife, and to reinforce the novel's double time scheme. Some of these are relatively complex in their tense-shifting, as when Penelope describes how Anticleia "had not yet died" and Laertes "had not yet quitted the palace in despair at his son's absence to live in a hovel and penalise himself by farming. All of that would happen once Odysseus had been gone for years, but there was no foreshadowing of it yet" (60). So much hangs on the word "yet" in the construction of this paragraph, which is couched in the conventional narrative preterite tense, but is equally appealing to a sense of a narrative present because, at this point, none of this has happened. Yet. The other dimension of this is the impossibility of the reader truly occupying this narrative present. To us, as readers of a literary canon that is always after Homer, Anticleia is already dead, Laertes is already a farmer, because we know how this story ends, and that it ended thousands of years ago.

Penelope's position after the events, and our own knowledge of the outcome of her tale, leads to ironic constructions like the following:

No one knew of my instructions but myself and the maids in question; I chose not to share the secret with Eurycleia – in hindsight, a grave mistake. (115)

Penelope's reference to her future awareness of this grave mistake is half proleptic and half what Genette terms an *amorces*: the establishment of anticipation for the development of the plot through hints about future events.⁴¹ Readers' knowledge of the events of the story of *The Odyssey* (which is what allows for the ironic twist in this "grave" mistake) shifts the balance from what appears, on the surface, to be an *amorces*, to being an example of a fully realised prolepsis. Even though both of the techniques indicate the narrator's knowledge of the future, the connotations of an *amorces* and a prolepsis are quite different. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan explains this distinction in *Narrative Fiction* (1983): "In a pure prolepsis the reader is confronted with the future event before its time, whereas a mere preparation for subsequent events is on the whole only grasped as such only in retrospect" (48). Neither of these definitions really fits this example from Atwood's novel, which relies on the reader bringing previous knowledge to the text in order for details of the future to be fully available for reference. Moreover, the narrative future of Eurycleia's condemnation of the maids (the object of Penelope's future hindsight, which is doubly dislocated from her present) is called on as a narrative past, based on our retrospective knowledge of events in *The Odyssey*. The repetition of events, and retelling of a familiar story gives this apparent *amorces* a more proleptic slant: it has a more powerful after effect.

In other examples in *The Penelopiad*, Penelope mixes the narrative present with a clearly demarcated future which is more like Genette's classification of iterative narrative: the telling of something once which happened multiple times in the same way. Significantly, this is also the technique used in the continuous present of Penelope's afterlife at the end of the novel. For instance, Penelope describes her jealousy of Helen on her own wedding day in a way which combines features which emphasise the narrative present with reminders of her narratorial position in the future:

She gave the patronizing smirk of someone who's had first
chance at a less than delicious piece of sausage but has fastidiously

⁴¹ In keeping with this chapter's continuing secondary focus on film, we can translate this into English as a trailer. This is doubly appropriate, given a trailer's status as a supplement to the film, trailing it, yet also coming before its release.

rejected it. Indeed, Odysseus had been among the suitors for her hand, and like every other man on earth he'd desperately wanted to win her. Now he was competing for what was at best only second prize.

Helen strolled away, having delivered her sting. The maids began discussing her splendid necklace, her scintillating earrings, her perfect nose, her elegant hairstyle, her luminous eyes, the tastefully woven border of her shining robe. It was as if I wasn't there. And it was my wedding day.

All of this was a strain on the nerves. I started to cry, as I would do so often in the future, and was taken to lie down on my bed.

(35)

The "now" of Odysseus's participation in the competition is reinforced by the immediacy of the free indirect discourse in the second paragraph. The explanation of Penelope's tears is that she was thinking, at the time, "It is as if I am not here. And it is my wedding day." This leads into the conditional, future-in-the-past-tense description of how events *would* unfold "in the future", casting this period in the terms of the earlier Penelope's time-sense, rather than later, narrating Penelope's (compare the alternative constructions: "I started to cry, as I have so often since" or "I started to cry, as I did so often later"). If we compare this to the proleptic episodes in *The Driver's Seat*, we can see the difference in their imagination of the future. The description of the corpse being found, in Spark's novel, is marked by the certainty that "she *will* be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab wounds" (25, italics mine) in contrast with the conditional future in *The Penelopiad's* future in the past.

The Driver's Seat has a structure with multiple prolepses, and employs a third-person, present-tense narrator, who, like the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow*, enacts the paradox Genette identifies of the narrator who is both discovering the story as it is told, and who knows what will happen later. The novel imagines the most extreme case of what Currie describes in *About Time* as the "presentification of fictional narrative" (31), through its narrative tense, but also by structuring the



prolepses as third-person journeys into the future, rather than into a future for the narrative, which is just the past for a retrospective narrator. *The Driver's Seat* tells the story of a woman, Lise, who plots her own murder, and who is therefore engaging with what it means to plot: to plan with the anticipation of retrospection, with the present as, what Currie terms, "an object of a future memory" (a memory her death makes impossible for her to genuinely experience).

As we have established, the narrator of *The Driver's Seat* inhabits a heightened version of the fictional present. The story is told in a continually moving narrative present tense, with prolepses that refer to a future that is already in place. It dramatises exactly the claims that narrative makes for itself as a past which is read as a present, but also with a future "already in place for us to reach it" (Brooks, 23), attainable through a proleptic "excursion into the future of the story" (Rimmon-Kenan, 48). This journey into a spatialised future time is analogous to the way that the afterlife becomes spatialised when it is portrayed in narratives of descent to the underworld: it becomes a place that can be travelled to and returned from, rather than a time after death which is situated in irreversible time. The comparison here is with a future which is separated from the present, and accessible through a specifically narrative journeying. The alternative to this kind of 'visitable' spatial afterlife is a life after death that maintains the unidirectionality of time and which means that, once dead, people stay dead, and once in the future there is no going back to other times.

The future which is reached in the excursions in *The Driver's Seat* is also limited to the day after Lise's death. The temporal horizon is fixed at this limit, so we are not told how Lise's killer fares in court or what her workmates think when they find out about her murder. We will see in the next chapter that this is a common structure for the afterlife: a finite, narratable, supplement to life that comes before a mysterious, unnarratable supplement to that. Rather than a narrative structure which puts the narrator at the end of all the events, Spark's novel is completely purged of retrospection, so the novel's future (after Lise's death) is told in the future tense, as prolepsis. The events take place in a present which emerges out of nothing – our only hints at Lise's origins are in the lies she

tells people about her dead husband and her American home – and which fades out via an unexplained knowledge of a future, limited to a few days. Ordinarily, the narrator's precognition of the events of a story can be explained by retrospective knowledge of the complete span of events. However, the novel's unconventional way of using this technique draws attention to itself, and to the narrator's seemingly unwarranted access to this information: the prolepses gain an edge of clairvoyance and the verb tense establishes them as more (completely certain) prediction than description.

These two features of the narrative future in *The Driver's Seat* are linked to the specifically classical form of the afterlife described in *The Penelopiad*. Firstly, the role of the future as a destination is most commonly manifest as the descent narrative of classical heroes to Hades and back. Penelope's narrative breaks with these traditions by giving a tour of hell from someone who is not only remaining there for eternity, but whose reputation in the epic tradition rests on staying in one place and not making excursions or journeys. Secondly, prolepsis in the novel plays into the prediction/description dynamic at work in *The Driver's Seat* in a unique way. Prolepsis is evidence of supernatural after effect in action in this specific context. Penelope's story is shaped by the time when she lived, in which, as we know from *The Odyssey*, the future did shape the present in the form of prophecy and fortune-telling. Penelope's life is nearly brought to an untimely end in childhood when her father is advised to kill her because the oracle advises she will weave her father's shroud. Her survival, and her subsequent life always after her intended death, is evidence of the logic of the after effect in the supernatural world she inhabits. The syntactical structure for reporting a prophecy for the future is the same as for reporting a future which has not yet come about, and both of these only work in the closed system of a narrative, where everything can be known. As Penelope says at the beginning of the novel, "*Now that I'm dead I know everything*" (1).

Finally, in Atwood's novel, prolepsis works by the readers' knowledge of the events of the story, something that can only be achieved by this text's place in the afterlife of *The Odyssey*. The intertextual relations are therefore working to the

same causal reversal, with Atwood's later text and Penelope's later life-story changing any future readings of Homer's *Odyssey*. The reversals of cause and effect are therefore confined to the world of these texts and between these texts, with no suggestion of a reversal in the real world.

The Cause and Effect of the After Effect

In Philip Turetzky's study *Time*, he opens his discussion by retelling the myth of the Titan Kronos, who castrated his father, the sky, to separate him from his mother, the earth, and create a space for life to develop. According to Turetzky: "Time, then, forms a rupture in the divine in which the world of human life and experience can appear" (6). This rupture seems to be fundamental to the ideas we have been exploring here about the afterlife: eternity is established as what precedes and what will follow all human experience. Myths about the origins of time which imagine it being born out of eternity efface any question that eternity may be a concept we have created out of, and in order to understand, our own experience of time.

This chapter has continued to make use of Peter Brooks's description of narrative fiction's "curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place, already in wait for us to reach it" (23) and I would like to reinforce Brooks's choice of words here, which confirms the processing of this present as fiction. The "curious present" is known to be effectively a fictional present, an invented time scheme in the terms of our real time scheme. More than this, Brooks emphasises that we *know* this past, present and future are working only on the level of fiction. Like Kermode's fictions which must be "consciously held to be fictive" to prevent their degradation into myth, the present of fiction *should* be consciously held to be past, completed and already-written. However, narrative functions by erasing this distinction and transforming the past tense of narration into a present which supplants the present of reading, even if only for a short time. If fiction asks us to accept the double time scheme of narrative and thing told, with the narrative feeding off the present for its temporality, as well as

nesting another, derivative time scheme inside its narration, is it really any wonder that our time-sense starts to get confused?

It is significant that some of the texts that I have considered in this chapter have strongly intertextual elements, so that the 'real' time they are invoking is the fictional time of another text, as well as the time of the afterlife, which is antithetical to lived time. The aims of temporal realism in the novel can be equated with the thought experiment of eternity as ways of imagining what time is not in order to get closer to what it is. This will be the focus of Chapter 7. We have seen here that these novels make an assault on realism's claims to mimetically represent life by representing causal reversals that can occur only in fiction or the afterlife. The effect is to create an atmosphere of suspicion around all the techniques the novel uses to represent temporality and cause and effect, and to suggest these are as much part of the fiction of the story of time as its origins and end in eternity.

The story of the break in eternity, from which time erupted, can be told today as the birth of the times we imagine, including eternity and all the times of narrative, out of the time that we experience. This imagination occurs most prominently through narrative itself and one of the most powerful and influential of these narratives has been the story of another life, after this one, where another kind of time operates, but whose relations with the time of the living can disrupt even its most fundamental principles.

Chapter 4

Plotting Death: the Dead Narrator and Plot

This is what it's like to be dead
the words at hand, writing
themselves

Close to me and Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven)

In the previous chapter, the question of genre was beginning to come under consideration, through a discussion of causation in first-person narratives with their roots in spiritual autobiography and in the therapeutic narratives of psychoanalysis. This chapter investigates the antecedents of contemporary narratives set in the afterlife, and particularly the question of where novels which employ a dead narrator situate themselves in the wide range of generic traditions whose plot formations are linked to the afterlife, and specifically to posthumous voices. Ali Smith's *Hotel World* and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* both employ dead narrators, and this is the narrative strategy that will be investigated in the next two chapters. As we will see in Chapter 5, the use of a dead, first-person narrator opens up to fuller examination the inferences we make about narrators, and suggests new ways of imagining this figure. However, in this chapter, the focus will be on the place of the dead narrator as part of a plot formation and a generic inheritance, with a view to examining some of the reasons for its recent frequent occurrence in popular literary fiction. The overwhelming majority of these texts involve some kind of violence visited upon the narrator, tapping into the traditions of the unquiet spirits of the ghost story (who often have unexpectedly little to say for themselves), and the retrospective explanations of detective fiction. Models of

autobiography and memoir also play a significant role and, unsurprisingly, these models are often blended together to amplify the posthumous voices which have the potential to speak through all of them.

The subgroup of texts considered in this thesis which are narrated by dead characters is distributed with increasing frequency as we get closer to the present (a chronological list of texts that employ dead narrators is supplied in Appendix I). So far as I can tell, the earliest dead narrator can be found in the work of the Brazilian writer Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis. Machado de Assis's *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas* (1881) acknowledges its influence in the work of Lawrence Sterne, and investigates similar problems of life-writing. In recent times, the best known dead narrator is probably Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002), but the contemporary fashion for the posthumous narrator by no means began with Sebold: Robertson Davies, Gilbert Adair and Susanna Moore all published novels in the 1990's with a narrator who was a murder victim, while Ali Smith in *Hotel World* (2001) and Orhan Pamuk in *My Name is Red* (1998) both wrote novels which use a structure of multiple narrators, each beginning with a dead narrator.⁴² Davies's *Murther and Walking Spirits* (1991) is the earliest of these recent novels and, from its beginning, engages with explanations of what the advantages and appeal of this narrative technique might be. The novel takes its title and epigraph from Samuel Butler's thoughts on the printing trade, which are an interesting commentary on the intersection of the dead narrator and violent death:

Printers finde by experience that one Murther is worth two
Monsters, and at least three Walking Spirits. For the consequence of
Murther is hanging, with which the Rabble is wonderfully delighted.
But where Murthers and Walking Spirits meet, there is no other
Narrative can come near it. (qtd. in Davies)

Perhaps part of what Samuel Butler was recognising in the Rabble's delight at a hanging was the pleasure of a crime narrative and its solution and – even if it does

⁴² The influence of Faulkner on both is significant: I have already mentioned some of the allusions to Quentin's narrative from *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) in Smith's novel, and, like so many writers considering the aftermath of profound historical upheavals, Pamuk counts Faulkner among his major influences.

not result in a hanging – readers get the pleasures of both murder and a walking spirit in the murder-victim narrators of these novels.

We can trace emerging similarities – or even a grammar of the dead narrator – beginning to appear in the earlier examples, which all tend to show a concern with language, with murder, and with the relation of time in the afterlife to time on earth but, after the publication of Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* in 2002, other novels published in its wake and using the dead narrator had to plead for their distinction from this mass-market bestseller. For instance, a publisher's promotional interview with Amy Tan after the publication of *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) found her defending her technique, and identifying these earlier works as part of a tradition:

The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold was not an influence, although I enjoyed reading it. I was well into the writing of *Saving Fish from Drowning* when that novel was published. But it's not surprising that both of our books have ghosts and dead narrators. Ghosts have populated the literary landscape since American literature imported them from England. Beginning in childhood, I've loved stories about ghosts, those found in fairy tales or in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, and in recent times, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The dead are narrators in Robertson Davies's *Murder & Walking Spirits* and Jim Crace's *Being Dead*, among others.⁴³ ('Author Q&A: A Conversation with Amy Tan')

I want to come back to the tradition of the ghost story later, but Tan's point that she is writing from a fairly long-established lineage (and did not just steal the idea from another bestseller) is important. Many of these novels do seem very concerned with the heritage of the dead narrator technique, whether because it has the potential to be interpreted as an empty conceit, or to forestall criticism about a lack of originality, so attempting to establish the technique as a sub-genre in its own right. I would argue very strongly for the dead narrator as a passing

⁴³ Contrary to what Tan says here, Jim Crace's *Being Dead* does not actually have a dead narrator.

experimental technique that has reached an unusual pitch of popularity, rather than a sub-genre: the strongest evidence of this is the way it seems to have disappeared since the novels (*Death of an Ordinary Man*, *Shade*, *Saving Fish from Drowning*) that appeared just after *The Lovely Bones*, suggesting that its familiarity was enough to kill it off.

A similar concern with originality can be found in Glen Duncan's novel, *Death of an Ordinary Man* (2004). The narrative, which moves in and out of the consciousness of its dead hero, was published in paperback with a review quote on the cover describing it as "far from the sentimental territory of *The Lovely Bones*." The review from which the quote is taken begins with the observation, "Nathan Clark, the narrator of Glen Duncan's fifth novel, is dead. In itself, this is not an especially original idea in fiction" (Lightfoot). This suggestion that Duncan's novel just about avoids surrender to a rather hackneyed choice of narrative trick is a little unfair, given that Nathan's position as the narrator is by no means unproblematic.⁴⁴ But this indicates that, by now, the dead narrator is a technical indulgence demanding to be redeemed by something more conceptually or emotionally powerful. Far from being worth more than two monsters, as it was for Samuel Butler, the murdered narrator seems to have begun to lose something of its scarcity value.

One way to interpret the popularity of afterlife narratives is as the most extreme manifestation of the desire for endings that Peter Brooks describes in *Reading for the Plot* (1984). Brooks writes, "If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*" (52). What more perfect narrative could there be than one that, rather than ending with the death of the principal character, includes the possibility of the afterlife's supplement to that life, and *then* builds in an end for that afterlife as well?

⁴⁴ The novel is actually narrated by a third-person, omniscient voice. However, the reading experience, which sees us becoming familiar with Nathan's posthumous powers of invisibility and mind-reading finds his voice blending extremely closely with that of the narrator. Moreover, the elements of stream-of-consciousness narration from Nathan's thoughts and feelings mean that Nathan and the narrator come to share a similar conceptual space: either as dead people or as narrators or both.

When the narrative is told from the perspective of a dead narrator, narrating his or her own life, death and afterlife, the deepest desires for the end of the story – and for the appropriateness and fit of that end – are apparently realised. However, as we will see in Chapter 7, this simply comes up against another limit, whether of eternity or of the end of subjectivity, beyond which narration cannot take place.

Brooks' definition of plot is as the container for a specific way of thinking about the world and, as such, it has particular concerns with its own boundaries; those things that allow it to contain these ideas. In defining plot, Brooks examines the meanings of the term to take in plotting graphs, a plot of land – with its edges clearly demarcated – or plotting insurrection against the ruling order (12). It is easy to take this idea one stage further and make connections with the dead narrator, the walking (and talking) spirits who refuse to stay confined within the graveyard plots designated for them, or who feel they have to speak back from their silenced position as the victims of murder plots. At the end of *Reading for the Plot* the focus is on Beckett's *Endgame*, a plot which considers the impossibilities of really ending, but also a refusal of the structuring power of the end. After Beckett, Brooks argues, "Ends, it seems, have become difficult to achieve. In their absence, or in their permanent deferral, one is condemned to playing: to concocting endgames" (313). One way round writing after the realisation that ends are both desired and deferred is to get them out of the way before the story has even begun, by making the narrator dead before the first sentence is even uttered. The problem of endings is therefore acknowledged, and the story can unfold in two complementary directions, as a retrospective account of a life, conventionally told from the end, and the new plot of life after the end.

This chapter considers a variety of plots which come out of the silence of the crypt, the spaces in existing plots where there are stories that have not been heard. Brooks identifies the Gothic plotline of burial alive as one repository of similar concerns in the nineteenth century, which concealed "a specifically literary obsession with the buried utterance: the word, the tale entombed without listener" (221). All of the possible plots explored in this chapter are about exhuming and bringing to light elements of stories which are otherwise in darkness and silence.

These take the form of the descent narrative, the detective story, the ghost story, and the autobiography, all of which are possible containers for the posthumous voice. This chapter examines the phenomenon of the dead narrator, and considers the close similarities in the plot structures that come with this technique in order to find out what it is that the dead narrator is trying to discover or exhume.

The Descent Narrative Possibility

Rachel Falconer's recent study *Hell in Contemporary Literature* (2005) identifies the descent narrative, to hell and back, as the predominant narrative shape in our contemporary cultural consciousness, particularly in narratives of the construction of subjectivity. Beginning with the Second World War, continuing through memoirs of mental illness and other personal struggles, and taking in the most recent narratives of terrorism, Falconer's work describes a history of the twentieth century in which the narrative of the descent into the underworld and the return to tell the tale is the primary figure for making sense out of life, and of telling a life story. Falconer quotes from Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* to describe this plot formation as "the felt shape of human life" (4). However, this shape is not as easily applicable as one might expect to the texts examined in this thesis, suggesting that the narratives of hell which form the felt shape of human life are narratives about living in and living through hell, not being dead in hell. This is particularly so for those stories, considered in this chapter, told by a dead narrator.

While the descent narrative is certainly a potent and relevant model for a significant portion of modern literature, there are a number of reasons that some aspects of it are not a good fit for narratives set in the afterlife. Firstly, the plot of narrative posthumousness, which establishes the narrator as dead from the beginning, is working with a model of the afterlife as something which occurs in the time after death, rather than being a place, like the underworld, which can be travelled *to* and, most importantly, can be returned *from*. In the afterlife, the journey is decidedly one way, with the only possible return to the world coming through reincarnation. The transformation of the self through reincarnation does not conform to the descent narrative's story of self-discovery.

The emphasis on afterlife time here is significant because, in contrast to the journey through hell, the dead narrators' stories are more like journeys into purgatory, which depends entirely on the possibility of the continuing passage of time after death. It could be argued that the protagonists of descent narratives experience only a brief sojourn in hell, and its temporariness means it should be considered as purgatory rather than hell. However, this relies on the protagonists having the knowledge that the descent narrative is also a narrative of return and, while Aeneas or Dante may have behaved something like tourists in Hades or the Inferno, in the modern descent narratives considered by Falconer, life in Auschwitz, or in the throes of mental illness, is hell when it is experienced, rather than a transformative journey or a temporary purgatory.

The only way that hell can be narrated is by a visitor, by someone who, in the case of these modern hells, experienced all its horrors, but was not subject to irreversible damnation, or to the experience of eternity. The problem for dead narrators is that eternity itself makes the unfolding of events impossible, severely impeding the cause and effect relations vital for narrative. There have been some valiant efforts at narrating eternity, as we will explore in Chapter 7, but these all settle for infinite time, rather than eternity itself. Therefore narration from the afterlife tends to be a signal that the narrators themselves are in some kind of limbo or purgatory, before a second ending that will close their narratives.

In a novel like Robertson Davies's *Murther and Walking Spirits*, the dead narrator's attachment to the world and his urge to tell his story are one and the same impulse, and both are evidence that his soul requires some measure of purgation. In some cases this manifests itself as a kind of working through of past trauma. For instance, Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning* and Glen Duncan's *Death of an Ordinary Man* both feature protagonists for whom the trauma of their own deaths has led to a repression of crucial details of their own pasts. In echoes of the spiritual autobiography's causal dynamic, of looking for evidence in the present for the predestined future of the soul, both the protagonists in these novels are concerned that they may have been victims of murder, and will therefore have to continue to be tied to the earth indefinitely as ghosts. Narrating their personal

history recovers their lost memories, shows them they were not murdered, and allows them to move on to another level of existence.

Many dead narrators are also writers, or connected with the study of words and language: Davies's narrator is an arts critic for a newspaper, the narrator of Gilbert Adair's *The Death of the Author* (1992) is a dead academic, whose life and work are uncannily similar to Paul de Man's, while Susanna Moore's *In the Cut* (1995) is narrated by a teacher and language researcher. Davies was once asked whether he anticipated that his own afterlife would be spent "working on some 'master novel' in another dimension," to which he replied, "Oh heavens, in the life to come, novels will be utterly irrelevant" (Harpur, 158). Irrelevant to the dead, but an indication of some kind of continuing attachment to the earth and to storytelling for these specific souls whose lives were so wrapped up with words. Part of the technique of the dead narrator is therefore a self-consciousness about writing, which is part of the force binding the dead to both storytelling and the earth, and which is a way of thinking that is incompatible with heaven. In *The Persistence of Purgatory* (1995), Richard K. Fenn suggests that the occupants of purgatory, who are removing the traces of the world's sins from their souls, are, in a description from Dante, primarily concerned with being purged of "the smears they carried hence" (*Purgatorio* XI: line 35) which Fenn translates rather more memorably as "the taint of time" (58). It is time itself that has to be purged from them, and narrative thinking – with its basis in cause and effect, in temporal ordering, and in the anticipated sense of an ending – is a symptom of their sinfulness. There is nothing to narrate once these souls reach heaven because narrative solves problems of imperfect knowledge that are caused directly by our situatedness in time and in the world: stories that interpret the past and explore hypothetical presents and futures serve no function in eternity, not to mention the impossibility of narrating for beings who necessarily already know the ending before they have even begun.

In narratives involving dead protagonists – who are not just temporarily visiting the place which is the afterlife, but have come to occupy the time after life – the plot therefore closes with a gesture towards another kind of end, rather than

the descent narrative's ultimate ascent and return to life. The most common shape for these plots tends to be of the journey from life to a specifically purgatorial afterlife, in which the narrative itself processes or, in psychoanalytic terms, works through, the consequences of the previous existence, in order for the protagonist to progress on to another plane of existence that is not communicable in narrative. Using *Hotel World*, familiar from Chapter 3, as an example, we can see that the dead narrator, Sara Wilby, is engaged in retelling and ridding herself of worldly attachments in order to work through to dissolving what is left of her subjectivity at the end of the novel. There is no way for the novel to finish with her continuing to inhabit the constant present-tense of eternity, and her words fade out completely on the final page. A similar plot is observable for many of the dead narrators, and is reflected in their capacity for narration as, like Beckett's *The Unnamable*, they narrate the process of their own dissolution, with the narrative ends and personal ends finally meeting as they dissolve into something unnarratable.

These plots also raise the kind of models Peter Brooks identifies in *Reading for the Plot* for the death drive of endings, which are both desired and deferred by narrative. For instance, the end of *Death of an Ordinary Man* involves the protagonist passing through a door which had previously been both attracting and repelling him for the duration of his afterlife in the novel, but which he is only able to pass through after uncovering the repressed memory of his own death and narrating the details of his young daughter's murder. In a similar plot, Bibi Chen, the narrator of Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning* is released from her attachment to the world when she narrates and works through the events of her death. There is some of the endgame-style play and prevarication identified by Brooks as symptomatic of the problematic endings after Beckett – "That is the nature of endings, it seems. They never end. When all the missing pieces of your life are found, put together with the glue of memory and reason, there are more pieces to be found" (472) – but Bibi's narrative appears to end tidily at the moment when she is subsumed into "the absolute stillness where all minds are one" (472).

All of the pieces of her life and her narrative apparently fit together, with nothing left over.

Bibi is a Buddhist, and her experience of the period between lives should be placed in a conceptual category with purgatory rather than with hell. *The Persistence of Purgatory* refers to the ideas of the twentieth-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who suggested that, in Fenn's words, purgatory "concerns a place or a time-interval in the full development of an individual with regard to the core of the person, to the body, and in relation to the world as a whole [and] should be understood in relation to such Eastern notions as reincarnation" (3). There are certainly valid comparisons between these two mechanisms for the improvement of the human soul. However, one of the attractions of purgatory for the novel, over reincarnation, is the very specific boundaries which the doctrine of purgatory maintains for our concept of the individual. This becomes very clear when we look at texts which do involve plots more or less explicitly related to reincarnation, like Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981) or Will Self's *How the Dead Live* (2001): the former strongly foregrounds issues of identity related to seeing afterlife as a kind of rebirth by dividing its protagonist into two intimately connected, named people, while the latter sees the dead narrator reborn into a new body – retaining her old memories and the thread of her first-person narration – therefore blurring the lines between identity as body and as soul, or narrating and narratable subjectivity.⁴⁵ Reincarnation lends itself less easily to linear, finite narrative, not only because successive lives can follow potentially infinitely, but because the incarnations of a single soul imply a constantly changing and developing notion of character which is difficult to contain within narrative conventions. This is not to say it is impossible to narrate a chain of reincarnations: Kim Stanley Robinson's epic alternative history, *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002), ranges across centuries of reincarnations

⁴⁵ In work on Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* Steven Connor suggests an alternative reason for a deliberate focus on only two lives or repetitions that is equally applicable here: "As with all such repetitions the first time through will strike us as new, and primary, the second is likely to seem a derivation from the first, its ghost or shadow [. . .]. To pass into a third phase is to risk suggesting transcendence as it has been conceived in many philosophical models; it is to rank the previous two possibilities as opposites and to suggest their dialectic subsuming or resolution in the third repetition. There, repetition is the sign of redemption, the guarantee of memory and destiny" (121). An implied infinite chain or repetition denies transcendence in the same way.

for its characters, including their time in the *bardo* between lives. However, the focus here is on the epic span of historical time that overwhelms the individual life, and which necessitates multiple incarnations for its telling. A more common strategy in these texts is a movement from life, to a purgatorial or *bardo*-state afterlife, and then on into a heaven or nirvana of non-existence.

In *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Bibi describes how her Buddhist tradition was Chinese, which desired everything, including material wealth and fame, and “to ascend to heaven”, rather than the Burmese tradition, which desires nothing and whose followers “are taught to shed their human desires like a snake its mortal coil, and once free they can achieve nibbana, nothingness” (147). She fears oblivion, and prays for everything rather than nothingness. It is significant that Bibi’s discussion of her specific brand of Buddhism occurs in the context of her desire to avoid memoirs from those living under the military Junta, which she describes as narratives of hell, without the hope of an ascent from this underworld:

[T]hey are so difficult to read, without a speck of hope to lift you, no redeeming denouements, only the inevitable descent into the bottomless pits of humanity. When you reach the end of such stories, you can’t sigh and say deeply to yourself, “Oh my, how glad I am to have read *that*.” (146)

Happily for readers like Bibi, her own narrative is not one of such hopeless suffering, and her story does allow some limited insight into the regime in Burma, along with the kind of ending which provides a “redeeming denouement”. Her self-absorption as a narrator, combined with the fact that she is narrating a tourist trip to Burma, rather than the experience of its citizens, is just sufficient to provide the distance that can allow for a return from this particular descent.

There is therefore a place in the dead narrator’s plots for the descent narrative as a model for describing the horrors of recent history. The other aspect of the journey to the underworld that Falconer identifies is a model for “telling the self” (27). The shape that she describes is characterised by the katabatic reversal, which enables “a journey of negation followed by a journey of discovery and empowerment” (27), with the reversal occurring at the nadir of the descent. The

wide range of examples analysed in *Hell in Contemporary Literature* suggests that the descent narrative is a shape that comes to mind quite easily for a lot of people narrating recent history and their own autobiography. However, we have to acknowledge that the transformative power of the descent narrative relies on its protagonist being still alive. The reversal and the return from the underworld are a return to a more complete and functional way of living, after previously living a death-like life. If the narrator is already dead, the preferred outcome is not a return to the world, but an acceptance that this has gone for good, and an adjustment needs to be made to welcome existence in a form that runs counter to living in the world. There will be no return to narrate the journey: these stories perform journeys to the ends of communicability and the relevance of narrative.

There are, however, some points of intersection of Falconer's descriptions of the katabatic reversal and the transition from life to afterlife. For instance, in the examples of the spiritual autobiography or conversion narrative, she identifies the way in which the reversal at conversion leads to a kind of posthumous narration:

This quasi-deathly experience bestows a special advantage on the narrators of conversion texts. Most autobiographical narrators have a limited vantage point on the meaning and shape of their own lives because they are still in the business of living them. But the converted narrator sees his or her former self as belonging to a prior life altogether; the pre-conversion past is absolutely closed off from the present and therefore open to being authoritatively interpreted. (46)

Conversion – at the hinge of the descent narrative of sin and redemption – is therefore a kind of death into an afterlife, like the afterlife of events inhabited by the narrator identified in Chapter 2. However, it is also a kind of rebirth and reincarnation, which is very different from the experience of fictional dead narrators, whose stories do not end in a new life, but with a transformation into another kind of existence which is beyond communicability. This is another aspect in which purgatory and reincarnation begin to intersect, in the sense that the translation of the soul into eternity, post-purgatory, represents the end of an

individual identity in any meaningful sense, as well as a transition out of time, like the end of the chain of incarnations in nirvana.

One of the major conceptual strands in *Hell in Contemporary Literature* is the idea that Western literature has adopted hell as a model for life events, rather than for the afterlife, and while, on the surface, it might seem that narratives set in the afterlife run counter to this, there is a rather more complicated relationship going on here. We could read the displacement of hell to life events, and the extension of the qualities and attributes of the living to the dead as virtually one and the same process. If people are becoming the living dead while they are still alive because of the unbearable conditions of modern existence (even if this can also be an agent for the katabatic reversal and, ultimately, for renewed life), then there is also an equivalent process at work in ideas about the afterlife, which simply extends some aspects of life after death for a definite period, to supplement the previous existence. Dead narrators move from life to an afterlife that functions as a kind of moral corrective to make existence as a whole morally neutral, as a precursor to the end of the self. From the history of purgatory we know that there has been a debate about whether purgation is a process that begins while the individual is still alive, and this is highly relevant to the idea that hell is made immanent on earth as well. Fenn's study, *The Persistence of Purgatory*, argues that purgatory was connected with the emergence of modern concepts of the self and of time, and the transferral of the values of purgatory to life mean that we retain "residues of purgatory" in lived time today. The inter-relations between the dead in purgatory and the living, caused by the system of intercessions and indulgences which Jacques Le Goff identifies in *The Birth of Purgatory* (1981) become, in Fenn's analysis, part of a wider system of time and obligations and guilt about how time is spent, wasted, or earned that builds a particular kind of modern thinking about the self and its responsibilities.

Fenn's study emphasises the changes in thought about time on which this is based: "If the souls of the dead were not part of the same time-zone as the souls of the living, there would be nothing that one could do in this life that would save a day or a minute of time in purgatory for the souls of departed" (155). There is

therefore continuity between the time of life and the time of afterlife which also allows for the narration from the afterlife. Where hell becomes the defining model for life events in the descent narrative, purgatory and the formations of purgatorial time, in particular, form a shared “time-zone” – a potent conceptual melding of time and space, equivalent to Bakhtin’s chronotope in fiction – which the dead narrator exploits to narrate from after the end, yet from within a continuous time-line, which has built into it a concern with time redeemed.

This blurring of boundaries between death and life can manifest itself as a far stronger closural impulse at work in these texts. The dead narrator’s plot closes when there is nothing more that can be narrated, either because everything will be eternally the same, or because there is nothing left of the narrator. In contrast with novels which describe the lives of apparently real, living human beings, texts set in the afterlife do not have to preserve the fiction that they close at the end of a particular story, which is just an arbitrary cut-off point in the life of those concerned: this really is the end of the story. The posthumous narrator allows for this desire for both a supplement to life, in which time continues to pass and the plot can find its solutions, but also for a time when nothing extra will happen, when no new elements can be introduced and nothing can continue to happen after the end of the story. As we saw in the previous chapter, the causal elements of narrative are foregrounded by the afterlife, and the dead narrator allows for an ideal time of narration in which no further events unfold to disturb the perfect finality of the story’s closure.

However, I would also argue that the dead narrator as a technique provides a critique of the desire for narrative closure. Rachel Falconer reads the descent narrative as a reaction against the prevalence of the death drive as a narrative model, and some of her argument is applicable to the dead narrator. She argues that the undecidable possibilities registered in going into the underworld as a living person, beginning with Dante’s observation, “I did not die and I did not remain alive” (qtd. in Falconer 138), mean that their protagonists can “remain unbounded by the closural or ‘death drive’ of narrative” (138). They offer a more faithful model of the self as constantly changeable and potential, in contrast to the

final inflexibility for the self that narrative might sometimes indicate. If narrative closure is the desire for nothing to be added to the information already there, the descent narrative sees a journey into eternity and a refusal to stay there, despite the perfect closure this would offer. Paradoxically, the dead narrator's plots could be said to reinforce this critique of the desire for closure in narrative. If reading plays into the death drive, and our secret pleasure in the end of existence, the dead narrator suggests that this is best confined to people who are already deceased, and that it might not be such a useful concept to apply to stories of people who are still living and changing. Moreover, the half-dead, half-alive narrators can undermine death as the ultimate model for endings by adding a supplement to its apparent completeness.

In the next section I want to consider the plot of the murder mystery as the most end-oriented fictional shape, with its revelations, suspense, and delayed explanations, and a potentially natural fit for the concerns of a posthumous narrator. The plot of detection and discovery is curiously prevalent in contemporary fictions told by the dead and reflects the concern we have identified with a potential mismatch between the end of a plot, the end of a narrative, and the end of a life.

Detecting Death: the Murder Mystery Possibility

There are admittedly contemporary narratives which use the technique of the dead narrator that do not raise the murder mystery as a possibility: the final chapter of Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989) takes place in an afterlife narrated by a newly dead inhabitant; *How the Dead Live* (2003), Will Self's novel imagining a city of the dead that maps over and between the London we know, features both dead narrator and narratee; even Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1991), with its split narrative consciousness inhabiting the body of a dead war criminal, could be considered part of the trend for the talking dead.⁴⁶ These novels, however, shift the focus of narration from life to the afterlife, so the time of the

⁴⁶ Self's *How the Dead Live* is considered in more detail in Chapter 6, while Amis's novel is discussed in the light of attempts to narrate eternity in Chapter 7.

thing narrated is in the afterlife, rather than among the living. Significantly, *The Lovely Bones* is the novel where these two worlds and time schemes meet, as its narrator has a continuing, haunting and observing, presence *in* the world, as well as a place in a fully realised afterlife. The tendency in most of the novels that will be considered in this section is for the continuing attachment to the earth to preclude the possibility of fully engaging with the afterlife: returning to Robertson Davies's comments about the irrelevance of the novel in heaven, the novel would surely be entirely irrelevant for a soul in heaven or hell, so some kind of limbo or purgatorial state before heaven or the dissolution of the self is virtually a condition for these narratives. This holds true for many of the narratives *about* the afterlife too. For instance, Barnes's story closes with the narrator choosing obliteration over a future of shopping, sex and golf in the New Heaven the story describes.

So, given that not all dead narrators from these recent texts suggest their stories to be murder mysteries, it seems worth beginning with the proposition that the dead narrator is something that follows on from a certain phase in the development of crime fiction, rather than the model of the murder mystery arising from some feature of the dead narrator. From this starting point, we could see the murder plot as a ludic form in which all the piece-markers of the criminal, the detective, the murder victim and the narrator each take their turn in play. Ernst Bloch's summary of this position opposes the realities of the dead body with the game of the detective novel: "Though built on blood and bodies, no good detective story achieves its fame with such attractions: they are merely the pretense for a purely intellectual exercise with a narrative picture puzzle aimed solely at the discovery of the perpetrator" (1988: 254).⁴⁷ It might, therefore, seem as if the genre has worked through all its potential narrators: we have already had Watson, as the sidekick, narrating Holmes's adventures; first-person narration by the detective, like Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade; and narration by the murderer

⁴⁷ This interpretation of the detective novel has a lineage that includes Roger Caillois's 'Le Roman policier' (1941) and Helmut Heissenbuttel's 'Rules of the Game of the Crime Novel' (1967) as well as analyses of the "narrative machine" of the detective story, as in Umberto Eco's 'Narrative Structures in Fleming' (1966); a way of thinking about the murder plot that most famously includes Tzvetan Todorov's 'The Typology of Detective Fiction' (1977).

himself, as in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926).⁴⁸ This device of the murder victim as narrator is therefore just the next step for a genre which has already played out all the other permutations of its characters.

This position is probably best illustrated with reference to Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1987): stories which start with the detective genre and work around it, revealing all its inconsistencies and uncertainties. In the trilogy, 'City of Glass' illustrates this idea of interchangeable roles, almost to the point of exhaustion: in the story, the detective novelist Quinn is mistaken for a detective, Paul Auster of the Auster Detective Agency, and then meets another Paul Auster, a writer. This level of metaleptic disturbance mirrors the confusion surrounding identity and even existence in the novel, because we are always uncertain about the relationship between Quinn and Auster, his writing pseudonym (William Wilson), and his fictional detective, the "private-eye narrator", Max Work. Quinn inhabits the boundary between life and death that the dead narrator seems to occupy, and is described as a man who had "managed to outlive himself, as if he were somehow living a posthumous life" (5). If a detective story – one not even involving a murder investigation – begins to invoke such ideas about the afterlife, just through an investigation of the form, then maybe there is something in detection itself which leads to a concern with this "posthumous life"?

The problem with this reading, with regard to the novels considered here, is that the model of the murder mystery is so prevalent and the narrators make reference to it early in their stories, only to discard it as a model. Some even seem to raise and refuse the murder plot as early as they can, as though it is the most likely shape for a dead person's narrative to take. For instance, the opening pages of *The Lovely Bones* dispense with the murder mystery as a way of reading within paragraphs: Susie says, "Don't think every person you're going to meet here is a suspect" (6). Susie's murderer is introduced and identified in just a few lines, and

⁴⁸ It's worth noting that the implication in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is that the murderer-narrator of the novel is actually dead by the time of reading (the final lines gesture towards his imminent suicide, so the text itself involves a voice from beyond the grave) and therefore a posthumousness voice in the same way as the murder plot device of the dictaphone recording of Roger Ackroyd.

he is never apprehended, so the model of the murder mystery is invoked and then put aside.

Dead narrators react to the shape of the murder mystery as a determining plot formation, whether by taking it on and introducing a new voice into its centre, or by invoking it, only to reject it entirely. In *Death of an Ordinary Man*, the main character, Nathan, finds that the mysteries of his death and afterlife are characterised by their poor fit with the mysteries of a detective plot:

It didn't feel right. He bounced set-ups from Chandlers and Columbos off himself, blackmails, love triangles, wills, cover-ups – but he was still a history teacher pushing fifty living in Exeter with his wife and daughter [. . .].(46)

The novel ultimately suggests that Nathan's family – the things that remain of him as a person rather than just a corpse – are what stop him fitting the set-ups from detective fiction, rather than the fact that his death was a suicide rather than a murder. The death of this ordinary man does not arouse enough interest for the detective story to fit, yet his death has started up the problem-solving machinery which leads to the crime-and-solution dynamic of the murder mystery plot. Both these novels indicate that the option of the murder mystery plot automatically arises as a model for dead people telling their stories, and so this option for the reader has to be bracketed in order for other ways of reading to appear.

One explanation for this bracketing is that putting the murder mystery to one side is the result of exposing a trade-off in the genre between treating the characters as human beings and treating them as pieces in a theoretical game. The narrating victim in these novels challenges a dead silence at the very centre of the murder mystery and provides a means for the corpse to speak back, rather than just reducing a person to a plot device. In Sebold's and Duncan's novels, however, there is a concern that the central plot element of the murder means some level of dehumanisation for the victim. The possibility of the detective story is therefore raised and then rejected because it seems to preclude a concern with the effects of a death on the family and on the dead person. This is the antithesis of reading the dead narrator as simply the latest theoretical move in the detective game.

This is particularly true in the case of novels that involve violence against women. The exploration of this problematic element of the murder mystery plot results in posthumous narratives from the perspectives of the dead women whose voices have historically been silenced in many detective novels and thrillers. What emerges is a complicated allusive network of relationships, forming something like a community of dead voices. For instance, *The Lovely Bones* alludes to Susanna Moore's *In the Cut* by way of a charm bracelet that plays a key role in both novels and Sebold's novel also features a mentor figure for its narrator (Susie, perhaps named for Susanna?) who is called Franny, sharing her name with the narrator of *In the Cut*. The transfer of objects from one novel to another is also a feature of *Saving Fish from Drowning*, in which one plot strand is the theft of the jade hair comb (misremembered as a hairpin) belonging to the narrator's mother which, on being returned, causes her such a flood of emotion that she falls from a stool and dies. This jade hairpin also had a place in Frannie's home in *In the Cut*, where it belonged to the Chinese maid employed by her mother. These objects all signify relationships between women, whether mother-daughter, like the hairpin, or a shared identity as victims of sexual violence (Frannie's friend gives her the charm bracelet and they are both eventually murdered, while Susie's bracelet charm is kept as part of her killer's trophy collection). The emotional core of Sebold's novel is an encounter between the novel's narrator, Susie, and the other young women and girls who were killed by the man who raped and murdered her. They are represented on earth by the trophies he has collected from each of them, and when they meet in heaven they tell each other the stories of their families and of their own deaths:

Our heartache poured into one another like water from cup to cup.

Each time I told my story, I lost a bit, the smallest drop pain. It was

that day I knew I wanted to tell the story of my family. Because

horror on Earth is real and it is every day. (186)

Violence against women is a powerful concern in these three novels, and this sense of a community of women writing back to the murder mystery is an important element added to the dead, silenced, voice of the corpse in the murder plot.

In 'A Philosophical View of the Detective Novel' (1960), Ernst Bloch identifies in the detective novel the defining feature of an "unnarrated factor and its reconstruction," which appears because "the crime has already occurred, outside the narrative; the story arrives on the scene with the corpse" (254). The key distinction of the detective story is, for Bloch, a crime which always remains outside the narrative, and is made unspeakable by the narrative structure itself. Novels like *The Lovely Bones* and *In the Cut* see this aspect of the unnarrated as a deliberate silencing which is gendered in such a way that it reinforces the power dynamics that lead to violence against women in the first place. The ordering of events in the detective plot is also significant: in the classic detective story, death occurs before the beginning of the narrative, and is then explained by the detective as a reconstruction of the crime as it was planned and committed. However, in *The Lovely Bones*, for instance, the murder mystery's narrative structure – in which the narrative is caused by the murder (taking place, as it does, before the story has begun), and the unnarrated elements depend on a voiceless victim – is not only subverted, but is implicated in the thinking that leads Susie's killer to learn early on in his life that it should not be lived "as a child or as a woman" since these are "the two worst things to be" (190).

The dead narrator in the murder mystery therefore expands the beginning of the story back in time, so that the cause is *not* the sudden appearance of the corpse. Bloch also suggests that the unnarrated still functions in detective plots that do not conform to the classical model of crime-narration-solution. In the plots of the hard-boiled detective genre, for instance, the action of detecting occurs in and around ongoing criminal activity, and these crimes are told, in order, during the course of the detective's retrospective first-person narrative. Bloch describes how this functions in the two kinds of detective narrative in a way that indicates the difference in a murder mystery narrated by the victim:

If, however, new murders occur in the course of the detective story, they constitute yet another black mark, connected with and augmenting the darkness before the beginning, often hampering the resolution of the case. The main point is always the same: the

alpha, which none of the characters appearing one after another admits to have witnessed, least of all the reader, happens outside of history like the fall from grace or even the fall of the angels. (255)

The victim-narrator brings light to these areas of darkness, but also makes the reader a witness to the crime scene where none of the characters admit to having been present, and even the narrator has generally had to report information second hand. This position as witness brings with it responsibilities beyond those of the detached solver of puzzles. Most of all, though, Bloch's observation that the crimes happen outside the narrative, in something which is other than time, or a pre-historic or mythic time, indicates that narration from the afterlife results in the temporal ordering of the murder mystery plot being disturbed. The murder scene itself has a witness with a new voice, forcing it back into time again: rather than a sketch reconstruction of the unnarrated – generally by the detective as evidence of his deduction, or by the criminal as a confession – the victim-narrator telling the murder gives an entirely different sense to the murder mystery. This is not reconstructed narration at two removes from the act itself because the narration of the murder can be directly narrated at first hand, rather than reconstructed by the act of detection.

The insistent voices of dead women speaking in these novels also force us to consider these corpses as people rather than puzzle pieces or plot devices. Despite having to eschew some of the pleasures of the murder plot as a puzzle, and the narrators' general refusal to accept the model of the murder mystery indiscriminately, the element of mystery or puzzle tends to still be maintained, even though the story's question is not necessarily whodunit. For instance, some of the deaths which start out as murders are revealed to be something else entirely: in Amy Tan's *Saving Fish from Drowning* for example, the murder turns out to be just a freak accident, and in *Death of an Ordinary Man*, the death is resolved as a suicide. Other novels which do have a murder-victim narrator follow the pattern of multiple murders, so the revelation at the end of Susanne Moore's *In the Cut* or Gilbert Adair's *The Death of the Author* is not only the identity of the killer, but also of the final victim. Similarly, the dead narrator of Neil Jordan's *Shade* (2004) tells us

when, where, how, and whodunit, all on the first page, but takes the rest of the novel to explain the whydunit. The detective plot enacts the processes of making causal inferences which are always at work in narrative. Turning E.M. Forster's famous example of a narrative into a murder mystery would produce something like this:

- a) The King died, then the Queen died.
- b) The King died, then the Queen died *of grief*.
- c) The King died, then the Queen died, *then the detective was called in, deduced the killer and revealed the Butler committed the double murder using a pair of slow-acting but different poisons.*

The inference that the reader makes to form the narrative in Forster's second permutation (example b) becomes just one of many deductions from the facts that the detective makes as the reader's proxy inside the text. When there is a dead narrator who is solving the mystery of his or her own death, the emphasis shifts from what has happened to *why* it has happened, and that *why* takes in both the motive for the crime itself, and the motivation behind all existence. The murder plot therefore becomes part of a wider search for meaning and for making sense of the world, using the tools narrative offers for examining cause and effect. However, as we saw in Chapter 3, these are inevitably problematised when turned on questions about supernatural circumstances.

Crude Spectres: the Ghost Story Possibility

Some of the dead narrators who frame their stories using the murder mystery make explicit their deliberate employment of the mystery dynamic by asking direct rhetorical questions which frame reading as detection. For instance, at the beginning of *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Bibi Chen gives the competing explanations of her own death reported in the newspapers ("Socialite Butchered in Cult Slaying" competes with "Shopkeeper's Death Ruled Freak Accident") and asks the reader, "In those last moments, what was I doing? Whom did I see wielding the instrument of death?" (3). Bibi's amnesia only subsides at the very end of the novel, when she can finally tell the story of how she died. Curiously, the main bulk of her

narrative has absolutely no relevance to the mystery of her death, and this plot element is only revived after a four hundred page story about an ill-fated tourist trip to Burma, so the suspicion is there that Bibi has been teasing the reader all along with the mystery of her possible murder.

The corpse who speaks in the first section of Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* is far more calculating in his appeals to the reader when he arouses curiosity about the circumstances of his death. He knows the motive and identity of his murderer, but he conceals the information as motivation for the narratee to find the murderer and avenge the crime. He asks, "Who is this murderer who vexes me so? Why has he killed me in such a surprising way? Be curious and mindful of these matters [. . .]. Find that son-of-a-whore murderer and I'll tell you in detail just what I see in the Afterlife" (6). At the end of the novel the murderer is revealed yet, rather than disclose these details immediately, the victim sets up a quest with information about life after death as the reward. This information is not the mystery at the heart of the novel, however, and the corpse never returns to tell us about his experience of the afterlife. It is the desire for a solution to the murder mystery itself that makes us "curious and mindful of these matters" as we read.

Is the mystery of whodunit therefore working as a placeholder for the questions about the afterlife we really want to have answered by these narrators, and something of an excuse for them not to tell us? Their requests aren't those of the helpless: the narrators of these stories are consciously, even cynically, using the model of the murder mystery to reel in their readers, in what is established as a mutually beneficial exchange.

The heart of the ghost story is in some ways the opposite of the detective plot: ending in obscurity, ambiguity and unanswerable questions. Some analysis of the ghost story has interpreted it as the antithesis to realism – and particularly nineteenth-century realism – in its refusal of certainty and rejection of materialism. For instance, Samuel Hynes in *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (1968) examines the fascination that various forms of "vague supernaturalism" hold in this period and concludes that, while ghost stories may be interpreted as "expressions of religious instincts detached from the forms and dogma of established religion" (147), they

are also a reaction against the Victorian novel. "After the social realism of the Victorians, from Dickens to George Moore," Hynes observes, "Edwardian novelists [. . .] turned towards the mysterious and unseen, just as the psychic researchers turned from the natural sciences to spiritualism" (147). This is also the position from which Roger Luckhurst begins in *The Invention of Telepathy* (2002) when he suggests telepathy's emergence out of nineteenth-century "scientific naturalism" is contemporaneous with the emergence of the late-Victorian Gothic and the fin-de-siècle ghost story. So, where the detective novel shows unswerving faith in empiricism, the ghost story represents thought processes that are rather less comfortable with this world-view.⁴⁹

This translates into a combination of narrative features that combine to make the ghost story in its modern form, as opposed to the narratives of visitation by the dead that Le Goff describes as coeval with the birth of purgatory. In Richard K. Fenn's interpretation of Le Goff in *The Persistence of Purgatory*, he connects these to survivor guilt after the plagues of the medieval period (50), suggesting that these relations of guilt and obligation of the living to the dead were responsible for the ghost story (in contrast with more benevolent relationships with ancestors from earlier periods). Notable features of the modern ghost story (from the late-nineteenth century onward) include the fiction of an oral tradition for the genre, or the description of a chain of transmission for an individual story which gives a similar sense of connection and credibility. For instance, *The Turn of the Screw* begins with the frame tale of the governess's manuscript read aloud by the fire in a country house. Henry James is the key figure identified by Amy Tan in her American legacy for the ghost story, when she described how since childhood she "loved stories about ghosts, those found in fairy tales or in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, and in recent times, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (Author Q&A). Tan's own novel employs a similar frame narrative to *The Turn of the Screw*, with a frame source for the narrative that opens the novel but does not close it. Tan's

⁴⁹ The ghost story has also been associated with literary modernism: in *Elegant Nightmares* (1978) Jack Sullivan suggests that the ghost story shares with certain strands of modernism a "fascination with darkness and irrationality, the focus on unorthodox states of consciousness and perception, the projection of apocalypse and chaos, and above all the preoccupation with timeless 'moments' and 'visions'" (2).

introduction claims a provenance for Bibi's narrative in the form of a local medium who transcribed it.⁵⁰ This open frame narrative seems to reinforce the classically open endings of these mysterious stories.

In Robertson Davies's *Murder and Walking Spirits* "ghosts in the Henry James manner" are the preference of the narrator for his future career in haunting, as opposed to the "crude spectre" of the "conventional ghost business" (21). The difference, according to the narrator, Connor Gilmartin, is the ambiguous existence of the Henry James ghosts, "who are seen only when the observer is in a state where certainty about what is seen is out of the question" (21). It is initially the narrator's wife, Esme, who brings the model of the murder mystery into Gil's afterlife when he admires her command of "detective-story lingo" at the scene of his murder by her lover (6). Esme also displays her mastery of other plots of death and mourning by writing a misery memoir about her widowhood and her late husband's posthumous child. At the end of the novel the murderer confesses his crimes to Gil's philosophical friend, McWearie, who hears the confession in the spirit of his father, "a good detective – the real thing, you know, not like those fellows in novels," but dispenses his judgement as a metaphysician rather than a detective, and leaves the murderer to "live with Gil's ghost" rather than handing him over to the authorities (349). In McWearie's terms, metaphysics means playing a different game from that of the detective and, in the novel's final conversation between him and the murderer, he describes how the terms of these games are completely different:

'Metaphysics, the mother of psychology and the laughing father of psychoanalysis. A wondrous game, Mr. Going, in which the players cannot decide what the relative values of the pieces are, or how big a board they are playing on. A wondrous, wondrous diversion for a really adventurous mind.'

'Gill was into that?'

'He's into it now. You put him there yourself.' (352)

⁵⁰ This particular plot motif has also been used before in the American ghost story: the third part of Ambrose Bierce's short story 'The Moonlit Road' is told, via a medium, by the murdered mother of the story's initial narrator.

McWearie's sense of the metaphysical is in opposition to the work of the detective, who is concerned only with the evidence of his senses and with earthly justice. The crime of murder becomes a metaphysical matter for him precisely because it dispatches its victim outside the realm of the physical. Similarly, the dead narrator's concern with the *why* rather than the *whodunit* contributes to this sense of the shifted focus on the murder from the corpse's perspective. The game of the detective story puzzle is being played on the expandable, uncertain board of metaphysics, yet still using the familiar pieces of the detective story.

Michael Holquist's investigation of the metaphysical detective story provides some degree of mediation between the ghost story and the murder mystery, and the value systems attached to them.⁵¹ Holquist argues that the metaphysical detective story, which is characterised by its reassuring narrative of the omnipotence of reason, becomes the primary model for philosophical investigations in postmodernity. "If, in the detective story," he argues, "death must be solved, in the new metaphysical detective story, it is *life* which must be solved" (155). The detective story is so prevalent a model for enquiry that it not only occurs to dead narrators as their default narrative model for solving the mystery of their own deaths, but also of their continuing afterlives.

Holquist discusses the pledges of the Detection Club, in which writers were required to swear "seemly moderation" in the use of "Death Rays, Ghosts, Hypnotism, trap-doors, [and] Chinamen" and which selects death rays and ghosts as tricks it is particularly wise to avoid, since "these elements are foreign to the world of the detective story – they belong to the worlds of sheer convention, pure fiction, the ghost story and science fiction" (142). The implication is that the ghost story's conventions and pleasures rely on the possibility that there are things beyond physical phenomena, while the basis and the consolation of the detective story is found in the affirmation of the power of empirical evidence to explain everything about the world. Even the Jamesian ghost story, which depends upon the tricks of the mind for its opening into the supernatural, would undermine the

⁵¹ The term "metaphysical detective story" is originally Patricia Merivale's, in 'The Flaunting of Artifice in Vladimir Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges' (1967), 295.

assumptions required by the detective story: if eye-witness evidence is constantly under threat from hysteria and hallucinations, the foundations of detection are built on sand.

So, are the dead narrators here calling on the detective story precisely because their existence is invalidating its very premises? In some ways, if anyone is going to want answers to metaphysical questions after a murder, it's going to be the victim, but does a position (mostly) outside the physical world preclude the use of detective strategies for answering the dead's metaphysical questions? One of Holquist's examples of the metaphysical detective story is in the work of Vladimir Nabokov, whose protagonists are characterised as "cosmic detectives, who wish to solve the crime of their own existence" (154). In the tradition of the unquiet spirit in the ghost story, the continuing existence of the ghost is the result of a crime which requires a solution. The conclusion of this plot frees the spirit from the earth, and also from the burden of narration, effectively solving the crime their afterlife existence at the same time as it solves the crime of their death. In the discussion of Nabokov's *Transparent Things* in Chapter 5, we will see one example of the mystery and crime of this kind of afterlife existence in his work.

The articles of the Detection Club prohibiting the use of ghosts and death rays are there for the benefit of readers, who would be unable to solve the mystery if these unpredictable elements were introduced. They stop the writer making the game of the detective plot unfair for the reader. However, in the novels considered here, the mystery of the murder itself will always get solved in the end, precisely because of the dead narrator, who has the most complete knowledge of the crime. However, this is a solution only for the reader, rather than the other characters in the novel. *In the Cut* dramatises this with particular force by setting up a chain of serial murders that are only solved by the narrator's death. In the final paragraph of the novel, Franny's narrative moves into the third person to signal that this is the point when her corpse alone will speak to the living, and become evidence for her lover, the detective, to interpret. This separation of the physical clues of the corpse, which are available to the detective, and the ghost's story, which is available to the reader, reinforces the difference in the information that can be presented in self-

conscious fiction and in the realism of something like the police procedural. Essentially, the things that the body has to say are not sufficient to answer our questions about death, in particular and in general.

This has serious consequences for how we consider the end of the story in these cases, because the ghost story always refuses closure. Earlier in this chapter I mentioned the quote from Samuel Butler which described the pleasure of the rabble at the hanging which would inevitably follow the “murder”, and its combination with the “walking spirits”. Dorothy L. Sayers introduces her *Third Omnibus of Crime* (1935) with an imagined dialogue between the two forms, which shows the way that the ghost story will always undermine the tidy ending of the detective plot:

“Here,” [the ghost story] says, “is a body that is, or was, the dwelling place of the soul. It was haunted when it was alive by strange lusts or fears or cruelties, and when it is destroyed it is not finished with. Its power has still to be made manifest [. . .]. But the dead will show their might, in some fashion or other – *though how we do not know.*”

“We know well enough,” replies the detective story, “The murderer will be detected and hanged, and there will be an end of it.”

“An end of it?” says the story of horror. “You will add corpse to corpse – and what then?” (5)

The end that the detective plot supplies is exposed as arbitrary and provisional by the ghost story, and this is where the dead narrator most forcefully combines these two plots (Sayers calls them the literature of power and the literature of knowledge): the logic of life, of causal relations, empiricism and finality is encountered in the detective plot, but the logic of the afterlife reveals a supplement to this that exposes its incompleteness. The ghost speaks after the murder mystery to reveal the likelihood of an infinite parade of corpses, adding their own words to the story.

A Voice-From-Beyond-the-Grave: the Life Writing possibility

The fourth possible plot shape I want to explore is the form of the autobiography or memoir, which we have already established has an important place in the descent narrative, but whose relations with the detective story and the ghost story are rather more complicated. The first-person narrator has a place in both these forms, but they do not necessarily intersect with the idea of telling a life.

Machado de Assis's *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* sees the model of the life-story adopted early in the history of the dead narrator. Brás Cubas believes that the story of life told after death is the most authoritative, and the ultimate form of life-writing: "Every season of life is an edition that corrects the one before and which will also be corrected itself until the definitive edition, which the publisher gives to the worms gratis" (57). The definitive power of the posthumous memoir has deep conceptual roots in the autobiography. In *The Post Card* (1987), Derrida calls all autobiography "autothanatography", identifying the posthumous spirit inside the claims of life writing. Autothanatography can also related to the shaping of narrative by plot, in the terms of the death drive that Brooks uses in *Reading for the Plot*: Derrida writes, "The death drive pushing toward autodestruction, toward dying-of-one's-proper-death—the proper is produced here as autothanatography" (393). The proper death in terms of the death drive is a death that is as well-ordered as narrative, as a self-ordered posthumous story. Ivan Callus notes that the term autothanatography "turns on the uncanniest of double genitives – 'the writing of the dead'" (2005: 428). The autothanatographers considered here are interested in how and why writing of the dead should be different from writing of the living, and how and why each should be a model or ghost of the other.

In the previous section I suggested that the combination of the ghost story and the murder mystery divides the dead person into a corpse and a narrating spirit, but I want to look at two novels here which explore the divisions within narration, using plot formations that combine the ghost story and the murder mystery. Genette calls this doubling of the interdiegetic narrator "classical autobiography's double I," and attributes the idea to Leo Spitzer (252), with the

division here being a temporal one, rather than the dead narrator's double separation from his or her past actions by time and by disembodiment.

The first novel considered here is Neil Jordan's *Shade* (2004), which establishes the more uncomfortable aspects of the autobiographical "double I." The novel begins with the description of the murder of the narrator, Nina, and goes on to establish the circumstances of her childhood through a combination of her own memories, and the stories told by her half brother, Gregory, and her friend Janie after Nina's funeral. Nina reveals on the first page that she was murdered by her childhood friend, George, who she had rescued from a mental institution and employed to restore the family home, which she had returned to at the age of fifty. In the intervening years Nina worked as an actress, after she fell in love with the confused identities of Shakespeare's comedies, and the novel constantly plays with the different roles and identities that make up an individual. Significantly, this formative experience on the stage is described by Nina in terms of giving life to a ghost: the characters are "most enduring spectres" who possess her and then leave, "like a ghost" (162).

The novel offers a set of identities that huddle, ghost-like, around Nina herself and the plot ultimately identifies the doubling of the narrator, Nina, as a contributory factor in her murder. From her earliest memories Nina has seen a ghost around her family home in Ireland, which the narrative eventually indicates is her dead future self. She and her childhood playmates tell stories about the ghost – whom they name Hester – only for Nina's friend and eventual killer, George, to develop a closer relationship with this character than any of them had anticipated. When the group are teenagers he confesses to Nina that Hester speaks to him, and suggests that the ghost's death is in the future rather than the past:

"Does she talk to you?"

"She tells me things," he said, "every now and then."

"What things?"

"What you want, what you're thinking."

"How could Hester know, when most times I don't know myself?"

"Because, maybe, she hasn't died yet." (136)

After George has killed Nina, he refuses to admit to her murder, but only to the murder of Hester, and the significance of this ghost who “hasn’t died yet” emerges out of the narrative’s time shifts and multiple voices.

The novel thinks through all the consequences of the similarities between a narrator and one of the dead, and creates a system of causal loops. The first of these is the idea that Nina’s ghost has been appearing to George, and it is the day that she finally matches the appearance of the apparition that triggers the murder.⁵² Secondly, it turns out that the reason for this haunting from the future is Nina’s narration itself. She (as narrator) has been watching herself all her life: “I am beyond her and she is here, she is me, of course, and over the gap of years I am amazed by her patience, her presentness, and her calm acceptance of the fact that she is observed [. . .]. I am the figure she occasionally notices, her guardian angel or her hidden sister” (33). Nina’s “presentness” when she is alive is in direct contrast with her capacity to roam across time once she is dead. An autobiographical narrator, “for whom past, present and to some extent the future are the same, who flips between them with inhuman ease” is, Nina comments, “the most impossible and yet the commonest in [. . .] books” (4). The reader’s acceptance of this inhuman activity and, most crucially, of the technique of the dead narrator itself, allows for the novel to take the exploration of the technique a stage further. What if, asks *Shade*, an autobiographical narrator actually *was* a ghost? What consequences would this have for the story she told and, moreover, for the events she observed, which had already happened before her death?

Jordan’s novel investigates the outcomes of the ghost story’s narrative connections between the living and the dead, and suggests that the storytelling power of the dead is at the heart of their potential to disrupt the living. Reading the double I of autobiography as a ghostly future self imagined in the present leads to a situation much like travelling back in time to kill your own grandfather, or like living a virtuous life because it will be evidence of your status as one of the elect.

Speaking from beyond the grave should give the most complete autobiography possible, and it also has the potential to reinforce an emphasis on

⁵² The other contributory factor is George’s discovery of the remains of a foetus Nina aborted as a teenager.

retrospective understanding as the only way of making sense of experience, and therefore a weighting of knowledge and understanding to after the end. The disturbances to cause and effect, as part of the workings of supernatural after effects discussed in Chapter 3, mean that this is impossible. Narration itself changes what has gone before, making the impartial and synoptic point of view from the afterlife no more favourable than any other position of narration after an arbitrary ending.

Consideration of murder victims narrating and investigating their own deaths indicates the possibility of speaking in the silences of the classical detective plot of crime-detection-solution/beginning-middle-end (and retrospective narration after the end). However, this first-person narration relies on the possibility of separating the body as evidence from the ghost as witness. This doubling of the narrator already has a place in detective fiction, and is most fully realised in the problematic self-division, guilt and causal disturbances in the hard-boiled detective story, as in the work of Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett. After considering the place of the after effect and autobiography in the aspects of the ghost story in *Shade*, I want to compare similar features in the aspects of the detective story in Gilbert Adair's *The Death of the Author*.

Adair's novel does not follow the classical detective plot described above, but bears more similarities to the hard-boiled narratives in the first person. One major difference in these detective stories is that the crimes occur in the course of the story, rather than before it begins, making the ghost story's model of the self-division of the narrator into an evidentiary body and a narrating spirit impossible. Chandler's Philip Marlowe, for instance, is not able to separate himself fully into detective and narrator: one who solves the crime and one who tells the story, like Watson for Holmes. This means that there is a complicated relationship between Marlowe's narration and his detecting activity. The stories begin with him investigating a minor crime – gambling debts or blackmail, for instance – and he is then caught up in a spiralling series of murders and further crimes, caused at least

in part by his presence as investigator.⁵³ If we accept that narration is essentially the same thing as detection (observing, making causal inferences, deriving meaning from events), then it is Marlowe's narration that is leading to these murders: he is bringing the plot of the novel into existence by interpreting these events, and his presence is escalating the situations to violence and murder. Rather than the murder causing the investigation and therefore the narrative (as in the classical murder mystery), Marlowe's presence as investigator and as narrator is disturbing the detective story's ordinary causal chain.

The capacity for a disturbance in the cause and effect established by the procedural shape of the hard-boiled detective novel is central to Adair's novel. The novel combines the problems of narrating death with the concern with a weighting towards the after effect, which comes in the form of a reversed narrative logic. It functions both as a murder mystery told from the posthumous perspective of the victim, but also as a rereading of the life and afterlife of Paul de Man. In Adair's novel, the protagonist Leopold Sfax writes his major work, "*Either/Neither*" (which introduces what, in this alternative world, is called "The Theory" to America) wholly as a preparation for the inevitable disclosure of his written support for the Nazi occupation of France. Cause and effect as interpreted in de Man's own biography are reversed, as Sfax writes his magnum opus with the intention of exonerating himself, "both retroactively and in advance, so to speak – of precisely those offences that the afterglow of its publication risked once for all bringing to the light" (91). This dual rewriting, forwards and backwards in time, mirrors the place of the author in the murder mystery, as both plotter and unplotter, who has to conceive of the crime and also bring about its solution. In a similar way, the novel's murders are revealed to be set up to conceal their motivation, through reversing the privilege placed on the original event: the murderer, Ralph, commits the first murder in order to provide a motive for his real victim to be killed when she starts to investigate it. Ralph explains his logic to Sfax in terms of the Theory: "the either/or, the reversal of binary oppositions, what comes first but really

⁵³ The titles of Chandler's stories often have a certain air of mortality about them – *Farewell, My Lovely*; *The Big Sleep*; *The Long Goodbye* – as though Marlowe expects from the very beginning that murders will follow from the reasonably innocuous set-up.

shouldn't" (126). Ordinary expectations of cause and effect are radically disturbed by the awareness that the murders are going to be interpreted in retrospect, with the logic of narrative or the criminal plot in mind.

The novel begins from the premise of what it means to write a memoir or autobiography, and takes the idea to its limit beyond the grave with the most extreme form of narrative retrospect possible. Living life and writing about life are divided into a subtly distinct pairing or, as Sfax says, "A biography and a life belong to two quite dissimilar categories" (72). Like Kierkegaard's observation that life is lived forward and understood backwards, Adair's novel posits two completely separate logics, one of which is the logic of cause and effect, the other is the counterintuitive sense in which the mechanics of writing and reading bring about situations where the effect seems to precede the cause, through the expectation or anticipation of retrospection. The second of these is heightened by the genuine, rather than psychological, cause and effect reversals that come about through the supernatural experiences of the afterlife. In Sfax's narrative, this emerges as a reinterpretation of his earlier life through the very act of his narrating it, as well as the shaping of his writing in anticipation of how it will be read. This awareness of the reader (appropriately enough, given the title) grows during the course of the novel, from Sfax's earlier work, which he writes "feeling that each of its sentences had to justify its having been underlined even before it was written" to his later work which was conceived wholly as a pre-emptive strike against future readings of his past (94).

More than once, Sfax quotes from his own work a phrase which is taken directly from Paul de Man: "death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament" (29, 135).⁵⁴ In the context of the novel, this reiterates the impossibility of speaking the death of the author, except as a fictitious exercise, because the word "death" is normally just a marker for something inexpressible. At the end of the novel Sfax is dead and finds himself without "posthumous last words" because he has found

⁵⁴ In Martin McQuillan's study, *Paul de Man* (London: Routledge, 2001), he describes how these "first nine words here are often ripped from their context and used to demonstrate de Man's alleged extremism" (79). In Adair's novel there's something of the Dantean *contrapasso* in Sfax's afterlife, as these words alone seem to have been used to structure Sfax's torment: the governing consciousness of this universe apparently sees Sfax as an extremist and has punished him accordingly.

“death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament” (135) The rest of de Man’s observation is outside this text, but is still relevant to it: taken from the end of his essay, ‘Autobiography as De-facement’ (1979), the quotation continues, “and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and of the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores” (81). In de Man’s terms, trying to reincarnate the author by way of autobiography is still hidden behind a displacement and a defacement. Autobiography as prosopopeia is extremely important for all of the dead narrators considered in this chapter, especially given that de Man defines prosopopeia as “a voice-from-beyond-the-grave” (81).

In *The Death of the Author*, murder is not only narrated, but it also forms the culmination of and solution to the plot, rather than taking place in a time before it begins and causing the story. I think this is probably only part of the way in which it plays into the end-oriented shape of the murder mystery. Murder mystery, as a genre, is obsessed with endings, with ultimately revealed secrets and undisclosed plot solutions. Frank Kermode describes the prohibition against telling the ending of murder mysteries as a “taboo [that] sacralizes closure; it suggests that the solution that comes at the end is to give away all” (1983: 180). The action of the murder mystery therefore rests on the power of certain final details to irremediably alter what goes before, to “give away all” as Kermode says. The voices of the dead de-sacralise closure – whether that is the unmasking of the criminal at the end of the murder mystery, or using the death of a fictitious author to reinforce the de-facement involved in prosopopeia – by adding extra time beyond the end and refusing to keep silent about what could fall outside any given plot.

The Most Acceptable of all the Possibilities

In the same interview about *Saving Fish from Drowning* in which Amy Tan placed her novel in the ghost story tradition, she also argued for the dead narrator as the best option for the author who wanted to combine the omniscience of a god with the character and partiality of a man. “No doubt about it,” she said, “ghost narrators are simply the most acceptable of all the possibilities.” This division

between omniscience and personality is one that will be examined in the following chapter, but my discussion here has continually emphasised the dead narrator as a way of expanding the possibilities of narrative; speaking where there was silence, questioning the dominance of endings. However, it is also the case that the dead narrator has a place as a kind of punchline, as part of a plot twist that reinforces the sacralisation of closure and the taboos about ending. The recent phenomenon of the dead narrator should probably also be situated alongside popular novels like A.M. Holmes's *The End of Alice* (1996) or Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) which employ the plot twist that major characters are revealed to be dead at the end of the novel, which is also the premise of films like *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and *The Others* (2001).

There are some important formal distinctions to be made here, which can help to answer these questions about the use of the dead-all-along plot twist. Firstly, there is the feature of the novel which means it is not intended to be consumed in one sitting. Edgar Allan Poe, the master of the short story's shocking conclusion, believed that short works had the advantage of "totality, or unity of effect" ('The Philosophy of Composition', 196). If we compare the revelation at the end of contemporary films with similar techniques in short stories, we can see the same effect at work. For instance, two of Muriel Spark's short stories feature dead narrators who reveal their posthumousness in the course of the story, half as a shocking revelation, and half casual jokes about popular turns of phrase. The narrator of 'The Portobello Road' cheerfully recalls, "He looked like he would murder me and he did," as our first indication that she is dead (412). Spark also goes for a similar one-liner in another story, 'The Girl I Left behind Me': "With a great joy I recognized what it was I had left behind me, my body lying strangled on the floor" (222). These two stories were published in 1958 and 1957, respectively, at the same time Spark published her first novel, *The Comforters* (1957) which posits a "typing ghost" as one of the possibilities for its narrator. As we will see in the next chapter, Spark's novel explores the idea far more fully, and with more of an eye to the problems of plots and their weighting towards the end than her short stories. Spark's other novels explore some of the issues discussed in this chapter

(the place of the victim in the murder plot in *The Driver's Seat* (1970); characters who are dead but continue to live on, unawares, in New York in *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973)) but never through the technique of the dead narrator. In the short stories, the dead narrator is essentially a punchline, and it almost seems as though, for Spark, it is something that shuts down possibilities rather than opens them up. The stories therefore set up a kind of limit case for her investigations into narrative and death; or establishing the boundaries of the territory before she explored the interior. This double meaning with which the dead narrator can be freighted, as both a heightened closural device or plot twist, and a supplement that destabilises narrative endings, makes it especially potent.

At the beginning of this chapter we saw how contrasting the descent narrative plot against dead narrators' autobiographical narratives led to the conclusion that a desire for narrative closure that fixes human beings statically with the end of a story is undermined both by living characters narrating their journeys to hell and back, and dead people narrating their journey from life to eternity. The cases of the ghost story and the murder mystery offered other possible models which texts involving dead narrators used to destabilise plots that emphasised endings, concealment and revelation. Finally, the plot structures of autobiography and other kinds of life-writing are exposed as conforming to these same structures for creating or privileging endings, which the dead narrator exposes as a sham. Dead narrators not only suggest that the end is not really the end, and can be infinitely extended in fiction, they are also constantly aware of their own fictiveness – and this is only heightened by their play with genre fictions – so that their own endings are exposed as provisional and arbitrary. For texts exploring the possibilities of narrative, the dead narrator, autobiography and the murder plots of detective fiction and the ghost story combine familiar generic expectations in new ways and expose the hidden workings of narrative to a new level of transparency, as a focus on the after-narrative becomes a medium to see through into meta-narrative. As Gilbert Adair's murdered narrator puts it, upon reaching "the very last page, the usually missing last page, of life's mystery story [. . .]" we find that, "the truth, as you can see, is that this last page is exactly like

those which preceded it, except that the number of characters is already thinning out and the grain of the paper is just beginning to show through" (135). Extending beyond the end, into the afterlife, only serves to undermine the idea of the ending's significance, and light up the secret workings of plot formations that borrow their sense and their seductions from death.

Chapter 5

Ghostwords: The Dead Narrator and Mind-Reading

I can see a mind, it is yours . . .
& mine . . . I see you without your . . . eyes . . .
You & I . . . without our eyes, we are . . .
words . . . Words are our senses . . .
Close to me and Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven)

Among the possibilities explored for the dead narrator in the previous chapter was the role of the ghost story as a shaping tradition for the plot of these narratives. Ghosts, and their association with psychic phenomena, attribute to the dead knowledge that is unavailable to the living. We have already observed the narrative effects which come about from the narrator's positioning after the story's events, and the extra kinds of awareness that come through retrospection. In this chapter, I am interested in a kind of knowledge which is not related to temporal positioning, but which takes the form of the unusual availability of characters' thoughts and feelings to the narrator. In novels which use a dead narrator for all or part of their story, the device exposes some of the unusual, even threatening, knowledge about the minds of the characters which is conventionally held by some narrators.

The dead narrator has the potential to overturn every single category used to talk about the narrator: from the distinction between hetero- and homodiegetic narrators, and the concomitant association of extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrators with an extended knowledge, to the assumption that a narrator is necessarily a person, or even an animate being. Equally, dead narrators make some

assault on virtually every critical model for the phenomenon of narratorial omniscience. The major metaphor for the strange narrative trick of mind-reading is divinity, with the omniscience of the narrator becoming entwined with the omniscience and omnipotence of the author-God. Dead narrators insert themselves into this binary model of all-knowing God and ignorant humanity, and open the way for thought experiments implying other knowledges in between. The dead narrator also raises the problem of the status of narrators as people, as entities that have the capacity to know anything at all. They not only imply various partial but extended knowledges, which only approach omniscience within the limited world of a narrative fiction, but also remind us of how uncomfortable we should be with the narrator who is not a person, but tries his best to convince us that he is. All narration walks a line between the presentation of a speaking human being and the awareness that this voice is firmly not a person, but is created out of words. The dead narrator plays on this division spectacularly and often with unsettling effects. The second part of this chapter considers two alternatives to omniscience as a model for narratorial knowledge. The first sees metaphors for knowledge of minds based on optics and vision come under scrutiny, as the implications of embodiment and disembodiment come into play in ideas related to point of view and perspective. Secondly, models from modern telecommunication technologies, paired with the uncanny elements of telepathy, are a significant area of investigation both in current narrative theory, and also in novels which use dead narrators. The dead narrator could be considered an alternative model of narratorial knowledge in itself, but texts set in the afterlife engage with every area of debate about the narrator's omniscience.

Omniscience and Divinity

Recent discussion on the topic of omniscience in narration has centred on theological questions of omniscience, and has been highly inflected with current feeling about new kinds of atheism. Illustrative poles of this debate are Jonathan Culler and Meir Sternberg. To reproduce their arguments in brief, Culler argues that, "if, for instance, we do not believe in an omniscient and omnipotent God, then

we cannot draw on what we know of God to illuminate properties of narrative” but also that “divine omniscience is not a model that helps us think about authors or about literary narration” (2005: 23). Sternberg, however, not only argues for omniscience as a model which “works best [and . . .] makes better sense” than the alternatives, but attributes Culler’s position, at least in part, to antitheist prejudice (684). Both their arguments are complex and nuanced, and deserve more space than I can afford them here, but they each seem to have neglected the dead narrator as either a problem or a solution to the positions they put forward. In this section I want to examine the potential of the dead narrator to occupy a position between the first-person, partial and limited, homodiegetic narrator and the third-person, extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator whose omniscience is at stake in this debate.

In *The Uncanny* (2003) Nicholas Royle argues, “To assume the efficacy and appropriateness of discussing literary works in terms of ‘omniscient narration’ is, however faintly or discreetly, to subscribe to a religious (and above all, a Christian) discourse and thinking” (2003: 260). To have a concept of omniscience (of a mind expansive enough to take in everything in the universe) *is* to have a concept of God. However, we can take issue with both the necessity of this being a primarily Christian discourse and the need for divinity as a model for omniscience at all by offering works from other religious (including non-theist) traditions which employ a dead narrator. The texts I am going to examine offer alternatives to an implicitly Christian theology, by way of omniscience for Buddhists, for Muslims and for atheists.⁵⁵ Most importantly, there is also a model of an alternative to omniscience for believers in a Judeo-Christian God.

⁵⁵ ‘Omniscience for Atheists’ is the title of a recent article by William Nelles on omniscience in Jane Austen, which brings together some aspects of this debate about omniscience and God, both from the perspective of the author as God and the narrator’s omniscience as God-like. Nelles argues for the omniscience of Austen’s narrators as being “not at all a Godlike omniscience, but a very human skill: the ability of a perceptive and thoughtful person, given enough time and sufficient opportunity for observation, to make accurate judgments about people’s character, thought processes, and feelings” (Nelles, 128). So, Austen’s narrators can read minds because they come from a limited social circle and they are (according to Nelles) women putting their empathy and intuition to good use. Nelles does not, however, address the issue of the separation between generalised awareness of thoughts or feelings, and free indirect discourse’s specific words, the second of which is harder to explain away as the ordinary communication of an emotionally intelligent and socially limited narrator.

The dead narrator allows for a concept of omniscience which is divisible; in which one aspect does not necessarily follow from all the others. At the simplest level, this means that a narrator can be omniscient, in that the minds of others are available for access, but omnitemporality and omnipresence are not possible. In a variation on divine omniscience with more far-reaching implications, these kinds of extended sensory knowledges into time, space and other minds can be separated from the narrator's reliability and power: dead narrators can know everything but lie about it, and do not necessarily have the omnipotence to go with their omniscience.

Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* (1998) illustrates this divided omniscience for the dead narrator in the context of an Islamic theology and eschatology. The novel is set among the miniaturists of sixteenth-century Istanbul, where the traditions of illustration based in Islam are meeting with new, Frankish art rooted in European Christianity. The novel's narrative technique starts from a Faulknerian orchestration of a mass of voices but, taking up where Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* leaves off, gives voice to the dead, the inanimate and the non-material, like the colour red (as a concept, not a specific instance) that gives the novel its title. The chorus of narrating voices reflects the tradition that in the underworld "everything, whether cloud, tree, object, dog or book, has a soul and speaks" (402). The violent deaths of the novel mean that the same thing happens among the living on earth: "Jinns, phantoms, the living dead [. . .] they come with the wind, possess objects and make sounds out of silence. Everything speaks" (181). There are two processes in parallel here, then, in which the speaking voices are possessing objects, and in which the objects are speaking for themselves according to their own souls.

Pamuk's novel is an exploration of ways of seeing the world which align the living with the dead, and human beings with God. The story describes the Ottoman illustrators' encounters with methods of linear perspective and portraiture which "illustrate from the street" and "move the art of illustrating away from Allah's perspective" as well as blasphemously place the individual in the centre of the picture and, by implication, the world (135). The novel seems to ally its own art

with the new illustrating techniques in which a fly and a mosque can occupy an equal area on the page, and different individuals can fill the frame, rather than being (apparently) ordered by a divine consciousness.⁵⁶ The perspective of God, on which the traditional illustrative art is based, is recreated by the works of the artists, which “replicate the piercing gaze of Exalted Allah” (90). It is this “piercing” vision which is significant here, and which constitutes the difference between being omnitemporal or omnipresent, and being omniscient.

The extended knowledge of the dead is therefore defined in both directions; against the perceptions of living people, and the complete awareness of all of creation in the mind of God. One of the novel’s three dead narrators, Enishte, who is the second murder victim, finds himself experiencing all times and all places as one, as a vision of the world is laid out like a map from his place in the limbo state of *Berzah*. When Enishte’s death is avenged, the murderer’s afterlife uses his limited present and temporality as a kind of torment resulting from eternity *without* omnipresence, omnitemporality, or omniscience: his world narrows to a frozen scene, like a painting, and he comments that “all time had now become this time” (495). Omniscience as mind-reading in the novel seems to be placed in a hierarchy above omnipresence and omnitemporality, as it is only achieved by the most deserving of the dead. This is illustrated by the fact that it is only when Enishte approaches God that he can communicate using his mind. All of the narrators seem able to communicate with us, the readers, in the same way as he can communicate with God – silently, in our thoughts – and so the text itself becomes a kind of mind-reading, a partial and qualified glimpse of omniscience. Allah’s piercing gaze, talking and mind-reading souls, the stylised art of the illustrators which shows the insides of buildings, all are equated with the techniques of the novel for revealing truths.

Despite the logic of omniscience appearing to refer to the total, perfect and unique omniscience of Allah, the idea of God is by no means necessary for a religious model of extended knowledge. Amy Tan’s novel *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) offers a dead narrator who makes some movement from the

⁵⁶ See the following chapter for a more detailed discussion of the significance of perspectival art and afterlife narratives.

limitations of human perception towards omniscience, but its position is within Buddhism, rather than within monotheistic religion. The recently deceased narrator, Bibi Chen, was born in China, but left with her father and stepmother when Shanghai came under Communist control. Bibi dies before the beginning of the novel and is rather troubled to find that, at her own funeral, she is able to gain access to the thoughts of her living acquaintances:

How I knew all this, I had no notion at first, didn't even wonder how I knew. But I sensed others as I sensed myself; their feelings became mine. I was privy to their secret thoughts: their motives and desires, guilt feelings and regrets, joys and fears, as well as the shades of truth within what they said, and what they refrained from saying. The thoughts swam around me like shoals of colorful fish, and as people spoke, their true feelings drove through me in a flash. It was that shocking and effortless. The Mind of Others – that's what the Buddha would have called it. (34)

In contrast with the mind-reading in Pamuk's novel, which comes at the top of a scale for extended perception and knowledge, Bibi's experience of *The Mind of Others* stands alone, without reference to a complete knowledge of events in the past and future. This is vital for the progress of the plot, which relies on Bibi's death in mysterious circumstances that even she cannot recall; difficult to sustain if she has knowledge of all times and places. The separation of these aspects of omniscience is completely rooted in Buddhist thought, and the *Mind of Others* is just one path Bibi's enlightenment could follow:

Since my death, it had taken me some time to accustom myself to the constant effusion of emotions. Whereas I had lacked dimension of feeling my entire life, now, through others, there was width, volume and density ever growing. Could it be that I was sprouting more of the six supernatural talents that Sakyamuni received before he became the Buddha? Did I have the Celestial Eye, the Celestial Ear, along with the Mind of Others? (42)

However, as we eventually find out, Bibi has made an error in attributing the Mind of Others to her death. She ascends to a new consciousness of her own feelings before her death, and it is actually this effusion of emotions which caused her demise, when she has a comb of her long-dead mother's returned to her and, overwhelmed, falls from a stool. The omniscience that results from this sudden exposure to the feelings she had been repressing is therefore revealed to be completely coincidental to her position in the afterlife.⁵⁷

As in Pamuk's novel, the different aspects of omniscience are separated out and categorised, so that the narrators can have some but not others, with the whole continuing to be reserved for Allah or for Buddha (because he is fully enlightened, rather than because he is God). Bibi does not possess the Celestial Eye, nor the Celestial Ear, nor the Mind of Eternity which would allow her to see into the previous and future incarnations of those around her, understanding their significance as part of the entire universe. This suggests a gradated kind of knowledge of individuals and of the world, which offers a range of possibilities before complete omniscience.

Even within a framework of Christianity, there is the possibility of a range of different kinds of knowledge that are limited and various, but which we would still end up terming omniscience if we encountered them in a narrative. If we turn to Muriel Spark's *The Comforters*, we can find a perfect example of what a spectrum of different knowledges might look like. The novel tells the story of a recent convert to Catholicism, Caroline, apparently undergoing a mental breakdown. As a result of this she comes to believe that she is a character in a neatly plotted novel. The plot offers her increasing evidence of coincidence and order dominating contingency and chance and she also begins to hear a commentary on her life from invisible, mocking observers. Caroline's friend, Helena, comes across a list that Caroline has made under the heading "Possible Identity" for this mysterious voice. The list runs down the page:

⁵⁷ Bibi's death is incidental to her enlightenment, supporting the sense we got in the previous chapter of the similarity of Buddhist thought to certain ideas about purgatory, particularly those which see the purgation beginning during a lifetime, through tribulations, increasing the sense of continuity between the living and the dead. See the first section of Chapter 4.

Satan

a woman

hermaphrodite

a Holy Soul in Purgatory. (124)

These options for the narrating voice seem to be all about unsettling the binary opposition that associates God with omniscience and man with limited knowledge: note that God does not appear in this list at all! Firstly Satan: there is no reason why Satan should not have access to human minds in the same way that God does, but also be unreliable, immoral and subject to the same (probably all) the character flaws of a human narrator. Glen Duncan, before he investigated the narratorial capacities of the dead in *Death of an Ordinary Man*, used Satan as a charismatic and engaging character narrator in *I, Lucifer* (2002), who can “hear and see pretty much everything in the human realm pretty much all the time” (3). Sternberg addresses this issue in his most recent article on the omniscience/divinity debate: “Satan [. . .] might in principle boast narrative omniscience where a saint merely gropes his way toward the limit of human enlightenment” (760 n.60). This element of Caroline’s list therefore separates out the aspects of morality or reliability and omnipotence from the core issue of mind-reading omniscience, and suggests that God is not the most accurate model for a mind-reading narrator (although Spark is perfectly content to explore the analogies between God and the author elsewhere in the novel) because narrators do not have to be benevolent towards their characters.

The second article on the list completes the alternative to a God/man binary by substituting a Satan/woman binary. Moreover, this is not just generic, this is *a* specific, definite article, woman; implicitly someone with a character and a personality. This takes in the possibility of Caroline as this specific autodiegetic narrator, overhearing her own narration of her life from the future. The third option on the list indicates the insertion of a third term into the gender binary already indicated, but also the idea of an indefinite being for the narrator: this is just “hermaphrodite” (not capitalised) to the previous “*a* woman”.

Conceptualising a scale between the binaries of divine omniscience and human knowledge has been acknowledged as problematic in the recent debate about new ways of imagining the narrator's powers. For instance, Sternberg objects to Culler's substitution of the limited and multiple knowledges of the Homeric gods for the monumental omniscience of the Hebraic God by suggesting that the binary opposition of God and man is so deeply rooted in our thinking that the very fact that gradated omniscience asks us to abandon our binary thinking tells against it: "it 'only' demands that we wipe our minds clean of our cognitive heritage—the binary ground rule" (780). Placing this in the context of gender, as Muriel Spark does, demonstrates how the effort invested in wiping our minds clean of our cognitive heritage is by no means fruitless for thinking about gender roles, and the model we finish up with is not only liberatingly un-prescriptive, but also works better and makes more sense (as Sternberg claims for his own model of omniscience). Spark's novel establishes a suspension model of omniscience, and asks that we accept the idea of partial omniscience to explain Caroline's typing ghost, in the same way that we can conceptualise ideas about gender beyond a binary.

The final item on the list is clearly of most interest to us here, representing the possibility that Caroline's narrating voice could be a dead person. The Holy Soul in purgatory therefore falls in the centre of the binaries already established, somewhere between a plural, general concept of the human and the supernatural connotations of divinity. Purgatory stands between heaven and hell, but also between them and the earth: still within the realm of temporality rather than eternity, still in a state of change and mutability where narrative has some relevance as a concept, embedded in time. It is not, in Spark's work, a mark of atheism to want to explore other models that might fit the narrator better than one of divinity.

The binary opposition that clusters together the descriptors of a first-person, limited, homodiegetic, character narrator, as opposed to a third-person, omniscient, heterodiegetic, omniscient narrator is one that theorists of narrative have not really been comfortable with for some time now. Gérard Genette uses the

terms heterodiegetic and extradiegetic to describe a narrator's absence from the story and the first, most outward level of narration (1972: 228, 245). These terms refuse any automatic assumption that a narrator telling a story without a part in it should have access to extended knowledge. Genette reiterates his model of focalisation in *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1988), and describes zero-focalisation as "the well-known 'viewpoint of God,' or of Sirius" (73). The viewpoint is therefore not necessarily godlike: any position outside the narrated world (such as from Sirius) is sufficient for zero-focalisation. Genette's analogy of a film camera is quite illuminating here: "Unlike the director of a movie, the novelist is not compelled to put his camera somewhere: he has no camera" (73). Focalisation therefore means that narrative voice can be separated from point of view, and can take in extraordinary knowledge of internal states as well, as narrating consciousnesses get disembodied.

This terminology is useful for the dead narrator because of the separation of narratorial knowledge from extradiegetic-heterodiegetic status. So, a novel like Neil Jordan's *Shade* employs an autodiegetic narrator who travels in time after her death, observing herself in scenes from her childhood, and extending her knowledge beyond ordinary retrospection. She can also listen in on and narrate conversations between other characters after her death. Whole sections of the novel read like they are written by an ordinary omniscient narrator, as Nina can pass through rooms unseen and relate the characters' thoughts. In the early part of the novel, for instance, she narrates the story of her parents' courtship with complete omniscience, describing their unspoken thoughts and feelings in great detail: "that he was in love with Elizabeth was for him beyond question [...] he felt that strangest of affections [...] he concealed, because he had to, his trepidation [...] she felt he was in need of reassurance and thought she knew why [...] he wanted his journey to end here, but he wondered would it" (15-19). Explaining this knowledge, Nina describes it as "the only grace of my state. I am everywhere being nowhere, the narrative sublime" (18). The novel therefore demonstrates the possibilities for separating focalisation and diegetic position.

Of course, dead narrators like Nina also straddle an interesting line between worlds and between stories. Her position, everywhere and nowhere, means that she is immanently present within the narrative, but whatever place she inhabits now is enough of a nowhere to be unnarrated, and presumably unnarratable. Her comparisons of herself with Pip in *Great Expectations* – the classic example of an autodiegetic narrator – indicate that Nina is very concerned with bringing to our attention the ways that she differs from a person simply remembering his or her childhood as an adult. Like Pip, she should be a homodiegetic narrator, whose knowledge of events is informed by both his presence at the time and his retrospective distance. However, Nina describes herself in a way that replaces this autodiegetic shape with another model of presence and absence: “Shade of what was. I am that oddest of things, an absence now. A rumour, a shade within a shadow, a remembrance of a memory, my own” (10). The older Pip’s lack of a narrated present when he recounts his past is translated into Nina’s extradiegetic non-existence.

Sections of Nina’s narrative read like the ‘viewpoint of God’ and the novel suggests that a dead narrator can be totally indistinguishable from a conventionally omniscient narrator. This is a parallel which is drawn in a number of novels with dead narrators: *My Name is Red* places the mind-communication of the dead alongside the processes of reading for comparison; *Death of an Ordinary Man* implies that its apparently extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator is dead as, like the dead protagonist, Nathan, the narrator can read the minds of the other characters, as well as Nathan’s own mind. Concomitantly, these embedded minds (reflecting the embedding of levels of diegesis) open out to include the reader in the outer shell of mind-reading: Nathan reads the other, living, characters’ minds, the narrator is apparently dead too, given the access to Nathan’s mind, exposing all of them to the reader.

One part of the debate about the status of the narrator’s omniscience has focussed on what authors claim about their own work, and particularly how they view their own authorial power as Godlike, and their narrators’ power as coming

from that quasi-divinity.⁵⁸ Is this necessarily the best way of thinking about narration, though? And what if authors themselves are putting forward objections to this model? For instance, in an interview for Random House's online book group Amy Tan discussed her use of a dead narrator rather than the "highly respectable and neutral third-person omniscient voice" in *Saving Fish from Drowning*. She examines the advantages of her choice of narrator and, most significantly, suggests that there are some highly undesirable aspects of complete, Godlike omniscience, which cause tension between this ideal concept of knowledge and narrative's need for delay and concealment:

The fact of the matter is, ghost narrators are the ticket when you need a first-person voice with personality and an ability to comment on the thoughts and motivations of others. [. . .] Ghost narrators may have better hindsight, but they do not need to be any wiser than we are. [. . .] There are few other suitable candidates for first-person omniscient narrators. God might be one, but since God knows everything and may even *will* anything, he (or she) might give away the ending too quickly or intervene too soon before things can fall into a more delicious muddle. Delusional people are another possibility, especially if they think they are God. But you have to set up the parameters of their delusion carefully, and in most cases, the ending is formulaic: Either it was a delusion or absolutely real, as revealed by the psychiatrist who invariably takes over as narrator and gives the story an O. Henry kind of insight. Psychic mediums as conduits beaming into the consciousness of others are yet another possibility. But most people automatically dismiss psychics as flaky, and an obvious bid for a made-for-TV movie. No doubt about it, ghost narrators are simply the most acceptable of all the possibilities. (Amy Tan 'Author Q&A')

⁵⁸ The fullest example of this is Barbara Olson's *Authorial Divinity in the Twentieth Century* (1997) and her response to Jonathan Culler in *Narrative* 14.3. Meir Sternberg also conducts a quick survey of this territory early on in his article 'Omniscience in Narrative Construction' (709).

Among the interesting points Tan makes is her evocation of a kind of spectrum of omniscient possibility; between the “personality” of a first-person voice and a problematically omnipotent God, she can imagine a range of other alternatives, some more desirable than others. There is the implication in her observation that readers ask more questions about plausibility and about causality with homodiegetic narrators who access some level of omniscience in ways which just don’t seem to arise with the respectable and apparently easy option of heterodiegetic omniscience. This makes sense if we consider the problem from the perspective of authority, since Tan’s considerations about her choice of narrator are almost entirely based on their position of authority in relation to the reader. The same factors which cause her to reject the “flaky” psychics or the “delusional” narrators who believe they are God – and are consequently undermined – also make her want to favour ghost narrators who “do not need to be any wiser than we are”. There is something important in this balance between a complete lack of authority, which undermines the credibility of the narrator and the narrative, and an excess of authority, which gives rise to the problem of a narrator-God intervening to control rather than to tell the story. Tan does not identify herself as a god in her own creation, rather, her objections to the idea of a narrator who is associated with God implies that she rejects the idea of a God-narrator because of the way it would impinge on the authority that she attributes to the text itself in its independent “delicious muddle”.

This last is important, as it is central to the idea that these post-Barthes authors have a sense of their position in the afterlife, of their own deaths. This is reinforced by the way that the texts also construct their destination as somewhere in the afterlife as well: read, as we have seen, with the same kinds of extended afterlife knowledge as the narrators, but counter-balanced by a similarly tenuous hold on our own personhood, like Barthes’ destination for the text which “cannot any longer be personal” (“The Death of the Author”, 148). All the persons (author, narrator, characters, reader) related to a text are turned into conduits for the dead to speak through.

The dead narrator is therefore being explored as a better model of narrative omniscience which starts with a human being and adds things to it (rather than starting with God and taking things – like omnipotence – away): it is a concept that comes *after* and out of the idea of being a person. So, the dead narrator is a way that contemporary authors have responded to these ideas surrounding their own posthumousness, but have also developed as a functional model for extended knowledges that allows for the expression of a wider range of narrative possibilities. In the next section I want to examine this paradox of the end of personhood combined with the strength of these first-person narrative voices, in the context of experimental fictions in the twentieth century which deny the realist claims for the narrator as a person.

Omniscience and Humanity

Brian Richardson's study, *Unnatural Voices* (2006) aims to establish a theory of narrative for postmodern and avant-garde texts which strain the descriptive boundaries of conventional narratological models. The feature these works all have in common is their employment of "extreme forms of narration [that] seem to have been invented precisely to transgress fundamental linguistic and rhetorical categories" (ix). These narratives are determinedly non-mimetic, therefore bursting out of the boundaries of any narratology based on models from speech and life-writing like history and autobiography. At the beginning of his first chapter, Richardson summarises the context for his work with an illuminating quotation:

In 1954, Wolfgang Kayser warned that if we lost sight of the fact that the narrator is "someone" who "tells a story," the novel is dead: "The death of the narrator is the death of the novel" (34). As it would turn out, Kayser could not have been more wrong. Narrative literature was about to explode with a wide range of post-anthropomorphic narrators, while philosophy (soon to be followed by critical theory) was beginning its half-century assault on humanism. (1)

Richardson's study concentrates on narrators who exceed the boundaries of individual personhood by using the first-person plural in their narration, and other forms of multi-person narration which use multiple voices to suggest the blending and bleeding together of consciousnesses. One strand within this is dead narrators' capacity to blend, read, and merge minds. Like Richardson's multi-person narrators, the dead narrator throws into question the idea of the narrator as "someone" who tells a story: after the death of the narrator, the idea of this position as a function of the text as well as a person begins to be thinkable. The dead therefore occupy a space between God and man, but also between persons and non-persons.

Culler's reading of Sternberg's work leads him to a model for omniscience that also addresses these issues of the personhood of the narrator. He suggests that the latter's position is based on a misapprehension of the *humanity* of these textual constructs, and not so much of their quasi-divinity:

If we reject the view that all narrators are omniscient but variously keep quiet about what they know, then why are there only two options left, as in Sternberg's model: ordinary human limitations or else omniscience? Why is nothing in between? I think this is because Sternberg, like other theorists, assumes narrators to be persons and has only two models: mortal persons and a divine person. Narrators may be human agents or they may be divinely omniscient. (24)

Between the "mortal persons and a divine person" we have already established the idea of post-mortal post-persons as narrators. I believe that the dead narrator is precisely a figure for the problem of the arbitrarily extended (and limited) knowledge of the supposedly omniscient narrator, but also an investigation of this problem of personhood, as they refuse to fit neatly into the binary categorisation of "mortal persons and a divine person", taking a position at the very end of individual existence, and (as we saw in the previous chapter) tending to narrate the dissolution of their own personhood. The tension between their impossible

narration, and the question of whether their narration must, by necessity, end with their subjectivity, is central to the significance of the dead narrator.

In *Unnatural Voices*, Richardson argues very strongly in favour of a post-human and post-mimetic narratology that would always question the personhood of the narrator, as the texts he wants to discuss find him without a critical vocabulary which includes them:

[T]he concept of the narrator implies a certain minimal discursive consistency that many late modern and postmodern authors reject; we should have a place for shifting, depersonalized, multivoiced texts that transcend or traduce the sensibility of a single narrator. [. . .] For many postmodern authors [. . .] the death of the traditional narrator is the essential precondition for the creation of new forms with other, disparate, decentered voices. We should not insist on a humanistic frame to encompass overt narration, even if it was produced by a single human being. Structuralist narratology has performed a great service by revealing that characters can be conceived both as human-like entities and as textual functions. The same insight should be readily applied to narrators. (86)

The “death of the traditional narrator”, predictably, translates in the texts considered in this thesis into the death of these specific narrators. Their impossible voices straddle, as considered in Chapter 4, the most end-inflected positions that are taken up in non-fictional discourse, in various forms of life-writing, but are also, by their very impossibility, uniquely fictional. Richardson’s position is that, in attempting to describe fictions in the terms of speakable or writeable sentences, “narrative theory has tended to deny, ignore, or dismiss as inconsequential curiosities the very kinds of narration that are distinctively fictional” (76). Not that Sternberg is dismissive of experimental fiction, but one of his objections to the possibilities that Jonathan Culler sets out in ‘Omniscience’ (these are things like “the capacity to read the minds of animals [. . .] telepathic sympathy for the old and infirm [. . .] a narrator who can authoritatively describe the thoughts of men but not of women” [26]) is that, while we can imagine them as possibilities, they are so

uneconomical in terms of the effort involved in both reading and writing them, that they go unrealised as sustained fictional examples. Even the benefits of defamiliarisation are not sufficient to make these experiments worthwhile, and therefore a narratology which takes in these kinds of imaginary examples is also unnecessary. Richardson's study offers a range of experimental fictions which do seem to call for a new kind of descriptive narrative theory to identify movements and similarities in their techniques.⁵⁹ Like Richardson, I have found that the texts I have been reading are not well served by some aspects of the critical framework available to me, and I have found that literary experimentation is certainly ahead of the narratological concepts for discussing these issues of personhood and omniscience with the dead narrator.

Culler's original article from 2004 draws on the work of Richard Walsh to suggest that we can dispense with the fiction of the omniscient narrator unless a character is specifically designated as such, because the qualities of the narrator do not need to be assigned to a person. In Culler's summary of Walsh: "we don't need to postulate a narrator to account for instances of omniscience, since what is in question is not something that a person can know anyway" (30). Inferring a narrator, giving this person super-human powers, and then going into critical contortions to explain them does suggest there may be problems with the model.

Richard Walsh's contribution to the problem of the narrator in 'Who is the Narrator?' (1997) marks an important early point in the discussion, as the wider critical concept of the narrator begins to be interrogated beyond classificatory descriptions of different narrating possibilities. For me, the unusual and useful aspect of Walsh's argument is his explanation of the reasons for our acceptance of the idea of a narrator when, as he convincingly demonstrates, it is not a necessary structuring principle of narrative. Walsh observes:

⁵⁹ For instance, he is particularly interested in what he terms "pseudo-third-person narratives" so, texts like Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Ian McEwan's *Atonement* or Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* which start off looking like conventional third-person narratives, only to reveal their narrators' real diegetic position (10). This is similar to the shift in Glen Duncan's *The Death of An Ordinary Man* or Neil Jordan's *Shade*, which forces us to read all third-person, heterodiegetic narrators as a possible dead person.

[T]he narrator's promotion from representational accident to structural essence has occurred specifically in response to the qualities of fiction, not narrative per se [...] because the narrator [...] functions primarily to establish a representational frame within which the narrative discourse may be read as report rather than invention. (496)

In promoting the narrator from an ontological level of fiction to one of real existence, the narrative discourse is promoted from invention to report in the same gesture. Furthermore, the relationship of the reader to the narrator is consequently altered, since, "by conceiving of a fictional narrative as issuing from a fictional narrator, the reader has cancelled out its fictionality, negotiated a mode of complicity with representation, and found a rationale for suspension of disbelief" (496). This is exactly the reading of fiction in the terms of non-fiction – in the form of life-writing – that Richardson complains of, and which the dead narrator's unnatural voice (among many others Richardson identifies) precludes.

By finding an explanation for the narrative which provides a reporting rather than creating voice, the reader has a fiction of origins which places the narrative's source with the narrator rather than the author. Using Dorrit Cohn's terms from *Transparent Minds* (1978), there is a "live center" of the work which convinces readers of the reality of the representation, with a "live" as opposed to a "created" being. What could be more subversive of the living, speaking presence of the narrator than substituting a dead voice and undermining the "rationale for suspension of disbelief" which the narrator provides? Walsh's argument goes much further in discrediting the idea of the omniscient narrator as a unique structural entity. In answer to his question 'Who is the Narrator?' Walsh asserts that the narrator "is always a character who narrates or the author. There is no intermediate position. The author of a fiction can adopt one of two strategies: to narrate a representation or to represent a narration" (505). I believe that narration from the afterlife forces this categorisation to the surface by combining the characteristics of authorial omniscience with those of a fictional character narrator, as well as affecting the relationship between the levels of diegesis within the text.

Providing an explanation for the knowledge of a character whose voice has all the features of one usually outside the representational frame of narrative, but whose patently fictive status places him or her inside it, should cause a problem for the reader's suspension of disbelief. The fact that there can be "no intermediate position" between an all-knowing or all-creating author who exists outside the represented narrative, and the created narrating character inside the narrative is what causes the dissonance in the position of an omniscient 'person', particularly the dead omniscient 'person' who speaks only in fiction.

So, does a narrator know things or is this actually a tool for concealing the author's power to create this knowledge? Have we really become more comfortable with a narrator's super-powers than a text created by an author? Culler observes, "artistic choices are obfuscated when transformed into decisions of an imagined narrator" (25). The narrator as character is therefore not a useful fiction, but actually stops us from talking about important features of narrative. Culler's position in *Structuralist Poetics* (1971) was an objection to the "naturalization" of the narrator into a character. Audrey Jaffe summarises his argument in a significant way, describing how character-ising the narrator means "humanizing writing and making personality the focal point of the text" (1991: 3). Is the storytelling voice something fundamentally non-human, with its strange powers and lack of a coherent identity? Categorising the narrator as a character leaves us with an ill-fitting and too-easily dismissed humanity for this problematic feature.

There are two related issues here which mean that the dead narrator has advantages as a way for fiction to enter into this debate. Firstly, it examines the place of divinity when we call narration omniscient, secondly, it plays with the idea of the personhood of the narrator. The dead narrator therefore mediates somewhere between divinity and humanity, but also between omniscience simply as a function of narration and a quality belonging to a person.

In the second part of this chapter I want to explore two models for the narrator's extended knowledge into the minds of characters, each of which places the emphasis on the limitations of this knowledge. If the dead narrator is exposing

the narrator's problematic position between character and author, and between supposed person and textual construct, the exposure of the limitations of his or her knowledge as arbitrary is extremely significant. It is also important that both these two models of extended mind-knowledge (which begin with the idea that it is antithetical to ordinary interactions between persons) are heavily inflected with thinking about the dead, indicating a wider association between dead people and the narrator, which begins to turn these texts in an explicitly metafictional direction.

Omniscience and Transparency

In *Of Christian Doctrine* Augustine observes that language is a system of signs "which living creatures show one to another for the purpose of conveying, in so far as they are able, the motions of their spirits, or something which they have sensed or understood" (II.2.3). In heaven, language is obsolete and "our thoughts [. . .] shall be visible to all" (*The City of God*, XXII.29. 6), a position Augustine supports with the verses from Corinthians which state that God "will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts" (1 Corinthians 4:5), and with the argument that the beatific vision will turn everyone's thoughts towards God anyway: making hearts clear and legible by making them identical. The only thing to read through heavenly mind-reading is a profound and eternal love for God, which goes hand-in-hand with the dissolution of individual will and identity. These visible thoughts translate easily into the "transparent minds" of Dorrit Cohn's study of the "narrative modes for presenting consciousness in fiction," as the subtitle of her study, *Transparent Minds* (1978), expresses it.⁶⁰ This section concerns the place of the knowledge of the thoughts and feelings, the internal worlds of other people, beginning with the metaphor of transparency of hearts and minds. The distinction between reading the mind and seeing the heart is a significant one in terms of both the Augustinian sense of legible minds in heaven and the literary concept of transparent minds that are

⁶⁰ The comparison could be even more explicit if we refer to John Burnaby's translation of a passage in *On the Psalms* which describes how the beatific vision will mediate between individuals in heaven so that "the hearts of all will be transparent, manifest, luminous in the perfection of love" (44:33, translation qtd. in Burnaby [249]).

exposed to narration. The difference here is that the visible thoughts are open to those who feel the same: other souls in heaven who, according to Augustine, have no need for language and no thoughts or feelings to communicate anyway, other than the perfection of love. In contrast, transparent minds are there to be read and to be narrated (and read a second time by the readers of fiction). One potential role for the dead narrator is as a mediating agent between these two concepts of transparency. The first is more clearly allied with the dead, and relies on the emotional resonance between people, the second has a scientific heritage in its vocabulary from optics and the technology of extended human vision, from binoculars and telescopes to microscopes, x-rays and modern scanning technology like MRIs and EEGs. This division between technological and supernatural omniscience intersects with a second division between visible thoughts and transparent minds: the former transmit their luminous perfection wordlessly, while the latter involve translating thoughts into words. The four permutations of technology/supernatural forces, and reading/feeling, will be explored in the next two sections of this chapter, which are concerned with ideas about omniscience that are clustered around transparency and telepathy. At first, these seem to be most clearly associated with technology and the supernatural, respectively. However, as we have already seen, with reference to transparency, the picture is more complex than this and the boundaries between modern technology and the supernatural are easily blurred.

In *Transparent Minds*, Dorrit Cohn suggests the representation of both thoughts and secret feelings is the distinguishing feature of fiction in narrative form, as what she calls its “special life-likeness [. . .] – as compared to dramatic and cinematic fictions – depends on what writers and readers know least in life: how another mind thinks, another body feels” (5-6). In the theatre or the cinema the viewer can inhabit the ghostly position of the disembodied spectator, yet narrative fiction’s defining difference is in the view into another consciousness, which is also associated with a degree of posthumousness for the one doing the viewing. The crucial paradox in Cohn’s observation is that this special life-likeness is not only

very much unlike the way we interact with people in ordinary life, but it is also achieved with immense artifice.

A novel like *The Driver's Seat* that deliberately avoids this special life-likeness of transparent minds offers a decreased sense of verisimilitude: its refusal of the techniques for narrative's "special life-likeness" makes it seem less like life, even when the narrator's knowledge is more faithful to the human experience of other minds. Why should this be? As discussed earlier in this chapter, one of the phenomena associated with narrators is that they are assumed to be people when we are reading. They are not read as just a camera or a disembodied, describing consciousness, but as a fully realised person. This is one explanation for the expectation that narrators should offer some level of attribution for the motives of characters and description of their feelings. We would expect a person to make these attributions and assumptions about thoughts and motivations as they relay events to us, in their own version of reading. Just as attributions about cause and effect make events into a narrative at the macro-level, at the micro-level the narrator makes attributions of emotional and logical causes for observed behavioural effects. Without them, the narrative seems stilted or inhuman, like an artificial intelligence failing the Turing test. As we have seen, the reading of the narrator as a person has all kinds of unintended consequences that narrative theorists are trying to untangle but, for now, it is enough to see the dead narrator as a measure that allows for some awareness of the weirdness of the concept of the omniscient narrator to filter into the reading experience. Dead narrators continue to be just human enough to continue to narrate, and to make attributions about behaviour and emotion, but distanced enough from human concerns to throw up the deeply alien qualities of a narrator who is *not* a person. When posthumousness is the justification for the transparency of hearts and minds, it exposes the fact that this is not the case for the majority of narrators, and highlights the weak point in behavioural attribution as an explanation for omniscience: guessing someone's motives is not the same as knowing what they are thinking.

However, it is not only the attribution of personhood to the narrator which reveals a paradox; Cohn goes on to observe, "the novelists most concerned with the

exact representation of life are also those who place at the live centers of their works this invented entity whose verisimilitude it is impossible to identify" (6). In the texts examined here, the invented entity at the live centre of the most life-like of fictions is a narrator who is revealed to have always shared attributes with the dead. The end point of this position comes in the subcategory of narrators whose posthumousness is either revealed as the final twist in the tale, or remains ambiguous. An example of the latter case, in which the dead narrator's powers are functionally indistinguishable from an ordinary narrator's capacity to see into minds and histories, is Vladimir Nabokov's *Transparent Things* (1972). The novel's narrator is a mysterious individual (part of a group with similar capabilities) who sees through both people and things to tell the story of a proof-reader named Hugh Person. In an interview Nabokov disclosed the "solution" to this mysterious puzzle which he described as "so simple that one is almost embarrassed to furnish it," namely, that the narrator is one of the characters, the author Mr R., whose death is reported during the story (1974: 194). Within the text itself, the hints are limited to verbal tics, like his fondness for addressing people as 'son'. The state of the dead is rule-governed –for instance, they are not permitted to interfere in the outcome of events on earth – but their perception is extended and unusual:

When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment.

Transparent things, through which the past shines! (7)

The narrator's posthumous perception of the world is characterised by the transparency of objects and of time itself, leading to a qualified omniscience: in the demonstration of these powers that follows the description above, the narrator pursues an "act of attention" towards a pencil (12), demonstrating his ability to see back in time to the pencil's creation and its origins in a forest and a graphite mine. However, the story of the pencil is a result of a narratorial compromise in where to direct this vision: "Thus the entire little drama, from crystallized carbon and felled pine to this humble implement, to this transparent thing, unfolds in a twinkle. Alas

the solid pencil [. . .] still somehow eludes us!" (14). The transparency metaphor therefore moves off in a new direction, resulting in a reading of transparent historical time as well as space, but new rules and restrictions are placed on its workings as a bar to total omniscience and premature revelation of plot details. This has a similar end result to the retrospective knowledge of all events from the afterlife that we have encountered in previous chapters.

The limits that are imposed on the novel's narrator and his kind are partly emotional, to the extent that they need a certain amount of personal investment in the world's transparent things in order to select and attend to the vast range of information available. The narrator's tangential relations to Person allow him access for the purposes of composing a report about Person's life:

Now we have to bring into focus the main street of Witt as it was on Thursday [. . .]. It teems with transparent people and processes, into which and through which we might sink with an angel or an author's delight, but have to single out for this report only one Person. (48)

Both angels and authors can see into the people in this street, and their supernatural capacity for entering the minds of others is identical. Despite the closeness of the narrator to both angels and authors, in this situation he is a third kind of being within the text: he is still a character and still a human being, even if he is no longer a person.⁶¹

The transparency of objects, of things, extends to people and to their emotions in an extremely materialist way. The narrator can see through Person's abdomen to what he ate for dinner ("A mess of sprouts and mashed potatoes, colorfully mixed with pinkish meat" (104) – where is the light coming from to colour this digesting meal?), and the "shallow hollow on a pillow as seen through a person's forehead, frontal bone, rippling brain, occipital bone, the back of his head and its black hair" (105). This transparent head and transparent brain imply a very

⁶¹ Nabokov, not unexpectedly, makes some play with Mr R.'s identity and his own in *Transparent Things*. For example, he describes how "some of the less demanding reviewers in his adopted country [. . .] call him a master stylist" (29), and an incidental character in one of R.'s novels is called Adam von Librikov ("the entire combination a sly scramble", 78).

material approach to omniscience, raising the possibility of the x-ray or the MRI scan as conceptual models for us today. The narrator of *Transparent Things* can, however, reveal more than an MRI scan, as he reads minds with the techniques of the conventional omniscient narrator, including free indirect discourse and thoughts reported like speech. Soon after we have learned the state of Person's digesting dinner, for example, we are informed, "Person visited the bathroom, emptied his bladder, and thought of taking a shower, but she could come any moment now – if she came at all!" (104). There is no justification in the transparency of bodies as objects for this level of specificity in the viewing and the conveying the very words and sentences passing through Person's brain.

The main character's name, Person, masks his status among these objects as a generic person, a transparent thing, which can be penetrated in exactly the same way as a pencil or a pillow, but the narrative also extrapolates knowledge of his thoughts from this without explanation. This highly materialist approach to transparency yields a sense of omniscience which makes no distinction between the knowledge of another time and the knowledge of another consciousness – this is presented as brain scanning, rather than a vision of transparency into a heart or soul – yet it smuggles over the narrator's bag of tricks for omniscience under the cover of this physical explanation. Despite the unexplained elements of supernatural knowledge here, the transparency mostly transforms a static and unexplored narrative omniscience into a dynamic process of altered vision, which seems to extend an existing sense in limited and particular ways, rather than with a more generalised extra-sensory perception whose limits are unexplained.

There is certainly a history for this self-conscious attention to the techniques of narrative omniscience in terms of optical technology, which offers a materialist rather than a supernatural slant to the proceedings. In Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759), eighteenth-century technology does not allow for the viewing of living hearts, still beating, and living brains firing synapses on a computer screen, but Tristram is eager to find a similar metaphor for the same fictional vivisection. Tristram imagines "the fixture of Momus's glass, in the human breast" and notes that, before writing the emotions of others: "had the said glass

been there set up, nothing more would have been wanting, but to have taken a chair and gone softly, as you would to a dioptrical bee-hive, and look'd in, – view'd the soul stark naked [. . .] then taken down your pen and ink and set down nothing but what you had seen and could have sworn to" (59). Tristram deals with the problem of representing the internal life of his uncle Toby, when in ordinary discourse the motivations and feelings of others are so obscured. The metaphors he uses for this problem are implicitly based in transparency: "Our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapt up here in a dark covering of uncrystalized flesh and blood" (60). This means that he has to depict Toby by his behaviour and his hobbyhorses; by extrapolating and inferring from behavioural effects to their emotional causes. Tristram's unconcerned transition from a mechanical, dioptrical soul to a shining and crystallised mind could suggest two different kinds of transparency. One, in the way of Nabokov's narrators, suggests an almost scientific efficiency: perhaps the world would work better if we could read what is happening inside everyone else through "one fine transparent body of clear glass" (1759: 60). The other, like Augustine's visible thoughts, simply shines out of the body by supernatural (rather than mechanical or prosthetic) workings.

There is no evidence here that Tristram makes any distinction in the transparency processes for the heart, for the soul, or for the mind, but there are, conventionally, some differences in translating thoughts and feelings onto the page. In *Transparent Minds* Cohn makes very delicate work of exploring the different techniques for turning consciousness inside out and putting it into words, moving from something internal to the legible and external order of grammar and sentence structure. The term consciousness is expansive enough to take in these ideas of the heart, the soul and the mind, and the focus on consciousness in fiction rather than other, more word-centred concepts (like thinking) is especially useful because it allows for the idea of a translation between media, and a mismatch between written representation and consciousness itself. Even if there are internal grammars and languages of the mind, these are not the same as their representation in narrative form.

At the beginning of *Transparent Minds*, Cohn refers to the dioptrical beehive passage from *Tristram Shandy* to demonstrate the idea of transparency quite generally, but it is also a good example of this problem of translating thoughts or feelings onto the page. When Tristram imagines looking through the glass, what he sees is the soul “loose in her frisks, her gambols, her capricios” and the observation of “all her maggots from their first engendering to their crawling forth” (59). The view into the soul yields a crop of concretised metaphors, from a galloping heartbeat to the worm of sin, rooted in words and in figures of speech, which attests to a rather complicated relationship between language and the soul. Tristram does not seem to notice this would still leave him to make inferences from the behaviour of the soul which, although it might be less likely to deceive him than the behaviour of the person, would still return him to his behaviourist approach (does a maggoty, sinful soul look different if its cause is lust or if it’s murder?) rather than hearing or reading a direct, explanatory truth.

Cohn notes that there had previously only been two approaches to the study of the narrative depiction of consciousness: studies of the techniques of the stream of consciousness, and studies which “apply to the techniques for presenting consciousness the model of the techniques for quoting spoken discourse” (10). In both there can be some acknowledgement that words are not sufficient for representing even the verbalised level of consciousness, let alone the overwhelming sensory experience of embodiment. One of the issues raised by the dead narrator is the inadequacy of narrative to reproduce human experience, of being and being *in* a body, by the way that processes of narrating consciousness can function virtually unchanged for one of the incorporeal dead. The problem here for the very materialist, dead mind-readers of Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading* is that if they can read minds by reading brains, what is it that they in turn are doing their disembodied thinking with? Cohn touches on these problems of sensory experience and bodily consciousness which arise when trying to account for the “non-verbal realm of consciousness” As she points out, the original coinage of the term “stream of consciousness” by William James was meant to take in all the other

“mind stuff” of images, feelings, and non-verbal thoughts, indicating that confining these ideas to words alone is inadequate (78).

Perhaps, though, Tristram’s window sees the things in the soul which are separate from those conventionally formed into speech in the mind and quoted as free indirect discourse, or the fragmentary moments of verbalisation surfacing in a narrative stream of consciousness. What if the soul (or the heart, or the subconscious) works in these wider non-specifics of colour, shape and symbolic image? When the dead narrator of *Hotel World*, Sara Wilby, sees into a living stranger’s head she finds him “considering knives and blood” rather than being able to quote the particulars of his thoughts (27). Similarly, in a passage from Amy Tan’s *Saving Fish from Drowning* I will discuss below, the narrator sees the emotions of people around her as “schools of colorful fish” floating past (34), rather than as sentences or even words.

This distinction between words and verbal consciousness on the one hand and images and more general emotions on the other is important here, because it exposes the weak point in the easy connection I made at the beginning of this section between heaven’s visible thoughts and narrative fiction’s transparent minds. Generally, heavenly transparency comes about through everyone feeling the same thing and through the purgation of language as a force for separating individuals, or through barriers breaking down between individual souls, as in Amy Tan’s Buddhist afterlife. For dead narrators, then, there are some problems in using eschatology from any religious tradition.

Dead narrators do not achieve transparency in the afterlife by extinguishing their sense of self, and this desire for both omniscience and personality is very significant. In terms of the metaphors of transparency, Dorrit Cohn identifies “fundamentally different optics” in the knowledge a first person narrator displays of their own past self, and the knowledge of an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator for a world full of minds and objects: her comparison is of Proust’s telescope with Stendhal’s mirror (144), suggesting the “different optics” involved in using an instrument to survey across the distance of time and to reflect the world as it is. Dead narrators are in a unique position, therefore, to combine the mirror

and the telescope, as their position is one of complete retrospection, but also deictic separation from the world they are observing. Following on from the observation of self-narration's different optics, Cohn suggests that the omniscient narrator's mirror is there to fill a gap in our capacity to narrate for ourselves: "Infancy and death point up the most obvious limitations imposed on self-narration by the figural identity of hero and historian" (144). These are the most obvious, but there are other times when we don't know our own minds or cannot articulate our own motivations, and that is when another narrator can step in. At the beginning and the end of life the heterodiegetic narrator comes into his own, to narrate these states in which we are human, but our status between person and object (in law and in language) is beginning to be uncertain.⁶² However, these are also the states in which narrators can combine aspects of self-narration's positions and privileges with those of an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator. Muriel Spark's short story 'The First Year of My Life' (1975) for example, begins with the premise that "all of the young of the human species are born omniscient" (341). Similarly, the expanded moments before death yield a mix of character and omniscience which is the same in the dead narrator. All these states involve recognisably human beings combined with limitations on activity in the world, which seems to be matched by heightened sensory powers. Babies, dying people and dead people in the afterlife are half in the world and half out of it, not fully engaged in living, and therefore have increased powers for narrating.

One of the earliest narratives to feature a dead narrator, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), sees Addie Bundren's process of dying narrated by the novel's other voices, but it is only once she is dead that she speaks for herself. The novel investigates the dynamics of human and divine omniscience, in a textual world that has been purged of any omniscient, heterodiegetic presence. This is reflected in terms of the plot, as Addie is accused of placing her illegitimate son, Jewel, above God; of privileging humanity over divinity. Addie's neighbour, Cora Tull, believes she has "closed her heart to God and set that selfish mortal boy in His

⁶² Cohn's examples of the impossibility of first-person narration of death include Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilych* and Broch's *Death of Virgil*, suggesting that someone else needs to take over narrating the process of dying, rather than narrating being dead.

place" (132). Addie apparently lacks the transparent heart of one of the righteous, and has substituted a human being for God. The consequences for the narrative's substitution of human beings for a God-like narrator mean that the characters themselves begin to display some of these qualities. Addie's son, Darl, is able to narrate Addie's death from miles away, and can talk to his sister "without the words" (25). According to Cash, Darl's brother, Darl's eventual madness comes from not being able to "see eye to eye with other folks" (185). Darl literally can't "see eye to eye with other folks" because he is operating with knowledge beyond human sensory experience. Our model of narrators on the borderline between worlds, and of positions not fully engaged in living still holds true here: Cash's final judgment on Darl's madness and a future without him is to conclude, "This world is not his world; this life his life" (208).

Transparency therefore offers us a way into thinking about possibilities for 'limited omniscience' – however contradictory that sounds – and exposes some of the associations between seeing into other people and having a place outside the world, like the extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator, to do that seeing from. In contrast with the idea of telepathy, which we shall come to next, transparency offers the option of observing things which do not or cannot take the form of words, like the capricious and gambols of the soul imagined by Tristram Shandy, and which then have to be translated into words.

Omniscience and Telepathy

The peculiar and unsettling aspects of omniscient narration are well-represented in Nicholas Royle's "The 'Telepathy Effect'", the essay in his study *The Uncanny* (2003) in which Royle explicitly establishes telepathy as an alternative model to narratorial omniscience. In Amy Tan's description of her thought processes in deciding on a ghost narrator, one of her early alternatives was a psychic, indicating that dead narrators are answering the same need in the text for an investigation into the properties of omniscience. Psychics and telepathy are also the models that immediately spring to mind for the protagonist of Glen Duncan's *Death of an Ordinary Man*. When the main character, Nathan, first realises he can read people's

thoughts, at his own funeral no less, the stream-of-consciousness narration takes us inside Nathan's mind in turn:

Thought fragments picked up and skirled: telepathy Uri Geller ouija boards ghosts listening those cards with shapes on them circles or crosses and someone trying to think them to someone else mind reading maybe gypsies incredible can't be but you just did it read your son's mind and all of science therefore in the dark. (13)

The dead protagonist associates his mind-reading with the mind-reading and cards with shapes on them of clairvoyants and psychics. However, these circles or crosses on paper are as much the paper we have in our hands in the form of the text itself, and the mind-reading is happening as we read. This idea that "all of science is therefore in the dark" is at the centre of the conflict between classical narratology's attempts to categorise the narrator's supernatural knowledge and narrative conventions which always have something of the uncanny and unfamiliar about them.

Earlier, in *Telepathy and Literature* (1990), Royle gives an account of various aspects of the "reading mind" his subtitle identifies, and takes a more historically situated view of these topics. Between the two books, Royle discards the terminology of the reading mind/mind-reading, which indicates a shift and clarification in the idea of telepathy as it firms up into a theoretical tool. In *Telepathy and Literature* Royle gives the etymology of telepathy as "distance-feeling", which indicates its potential to stretch across both time and space, and to take in concepts related to foreknowledge and prophecy, as well as awareness of events happening across distances in space. However, this seems to me quite different from mind-reading, which not only implies thoughts as words to a certain extent (in contrast with the *feelings* of telepathy), but also an active process on the part of the mind-reader, rather than being a passive receiver of telepathic transmissions. This is the distinction between Cohn's transparent minds and Royle's telepathy, and it is the power relations involved in telepathy which will most concern me here. Given that telepathy can claim to "[open] up possibilities of a humbler, more precise, less religiously-freighted conceptuality than does

'omniscience', for thinking about the uncanniness of what is going on in narrative fiction", these power relations do have a bearing on the idea (261). This terminology is "humbler" on the part of narrative theorists, but also involves a humbling of the narrator: the telepathic narrative is not freighted with omnipotence in the way that omniscience is.

Telepathy also has affinities with the kinds of distance-feeling across both time and space which we have seen at work in the narratives from beyond the grave and their disturbances to cause and effect. Royle quotes Derrida's essay 'Telepathy', with the suggestion that reading works much like telepathy as we imagine things, "as if we were late with respect to that which has already happened to us in the future, / the one which foresees us / and by which I sense us predicted, anticipated, snapped up, called, summoned from a single casting, a single coming" (qtd. in Royle, 1990: 13). This makes Peter Brooks's anticipation of retrospection into another form of telepathy, as readers have to anticipate or recollect themselves, in the present and the future, to make sense of a narrative. In exactly the same way, the layering of times constructed by Derrida in 'Telepathy' means that they collapse, reducing distances and making telepathy into foreknowledge and memory. When the present exists as the past's prediction, even as it is abandoned and made into the past in favour of an anticipated future, the "distance-feeling" of telepathy becomes more than relations between separate minds in the present, and becomes part of a communication within a divided subjectivity.

This telepathic casting forward to feel the future from the distance of the present involves imagining ourselves "as if we were late", and telepathy is therefore also related to the afterlife. We saw with transparency that its origins as a conceptual model for narrative omniscience had roots in both modern technology and in the supernatural qualities of the dead. Telepathy is no different. Royle's work places the emergence of the idea of telepathy among the psychic phenomena linked to Victorian spiritualism, and therefore a result of the nineteenth century's changing religious practices. One element of this was a belief in a heaven which was centred around the continuation of life, and which privileged family reunifications and the continuation of marital and social relationships. This also

went hand-in-hand with faith that the dead had the inclination and the capacity to contact the living (1991: 3). Elsewhere, Royle comments that telepathy is “closely linked to the so-called decline of Christianity in European and North American culture: a belief in telepathy, in the late nineteenth century, often (though by no means always) appears to have provided a kind of substitute for a belief in God” (1995: 71).

In contemporary fiction, narratives of the afterlife have the potential to play a similar role in an equivalent modern dynamic of the secularisation of religion into fictions which serve a consolatory purpose. For instance, Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* plays into an American sentimental tradition of writing about the afterlife, inheriting from nineteenth-century bestsellers like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Gates Ajar* (1868) an almost wish-fulfilment model of a heaven which, in Sebold’s novel, intersects with an afterlife without a god, but which instead values individual self-development. The next step for an afterlife imagined in entirely human terms is the narrative model of the self-help group, taking the plot of the spiritual autobiography and making it a secular story of self-realisation. In this context, the dead narrator represents the transfer into human terms of the things we find useful for narrative in the idea of God (omniscience, a position outside the world, and so on): as in spiritualism, dead people are a substitute for God, and their telepathy replaces the aspect of God most prominent in narrative.

Jonathan Culler offers Royle’s concept of telepathy as a resolution to the problems he identifies in more established ideas about omniscience describing it as having, “certain advantages, especially that of estrangement” (2004: 23). Meir Sternberg has countered this with the observation that not only is a “strong and strange God” the last word in the *unheimlich* (what is more *unheimlich* than God?) but also that this estrangement pre-supposes a norm (divine omniscience) against which telepathy functions (776). So, Sternberg argues, telepathy as a model for omniscience seems to accept divine omniscience as the norm for omniscience in narrative, and refuses to acknowledge any of the uncanny aspects of divine omniscience. For me, however, the major benefit of Royle’s idea is not estrangement, but the lack of hierarchy involved in this model of mind-reading,

making the process something that goes on between equals, rather than necessarily a manifestation of power relations. The elements of discipline and control manifested in omniscience are revealed in the connection Culler makes between Foucault's analysis of Bentham's panopticon and the omniscient narrator. Similarly, D.A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1988) associates the omniscient narrator with the constant observations at the heart of the disciplinary society, while Audrey Jaffe interprets the nineteenth-century omniscient narrator as "an appropriate mode for the age that developed statistical science, producing vast quantities of information, attributable to impersonal agencies, rather than institutions" (15). Later in this chapter I want to consider some elements of telepathy that Royle does not address, but which bring it closer to these properties of a surveillance society: things like wire-tapping or the submission of intercept evidence in court, which represent the more invasive edge of telepathy, and its associations with communication and surveillance technology.

At the end of Royle's essay on the "telepathy effect" he discusses the case of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and its telepathic narrator, Saleem. Taking into account that the novel was originally written as a third-person, omniscient narrative, Royle argues that its conversion into a first-person, telepathic narrative enacts the way that the narrator's knowledge has been rethought in recent times:

The very composition of *Midnight's Children* [...] dramatizes the untenability of 'omniscient narration'. What the novel instead offers is the metadiscursive trope of 'omniscient third-person' reconfigured as 'telepathic first-person' – in other words it demonstrates in a new, even unprecedented way the fundamentally telepathic (rather than omniscient) structure of fictional narration more generally. (2003: 269)

Depending on which aspects of *Midnight's Children* Royle is talking about, I think we can probably identify some precedents for the novel's telepathic narration. If it is the first-person aspect which is unprecedented, *Transparent Things* provides an earlier example; if it is specifically the replacement of omniscience with a technologically informed telepathy (like Saleem's "radio-receiver" powers) then

Muriel Spark's *The Comforters* (1957) addresses these issues from a variety of angles which I will address below. It is true, however, that Rushdie's novel combines these features in the most explicit way.

The historical intersection of telepathy and various communication technologies like the telephone and the gramophone, which involve the transmission and reproduction of voices across space and time, is a connection that Royle describes as "the establishment of tele-culture in general" (1994: 5). This combination of technology and telepathy has not gone unexplored in novels that investigate the idea of the mind-reading dead. For instance, film and television has a significant place in many of the afterlives in these novels, because it offers a way of observing events at a distance in both space and time, without intervention from the viewer.⁶³ The fiction in TV and film is that there is no eye through which the action is focalised, and the disembodiedness of the television camera's viewpoint is important to represent a position in the world without a person attached to it. However, the television is not really the kind of tele-technology Royle is interested in: his focus (understandably, for the historical period he has identified) is on voice recordings and transmissions of the gramophone and the telephone. The only author to explore this kind of technology in relation to the dead's telepathy is Muriel Spark, and Royle has discussed Spark's *Memento Mori* in terms of the telephone's uncanny associations in his essay in *Theorising Muriel Spark* (2002). However, the novel in which she investigates these connections most fully is *The Comforters*.

In the context of a reading of Raymond Chandler's *The Little Sister* in the light of these technologies of communication and telepathy (and of the detective plot's eschatology), Royle concludes that "the telephone is associated with concealment and unveiling, with the apocalyptic, with revelation in a religious sense [the telephone is] inescapably anthropomorphic, unsettling the very notions of voice and metaphor, it is wired up with uncanny revelation, the fantastical, and death" (1991: 167-168). These recording and transmission technologies are

⁶³ For instance, the afterlife of Robertson Davies's narrator, Connor Gilmartin, involves attending a film festival with his murderer and watching films of his ancestors. Thomas M. Disch's *The Businessman* features an afterlife in which television is more structurally important, and this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

therefore linked with both endings and death. However, the eavesdropping and surveillance aspects of narratorial telepathy in a novel like *The Comforters* are more like wire-tapping than a directed telephone conversation: the narrator is not like someone listening to voices recorded on a gramophone record or having a telephone conversation; he is more like a police officer listening to suspects' conversations after bugging their phone line.

In *The Comforters*, Spark imagines a situation in which a narrator's telepathy has become more like a genuine two-way exchange, rather than an exercise in concealed monitoring on the part of the narrator. At first the narrating voice seems just to be listening in on Caroline's thoughts, but the fact that she can hear the commentary alters the dynamic of this tele-relationship:

I think it is one person. It uses a typewriter. It uses the past tense. It's exactly as if someone were watching me closely, able to read my thoughts; it's as if the person was waiting to pounce on some insignificant thought or action, in order to make it signify in a strange distorted way. (62)

The voice is heralded by the sound of tapping on a keyboard, which indicates some overlap between this apparently omniscient narrator and the omnipotent author.⁶⁴ The second part of the quotation indicates that the relationship is far more complicated than someone writing, and therefore creating, her actions: Caroline does not believe the voice is *controlling* her actions, merely plotting them; rearranging them to signify in ways she doesn't intend. I will return to this in a moment, but the quality of the voices I want to consider first is their adherence to the shape and structure of narrative techniques for relaying thoughts:

It was the phrase 'Caroline wondered' which arrested her. Immediately, then, shaken as she was, Caroline began to consider the possibilities, whether the sounds she had heard were real or

⁶⁴ The sound of the typewriter is virtually the signature of metaleptic boundary-crossing. The device is used in a comparable way in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (discussed in Chapter Six) and was also a feature of the recent film *Stranger than Fiction*, which involved a character realising that he was being written and revolting against the writer who planned to kill him off. The sound stands in for authoring, coming intrusively from a next door room and from another world.

illusory. While the thought terrified her that she was being haunted by people – spirits or things – beings who read her thoughts, perhaps who could read her very heart, she could not hope for the horrible alternative. (45)

The phrase “Caroline wondered” casts suspicion on the next sentence, and forces us to question the motives of the voice narrating Caroline’s thoughts here, since both sentences follow the conventions for reporting thoughts like speech. The horrible alternative Caroline hopes to avoid is madness. Fortunately, we can confirm for Caroline that she is actually correct in her assertion that she is being haunted by spirits from another world (even from an afterlife, since we only read her story after it has been completed) because she is a fictional character.

What distinguishes this voice from other apparently telepathic narrators is that Caroline becomes telepathic too: she can hear what the voices are saying from outside her own world. When Caroline attempts to record some of the voices on a dictaphone the attempt is unsuccessful, depriving her of recorded evidence of what she is hearing, but suggesting a different relationship between hearing with the mind and the recording and replaying of voices. All of the manifestations of the voices she is hearing are non-physical, like the non-physical brains practising brain-scanning as mind-reading in Nabokov’s *Transparent Things*. Caroline’s telepathy is therefore operating just like the narrator’s.

One major argument against telepathy as a widely applicable substitute for omniscience is that, generally, the process is not reciprocal, and the detection of characters’ thoughts does not come with a reading of the narrator’s by the characters. *The Comforters* is very unusual in this regard, within the limitations of Caroline at least being able to overhear the narrator’s voice. However, she is not able to read the thoughts of this mysterious entity. Despite Caroline’s assumptions that the narrator is some kind of a person (from her listing of “Satan, a woman, hermaphrodite, a Holy Soul in Purgatory”), the evidence from her mind-reading of the narrator might indicate that the narrator has no thoughts beyond those expressed as the narrative itself: this apparent person is really only a textual

construct.⁶⁵ The advantages of estrangement that telepathy offers do suggest the injustice of this set-up, something which is not made obvious in the ordinary run of omniscience. Where *Midnight's Children* substitutes a first-person telepathic narrator for third-person omniscience, *The Comforters* offers a third-person narrator's telepathic relationship with a character, which identifies the reciprocity generally lacking in omniscience.

Where Caroline and the narrator have an unequal power relationship, there are also telepathic associations displayed between the characters which seem far more equitable. Caroline and her fiancée Laurence demonstrate telepathy – which is realised through the technologies of the tele-culture – when they simultaneously send each other identically worded telegrams. Neither is able to tell whose thoughts are being read, and this seems more like an ideal representation of wordless communion and empathy than the narratorial eavesdropping. For Caroline, however, this episode is also evidence of the voices going a step further in their control over her story. Until this point she has believed that the consciousness narrating and writing her life has really been controlling the plot, rather than the story; making her thoughts or actions signify, rather than controlling the actions themselves. At the point of the telegram, she begins to fear that her choices may not be under her control, and she feels it is “horrificing. Like predestination” (62). Telecommunications become the weak point at which life travels close enough to the mechanics of narrative fiction that the voices can cross over from omniscience into omnipotence, and begin to interfere with actions as well as tune in to thoughts.

In a similar way, at the end of the novel, it is a written communication that proves significant for our reading of the text as a whole, and closes the telepathic link between Caroline and the voices. The final paragraph of the novel sees both into the future and into Laurence's thoughts, with the narrator commenting: “He

⁶⁵ Mieke Bal argues in *Narratology* (1985) that attributing personhood to narrators means attributing the gender-neutral narrating 'I' with a gender that has no basis in the text. In her work, she identifies the narrator as “the linguistic subject, a function, and not a person, which expresses itself in the language that constitutes the text” (16). This quotation shows the consequences in pronoun usage. Caroline's identification of an ambiguously gendered narrator, and then a non-person narrator in the Holy Soul seems to be moving progressively away from assumptions about the narrator's person.

did not then foresee his later wonder, with a curious rejoicing, how the letter had got into the book" (223). There is so much strange telepathic activity going on in this single sentence. Not only is the narrator apparently surprised that Laurence is unable to see the future, but the sentence also demonstrates the ways that the narrator's own distance-feeling stretches across both space and time, telepathy and prolepsis. The letter, like the telegrams, seems to have been vulnerable to the machinations of this narrating consciousness, because we have read that it was torn up and scattered across Hampstead Heath, unread, but it has already "got into the book" *The Comforters* that we have just read. The contents of the letter is significant because it is the only evidence that we have that Caroline left her notes for her novel behind in a box when she went away to write. Bryan Cheyette reads this abandonment of her notes as evidence that she is "challeng[ing] the Calvinistic belief in predestination" and writing her own story (2002: 95). I find this a little problematic in the context of the end of the novel, in which Caroline's position is not that of a real person: she is *right* to think that her life has already been written for her and that she has no free will! Even if we read the end of the novel as Caroline going away to write her experiences for herself, her story of feeling like a character in a novel, and the plot she creates from it will influence each other in exactly the kind of looped causality that characterises the most convoluted double predestination. A person goes to heaven because he is one of the elect, his life was also sinless and perfect, but that was *because* he has always already been one of the elect: Caroline feels like a character in a novel because she is fictitious, she has also written a book with herself as the main character, but that was *because* she was already fictitious. The free will here just gets reflected back to a higher order of predestination so, even if Caroline ultimately becomes the autodiegetic narrator of the novel *The Comforters*, she is still a fiction.

One reading of *The Comforters* sees Caroline's malaise as the result of a heightened narrative sense, so the voices she hears are simply the manifestation of the "double I" of autobiography. At the beginning of the novel Caroline distracts herself from her over-active mind with a present-tense commentary on her actions:

She told herself 'I'm good at packing a suitcase', forming these words in her mind to keep other words, other thoughts, from crowding in. [. . .]'Shoes there. Books here. The comb-bag in that corner. Blouses flat on the bed. [. . .] I am doing what I am doing.' (36)

Even this self-narration requires telepathy; deliberate distance-feeling that opens up a crack in the self which is also an entry way to the afterlife. Caroline's self-narration moves into the past tense as one part of her advances after herself, is distanced again, and begins to experience everything as a form of *déjà vu*.

Conversely, as Caroline goes on to write about her own experiences in the form of a novel, the voices are also a precognition of her own future self writing the manuscript on the typewriter. In this reading of the text, too, the voices are a kind of spirit, of Caroline foreseeing herself and made late.

The Comforters imagines telepathy in the form of telecommunications and of bugging and intercepting these exchanges, but the other technological aspect of the idea is in transmission technology. Telepathy suggests the capacity to both send and receive messages in a way that mind-reading as a concept does not. In David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1997) the dominant tele-paradigm is the television, as the plot centres around control of a videotape which, once watched, renders viewers catatonic with pleasure, infinitely. The novel explores the threatening and problematic qualities of narration which has links to both the afterlife and to a transmission, rather than a communication or eavesdropping model of telepathy.

The structure of the novel involves a missing segment of time which comes after the end of the novel (which has a third-person narrator) and before the opening monologue of the main character, Hal. Instead, the final pages of the novel consist of endnotes to the text itself; forms of commentary and extra, supplementary knowledge which both extend and expose passages in the novel, without completing them. The novel is epic in scope and size, but it deliberately avoids the multi-faceted sense of many voices in a novel like *Ulysses*. Conversely, the novel also seems to refuse the complete omniscience of a monologic, authoritative omniscient narrator, deliberately leaving out the vital section between the end and the beginning of the novel and leaving the reader to piece

together what has happened. This interplay between the controlling, hyper-detailed realism which David Foster Wallace made his own and the deliberate abrogation of total narratorial omniscience leads to a text which is able to examine the consequences of a narrator's knowledge.

The key passage for a reading of the novel in terms of the afterlife comes towards the end of its 1000-plus pages, as Don Gately – the reformed addict whose attendance at AA meetings links the novel with afterlife narratives that focus on self-help similar to the twelve-step program (although always without the higher power): *The Lovely Bones* and *How the Dead Live*, for example – recovers from a gunshot wound in hospital and is visited by a “creepy ghostish figure” who describes himself as “just a generic garden-variety wraith” (829). The wraith is apparently the spirit of James Orin Incandenza: celebrated film-maker, Hal's father, and the novel's ghost figure in its play with *Hamlet*. Gately watches the wraith dancing on the ceiling, “doing what Gately would know were pirouettes if he'd ever been exposed to ballet” before the wraith enters into his head to direct his vocabulary in precisely that direction:

[I]nto Gately's personal mind, in Gately's own brain-voice but with roaring and unwilling force, comes the word PIROUETTE, in caps, which term Gately knows for a fact he doesn't have any idea what it means and no reason to be thinking it with a roaring force, so the sensation is not only creepy but somehow violating, a sort of lexical rape. (832)

Even as Gately's “brain-voice” is taken over with the words of another being who has the capacity to perceive this lack in his vocabulary and correct it, we are able to read his mind and see this process in action in the instant that Gately knows that his mind is being invaded. This becomes even more complex as “other terms and words Gately knows he doesn't know” flood into his head and “all of a sudden it occurs to Gately the aforethought EXTRUDING, STRIGIL and LEXICAL” are part of this legion of intrusive words (832). Earlier in the section, the narrative seemed to present Gately's description of his photograph of the president “when he used a strigil”, and the narrative is focalised through him as he watches the pirouetting

wraith looking like a “long stalk [. . .] that seems to extrude from the ceiling” (832). None of these words, which have been presented to us as if they were running through Gately’s mind, are actually his own. Even if he has a feeling (the “sort of lexical rape”) or observes but can’t name the action (the pirouette) these words are not the words in Gately’s ordinary brain-voice. If we are going to subscribe to the idea that people have thoughts which are words, then there could also be some thoughts they don’t have the vocabulary to express: is it lexical rape to substitute the words in a narration of their thoughts?

Rather than the wire-tapping suggested by Royle’s use of telepathy, or the reciprocal overhearing *The Comforters* suggests, Foster Wallace’s wraith seems able to both send and receive telepathic messages in this exchange with Don. He reads Don’s mind, but “apparently can’t tell the difference between Gately just thinking to himself and Gately using his brain-voice to sort of think *at* the wraith” (839), and is also able to insert his own words into Gately’s brain-voice. This is free indirect discourse in reverse as, rather than sampling characters’ brain-voices into the narrative, the wraith (who we will see can be associated with the narrator) inserts his own voice into the thoughts of the characters.

The other aspect of telepathy which is fully realised in *Infinite Jest* is the etymology of telepathy as feelings or pain at a distance: when Gately tries to move his arm the wraith “gasps and almost falls off the monitor as if he can totally empathize with the dextral flare” (839). This shared, rather than communicated, feeling is different from the telepathy exhibited by an ordinary omniscient narrator. Where the wraith does insert words into Gately’s mind, he is also present in the same world as him, making his mind-reading known and sharing Gately’s pain. This serves to point up the lack of these things for characters in texts with extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrators: they get all of what Gately describes (as far as his brain-voice can be said to be his) as the “ghostwords” appearing in their brain-voices, but none of the things Gately comes to appreciate: the “dialogue. The give-and-take. The way the wraith seemed to get inside him” (922, 923).⁶⁶

⁶⁶ This is particularly troubling if we read it in the context of Gately’s sort-of lexical rape earlier. It also invites a comparison on similar issues with divinity as a model for omniscience: gods have a worse record than ghosts for respecting the bodily or psychic integrity of human beings.

The evidence for the wraith, the ghost of James Orin Incandenza, as the dead narrator of Wallace's novel is fairly diffused throughout the text, including the accounts of his films given in the endnotes that match the descriptions of events that happen in the story itself. The ghostwords that appear in Gately's brain are crucial evidence in this reading. Some of the words are film-related, as we might expect given J.O.I.'s profession ("NEO-REAL CRANE DOLLY" and "CIRCUMAMBIENTFOUNDDRAMALEVIRATEMARRIAGE" are among these [832]) but others are related to the novel's plot and allusions to *Hamlet*: "LAERTES", "POOR YORICK" (832). At one key moment earlier in the novel, readers witness the narrator committing the same crime against Gately (and using tellingly similar terms) as the wraith. Describing Gately's view of the lonely addicts waiting outside the methadone clinic, the narrator makes it clear that the limitations of the character's language and knowledge need some intervention:

[I]f Don Gately had ever once seen a ballet he would, as an Ennet House resident, from his sunup smoking station on the fire escape outside the Five-Man bedroom upstairs, have seen the movements and postures necessary to maintain this isolation-in-union as balletic. (194)

This is the same process as the roaring, all-caps entry of PIROUETTE into Gately's brain by the wraith's telepathy. The narrator has no use for Gately as a person here, even though we are ostensibly in his position on the fire escape: from the alliteration of the "sunup smoking station" to the deliberate obliteration of Gately's thoughts in favour of the description of the "balletic" movements, narration turns Gately-the-man, or even Gately-the-character into nothing more than a point of view.

Even as telepathy removes the ultimate power differential between gods and men, there is not necessarily a more equitable relationship in its place. Its associations with the dead and with our own anticipated future lateness mean that its uncanny aspects are, at root, very threatening: as we saw in Chapter 4, the origins of the ghost story can be traced to survivor guilt, leading to a very unequal relationship between these potentially telepathic dead narrators and the

apparently real, live people in the stories they are telling. The dead narrator is a convenient locus for all these issues of embodiment, personhood, theology, focalisation, the uncanny, and power relations to come together to offer new, if uncomfortable, ways of thinking through the idea of the narrator.

Chapter 6

Here and Hereafter: Space and the Afterlife

The world is of . . . made of . . . what is, & isn't there. Because what isn't there – now – or, hasn't been there, yet – or you can't see . . . because you're earth – is there too. The center has to . . . be . . . the center of all that. That's god, but sometimes . . . anyone.

Close to me and Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven)

All through this study, I have been looking at the combinations of different points of view that dominate narrative engagement with the afterlife, from the conflict between human- and God-centred perspectives on the universe, to temporal positions and views of the past and present. When authors take narrative techniques which are honed for the realistic portrayal of life and use them against themselves in the service of a representation of another existence, or present a concept defined by eternity in a medium designed to explore and convey temporal experience, they are always bringing together multiple interpretations of the same events in a sometimes uneasy but often productive combination. For instance, when, as discussed in the previous chapter, dead narrators have all the qualities of both a character narrator and an omniscient narrator, there is an important sense in which they are sometimes both these things at once and sometimes more one than the other. The oppositions between the omniscient narrator's "point of view" which is completely outside the world and which can include all its details and secrets, and the situated, embodied perspective of a first-person narrator becomes easy to translate into a spatialised model. This constant shifting between and blending of two apparently mutually exclusive views can also be applied to other

aspects of afterlife writing, like the forwards and backwards memory at work in the *memento mori*. This chapter demonstrates how these paradoxical perspectives become concretised and assembled into narratives which use space and, more importantly, the representation of space as a way of showing the conflicts at the heart of narratives of the afterlife. Different representations of space are associated with human and divine experience, and with living and dead experience, and the impossible and paradoxical spaces of the afterlife itself are also opposed to the ordinary spaces of the world. The most prevalent means of investigating these aspects of spatial experience in contemporary narratives about the afterlife form main areas, indicating two broad ways of conceptualising worldly space. The first is through the visual arts, particularly ideas about linear perspective and framing, and the second is through mapping. These techniques for showing the world as it really is are tested to destruction by being put to use in fictional representations of the afterlife and its other kinds of space.

In narratives about the afterlife there are engagements with space and perceptions of it which play into concerns about person and narration, but they are also interested in the idea of deictic shift, or the difference between the world of the story and the world of the reader.⁶⁷ This is particularly significant when the world of the story is the Other World of life after death. However, omniscient first-person narrators like Bibi Chen in *Saving Fish from Drowning* occupy two kinds of space – of the narrator and the narrated – at once: she is quite firmly a person with a subjectivity and her own agenda, but is also not situated within the world because she is invisible, incorporeal, able to narrate scenes thousands of miles apart and able to read minds. This is beyond the double character-narrator of an autodiegetic narrative, since she is not narrating her own experiences, but telling the story of another group of people from outside their world.

The afterlife is another world that exists in fiction, which can either imply that all fiction has the same relationship to the world of the reader as the afterlife

⁶⁷ The terminology of deictic shift theory is taken from David Herman's *Story Logic* (2002), which describes "story worlds" in terms from cognitive science as "mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate – or make a deictic shift – as they work to comprehend a narrative" (9).

to the world, or establish multiplying fictional worlds which are not complete within themselves and can always be supplemented with another. The title of this chapter indicates the significance of these distinctions between the reader's *here* and the narrative's *there*, which are shaped by a sense of the afterlife as both a place, which exists as the Other World, alongside the one in which we (as readers, as living people) exist, but also as a time, which comes after life and the end of a narrative. Here and there always exist in parallel with before and after in conceptualising both the afterlife and narrative, because of conventions for establishing the narrative in a separate time and space from the readers' times and spaces. The afterlife is an unusual fictional space (and time, as discussed in Chapter 7) which allows for an investigation into the novel's techniques for representing space.

Perspective and Pictorial Space

In *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel* (1983), Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth argues that, "The consensus that unifies space and rationalizes sight in Renaissance painting has similar effects in realistic fiction where consensus unifies time and rationalizes consciousness" (24). For Ermarth, the agent of this consensus in the novel is the narrator. Central to Ermarth's argument about the consensus in the "conditions of perception" necessary for realist narrative fiction is the idea that there is some equivalence between the Renaissance painters' formulation of conventions for perspectival representation and the conventions of realist narration. According to her analysis, it is the extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator who brings about this consensus, but at the price of a loss of subjectivity or, in specifically physical terms, "disembodiment": "Questions about the identity or location of the past-tense narrator cannot be answered, because the narrator literally is nobody" (85). These apparently unanswerable questions about "identity and location" are at the heart of afterlife narratives' investigation of deixis for dead people. *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel* suggests that this body space vacated by an extradiegetic narrator is somehow filled by the reader or the viewer in order for the experience of space and time to transfer to us, through the conduit

of the narrator or the point of view in a painting. Moreover, the capacity of the narrator as an agent of consensus, mediating between multiple viewpoints at once, means that this interpretation of the action of perspective and the narrator is useful in these afterlife narratives which tend to be trying to write about one thing in the terms of another.

With this idea of the (dead, distanced, disembodied) narrator as the consciousness that serves to mediate all possible perspectives into one single vision, I want to return to Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* (1998), a novel which is set at the initial moment when the Renaissance's linear perspective is introduced to the illustrators of Istanbul, and which explores different permutations of the conventions of perspective and narration. Pamuk's novel takes in a huge variety of different voices, and the text invites a reading which draws parallels between pictorial art, narration, and both divine and posthumous omniscience. The traditional techniques of the novel's Ottoman illustrators involve painting from memory and imagination, from the perfect recollection of well-practised ideal forms, rather than from observation of the imperfect particulars around them. The illustrator Stork, one of the workshop artists under suspicion of murder, tells the story of the origins of the illustrators' use of the elevated perspective and the horizon line, and how this renaissance had occurred hundreds of years previously, when the Islamic artists were already painting in the apparently new, realist fashion which has just been introduced from Europe:

[T]he old Arab masters, perceiving the world the way the Frankish infidels do today, would regard everything and depict it from the level of a vagabond, mutt or clerk at work in his shop. Unaware of today's perspectival techniques, of which the Frankish masters haughtily boast, their world remained dull and limited, restricted to the simple perspective of the mutt or the shop clerk. (84)

Stork goes on to tell the story of the change in illustrative technique, describing how a master calligrapher looked down on Istanbul from a mosque's minaret as it was sacked by the Mongols in the twelfth century. The distinction of Islamic art comes from the calligrapher's view of the city which led him to make a "truly

agonising depiction of the world from the elevated Godlike position attained from drawing none other than a horizon line” (85). After the first, lowly paintings from the perspective of a mutt or a clerk, the perspective changed to this view from above, with a horizon line, but without perspective. According to Stork’s account, the Frankish artists seem to combine both the perspective of the mutt with the implications of other perspectives, with something less “dull and limited”. In contrast with the subjective or even allegorical composition of the traditional Ottoman artists in which the most important features of a scene (the mosque, the Sultan) are the largest, the Frankish perspectival practice means that the mutt and the mosque can occupy a space of exactly the same size on the page. This leads to accusations of blasphemy when the artists dare to draw, “from the perspective of a mangy street dog, a horsefly and a mosque as if they were the same size – with the excuse that the mosque was in the background” (191). The order in these illustrations that mimic the “infidel masters” is apparently human rather than divine, showing what we perceive, rather than the underlying patterning and significance that not only formed the traditional illustrators’ art but also reflected the world’s divine order.

Throughout the novel, the techniques of the Islamic miniaturists’ art are connected with divine point of view, which goes beyond just an elevated position from a tower above a city. The miniaturists paint a building “in cross-section as though having cut it in half with a huge, magical straight razor” in order to “replicate the piercing gaze of exalted Allah” (90) and Olive says, “Illustrating was the miniaturist’s search for Allah’s vision of the earthly realm, and this unique perspective could only be achieved through recollection after blindness descended” (97). There is no way of finding a place to stand in order to see with human eyes in the way that Allah would see, but there is some hope of rendering this vision on the page. The faculties of imagination and creation are therefore valued more, and associated more with divinity, than the techniques claiming to represent reality, that is, from a human perspective. The true view is the divine view. The renaissance in Islamic art is already history for Pamuk’s characters and the new introduction of European perspectival painting and portraiture seems to result in a

fracturing of viewpoints and the possibility of many different points of view rather than one divine perspective.

Samuel Edgerton's study, *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (1975) is significant here because he explicitly connects medieval art with a view centred on actual human experience, while the painting involving linear perspective had a viewpoint "elevated and distant, completely out of plastic or sensory reach" but with "a sense of harmony with natural law, thereby underscoring man's moral responsibility within God's geometrically ordered universe" (114). It was also the straight lines of linear perspective which reinforced the sense that these images represented both a realistic image of the earth and its relationship to a higher spiritual order across the whole universe. Linear perspective can therefore also be read as an attempt at conveying divine vision. In Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth's interpretation of Edgerton, this order and "coordination of disparates" which arises from transferring the many possible perspectives of a scene into a single two-dimensional image produces the "realist consensus" of neutral time and space (34). For me, the significant factor here is the involvement of the element of mediation, choosing a single, particular perspective rather than a perfect or universal one, so that our perception is mediated by the choice of a certain point of view. Ermarth's argument is that this implies other perspectives, and that these are in consensus with the reality presented: for instance, a chequered floor is perceived as being made of square tiles, even if the tiles are painted as various rhomboids to allow for perspective. The tiles "exist" as squares in a world with the same physical rules as our own outside the canvas, but they look like rhomboids on the flat surface of the painting.

This assumption that the space of a painting is continuous with the space outside, and congruent with our observing position, becomes very problematic when we encounter paintings which fail to conform to this perception. In analysis of Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and Andrea Mantegna's *St. James Led to Execution*, Margaret Wertheim shows how, in these paintings, the centre of projection for the scene does not match the viewer's perspective, the centre of projection being the position established by the perspective of the painting as the position of the viewer.

To view *The Last Supper* from its centre of projection you would need to be about fifteen feet tall, while Mantegna's painting implies a viewer in a pit below the fresco. In her study, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* (1999), Wertheim argues that this has implications for our understanding of space, when art can give us the experience of disembodiment and we can project some seeing part of ourselves outside the physical space of our bodies. Wertheim's interpretation sees this having far-reaching effects for philosophy:

Without any conscious intention, perspective artists thereby succeeded in circumventing the strictures of Aristotle, and in a very powerful way they rendered the idea of extended void space real and palpable. In many ways this achievement is their most lasting legacy, for the free-floating "virtual eye" roving in space is precisely the model that Galileo and Descartes would adopt when formulating their new scientific world picture in the seventeenth century. (115)

It is the out-of-body experience of perspectival art – in contrast with the embodied experience of discontinuous space which pictures each object as it is individually and separately perceived – that gives the sense of a position outside the subject/object relationship from which both can be seen, and therefore codified as part of a system of knowledge. Wertheim's account therefore sees this elevated viewpoint as the perspective of human reason rather than divine knowledge and power. Linear perspective succeeds in dividing subjectivity, forcing us to imagine being outside ourselves, implying continuous physical space and the presence of different perspectives within it, and referring us to a position beyond and including all these positions to contemplate the nature of order in the system as a whole. The very fact that we can imagine this viewpoint reasonably unproblematically, and have created the artistic tools to conceptualise it, suggests that this can be read as a way of thinking about human possibility as much as an approach on divinity.

In *My Name is Red*, Pamuk places theological concerns only with the tradition of Ottoman art as, if they desire to conform to the new style of European painting, the artists must illustrate "from the perspective of pedestrians exchanging

pleasantries and regarding their world” and “move the art of illustrating away from Allah’s perspective” (135). The divine perspective is more than an elevated point of view or the capacity to see through walls, however, as it also implies clarity and the possibility of making sense of events, much like Edgerton’s emphasis on the realisation of God’s “geometrically ordered universe” arising from linear perspectival art. When Pamuk’s traditional illustrator draws, his artistic ordering and organising of an imagined scene is what gives it Allah’s perspective; when Edgerton’s imaginary Renaissance artist draws, the order of the whole universe is implied by the order to be found in the observation of *any* scene, and is just reflected in the techniques of linear perspective. The illustrator Butterfly argues against Stork’s adoption of realist techniques by maintaining that it is the artist’s job to make patterns and tell stories through painting, and that the element of the divine vision enters at this point: “Of course, Allah sees what we see, but He doesn’t perceive it the way we do [. . .]. The confused battle scene that we perceive in our bewilderment, He perceives in his omniscience as two opposing armies in an orderly array” (450-1). This is a central feature of omniscience as it is represented in visual terms, as the idea of complete knowledge reveals a faith in the underlying order and artistry of the world which is only concealed by the partial and specific nature of ordinary human knowledge. The vision of Allah becomes as much about seeing connections and selecting important details as seeing everything. This coincides with Ermarth’s formulation of realist narration as a kind of middle distance which avoids getting too close and being blinded by the particular: “The implication of realist technique is that proper distance will enable the subjective spectator or the subjective consciousness to see the multiple viewpoints and so to find the form of the whole in what looks from a closer vantage point like a discontinuous array of specific cases” (35). Multiple viewpoints can be united here with a middle distance that erases the limitations of the particular, and allows for meaning to come from the overwhelming detail of the world (as in Pamuk’s account of the divine view in Ottoman art) and to extrapolate meaning from the particular to the universal (as in Edgerton’s “geometrically ordered universe”). The common theme in all these descriptions is the way that art can imagine a perspective

different from the individual or ordinary point of view, but can also include and acknowledge that view.

So far, then, we have a fairly binary account of human and super-human views of the world, as in the intradiegetic/extradiegetic narrators we encountered in Chapter 5. Pamuk's novel sets up the familiar third option of the dead between and across these possibilities. The head illustrator, Enishte, who (as discussed in Chapter 5) is one of the novel's three dead narrators, is also its only character to be successfully buried, and therefore freed from his material body. He observes his own funeral from a position above the city which corresponds exactly with that of the calligrapher in Stork's story who discovers the horizon line from a minaret. In Enishte's narrative, this view has all of the order which comes from art and from the divine: "Looking down from the height of a minaret, the whole world resembled a magnificent book whose pages I was examining one by one" (280). The vision from the afterlife is both human and divine, ordering and making sense of the world like an artist. The image of the book brings together the temporal and spatial aspects of Enishte's knowledge: he can see the world with the order of art, but he is also turning the pages of the book, bringing in temporal, sequential and narrative elements which allow for "past and present times [to] appear at once" (281). The illustrations which take their logic from divine omniscience become the dead miniaturist's analogy for his own afterlife omniscience. Enishte is reassured when he finds his posthumous experience matches literature (not least sacred texts) about heaven and hell, but there is a more complex affinity between books and his afterlife, as immortality is shown to be as much like reading an illustrated book as books and illustrations aspire to the immortals' point of view. The experience of seeing the world as a book, from outside and from afterwards, is the same as Dante's description of the beatific vision in the final canto of *The Divine Comedy*, in which the love of God binds together leaves to make a volume. There is a connection, in both instances, between narrative, interpretation and making sense, and the view from the afterlife.

In previous chapters the pleasures of heavenly omniscience and retrospection have run alongside the narrative pleasures of the anticipation of

retrospection, of understanding, and of love for and empathy with other people. Enishte's enjoyment comes from aesthetic, and specifically visual, pleasures: he examines the world from his new perspective "with the pleasure of analysing a painting" (280), which is a combination of order that signifies both beauty and understanding. He can find the red belt that he thought was lost, and discover the thief, as well as connecting the incident with his attraction to the red shirts his mother laundered when he was a baby. These are the pleasures of art, combining visual and narrative satisfactions in the same way as his life's work of illustrations.

The technique that *My Name is Red* employs in its narration, however, is not that of the elevated view which takes in and orders a scene, but the particularised and subjective narratives of the text's multiple voices. In this respect it comes closer to the Frankish techniques of portraiture and, implicitly, realist linear perspective, because of its view "from the street" rather than from the minaret. The novel's narrators include a corpse, a gold coin, a dog, an illustration of Death, and the colour red, each placed in the foreground of the story's perspective onto the city of Istanbul. The creative process by which the story's controversial, pivotal illustration is achieved is also relevant to the novel's structure, as the complete picture is kept hidden from the illustrators whose work forms each component part. The organisation of the novel therefore reflects this missing overarching consciousness: the deceased Enishte was the leader of the workshop creating the final illustration for the Sultan's book, while there is a suspicion that Elegant, the corpse whose narrative opens the novel, was murdered because he had seen the final double-page illustration. Until the final pages of the novel, the only people with complete knowledge of both the plot's events and the art at its centre are the dead.

What does this mean, then, for the connection between perspectival art and realism's extradiegetic narrators that Ermarth outlines in her study? And what are the implications for the disembodied observer when its ambiguous, part-earthly, part-divine perspective is equated with that of the dead? These are the ideas that Pamuk tackles in his novel, making multiple connections between two orders of vision: the human and particular, and the super-human and universal. Ermarth

asserts that both the realistic narrator and the implied spectator in perspectival painting are features that represent a “consensus among possible views [that] homogenizes the medium of perception”, making us feel that our experience of space can be projected across the dividing line between art and life (21). However, as in the examples of the displaced centre of projection in some Renaissance art, this is not always the case. Margaret Wertheim’s discussion of these instances of non-homogenised space forms part of her genealogy of doubled spiritual and physical spaces in *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*. This study examines the idea that the modern sense of space is problematic and unusual in its homogeneity and unity, and that there is also a history of an alternative concept of space running alongside it. Wertheim offers cyberspace, a space where we exist as non-physical subjects, as the contemporary equivalent of medieval Christian soul-space, which was edged out by the changing concepts of physical space. In this account, medieval Western thought situated the spiritual elements of ourselves in an alternative, parallel space of heaven or hell, rather than in the dreamtime or in the mythical past which provide the spiritual realm in other cultures. This led to a serious conceptual problem when the space the immortal soul had previously occupied was replaced with the “infinite Euclidean void of Newtonian cosmology” (150). There was no space left for the afterlife to occupy.

Wertheim’s account – “from Dante to the internet”, as it is subtitled – identifies the homogenous, unified physical space of perspectival art and modern physics as a temporary deviation from the way that Western thought has characterised the human occupation of space. The modern pairing of cyberspace and physical space are close enough to the spatial dualism of the medieval period that the internet can become “a new space for the playing out of some of those aspects of humanity that have been denied a home in the purely physicalist world discourse” (230). This must have some significance for the analysis of narrative, and particularly the novel, which has its roots (as Ermarth has shown) in the consensus of perception related to a single, objectively envisioned spatial existence yet, I would argue, can also imagine other possibilities for imaginary spaces or soul spaces. Has the novel, then, consistently maintained two spaces at once, even in its

most realist incarnations? If so, one of these spaces is characterised by a profoundly non-physical experience for the reader; an experience analogous to the disembodiment of soul space.

On the Outside

The crucial area for exposing the continuous or discontinuous nature of space is on the dividing line between the world we live in and the world depicted in art. *My Name is Red* identifies different possibilities for this area, which is fraught with the difficulties of embedding one world within another. In the novel, Pamuk's senior illustrator, Master Osman, imagines stepping into one of his own paintings of the main parades of the Hippodrome and then making a turning down a side street in three different artistic traditions:

In a Frankish painting, this would result in us stepping outside both the frame and the painting; in a painting made following the example of the great masters of Herat, it'd bring us to the place from which Allah looks upon us; in a Chinese painting, we'd be trapped, because Chinese illustrations are infinite. (284)

The Frankish art is situated in the world, but it is a part of the world's continuous space which happens to have a frame around it, separating it off as a representation of that world. In contrast, in traditional Ottoman art the implied viewer is not the viewer of the painting in the world, but Allah, who looks on the world from heaven with the eye of an artist. The outside of the painting is therefore the outside of the world. In Master Osman's description of Chinese illustration, there is no outside implied by the painting, and no imagined frame: the space of the picture is completely unconnected with the space of the viewer. The associations of being trapped in an infinite Chinese art object gesture towards the nested Chinese-box narrative familiar to twenty-first-century readers, and Master Osman's references to infinite Chinese illustrations seem to conflate the two, as we are already dealing with visual art as a metaphor for narrative, or at least visual art as it is narrated.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ The apparent anachronism of reading twentieth-century literary theory from characters from the sixteenth century invites some comparison with Brian McHale's observations about Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. In *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), McHale argues that the anachronies

These three alternatives for the relations between the world in the art object and the world outside the art object are very much present in the way the intersections between these different worlds and spaces are imagined in other novels about the afterlife. Alasdair Gray's *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1982) imagines art and worlds with frames that allows for a breakthrough to our world, art and worlds which have the afterlife outside them, and models of infinitely continuous and infinitely nested narratives. The investigation of any of these features in the novel almost inevitably leads to a *mise en abyme*, as layers of the world of the story become employed as frames around further representations. In Master Osman's narrative, for instance, his picture of the street invites reading as a figure for the novel itself, and its relationship with what lies outside its frame. Gray's novel employs its four book structure to examine competing interpretations of space and narrative which, as in Pamuk's novel, have implications for thinking about the world and what is outside it, whether in art or the afterlife.

Lanark's double structure consists of four books which are arranged anachronistically, in a series that runs three, one, two, four. The first section (Book Three) tells the story of Lanark, an amnesiac inhabitant of a dystopian society; Books One and Two describe the early life of Duncan Thaw, a misunderstood young artist and writer living in Glasgow in the middle of the twentieth century; and Lanark's story resumes in the final book. In some ways the novel's two stories could be read according to Brian McHale's distinction, described in *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), between modernism's epistemological focus, and postmodernism's ontological focus. Thaw's story is concerned with art and its capacity to transcend time and represent the world, and his story ends with a surge of present-tense narration apparently describing Duncan's final moments in his death from drowning. In the questions McHale quotes from Dick Higgins on the difference between cognitive and postcognitive art, the cognitive questions – "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" (qtd. in

(which are far more explicit in Eco's novel with, for instance, characters "quoting" Wittgenstein) also add to the sense of "ontological queasiness" cultivated by the novel (152). Ontological queasiness is a reasonable descriptor for Osman's musings on the outside of the work of art, as the characters' status as living or fictional beings comes under scrutiny.

McHale 33) – are associated with modernism and seem relevant to Duncan’s story, with its emphasis the development of his subjectivity and the certainty about the reality of the world in which he is living: the story and the ambiguity are about Duncan’s consciousness and what happens to him, rather than the existence or otherwise of the city around him. Conversely, Lanark’s sections of the novel raise every one of Higgins’ postcognitive questions: “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” (qtd. in McHale 33). Is Lanark’s world a dystopia or an afterlife which punishes, corrects, or extends Duncan’s life? Should Lanark try to participate and engage with the political process in this new world? Is Lanark Duncan?

The situation becomes more complex because the psychologically realist narrative of Duncan’s life which, like the Frankish painting in *My Name is Red*, should be surrounded by the world outside its frame, is actually contained within Lanark’s story. So, outside this novel should be us, the readers, but these “books” are contained within other books. At the end of the Third Book, Lanark travels to an underground hospital, the Institute, where he is being treated for dragonhide, one of the psychosomatic illnesses which are endemic in the city above ground. He and Rima, a fellow patient, are visited by the oracle, a narrator as disembodied as we would expect, who has managed to separate himself from his body and thereby avoid death. The oracle explains how he was summoned to the Institute in order to narrate Lanark’s story: “A sullen, determined voice – your voice – asked me describe *his* past. My experience of void had made me able to visualize things from very slight cues, and that voice let me see you as you were” (116). What he tells is Duncan Thaw’s life-story, demoting this apparent realism to a nested tale-within-a-tale, and suggesting the life and afterlife connection of the character(s). The narrator of this part of the text is the oracle, whose omniscience and lack of a physical body seem completely unsurprising and unproblematic in this section of the text. However, it leads us to ask, who is narrating this narration? Whose voice is it that says, “The oracle began speaking in a male, pompous elderly voice [. . .] (105)? Who makes these judgments about the oracle? Even more mysteriously, at the end of the narrative we learn that, while Lanark has heard the story of Duncan,

Rima has been told another story, about a woman in another life. If the oracle's narratives are entirely subjective and tailored to the past of each individual in this afterlife, then the reader has been somehow incorporated into Lanark and been required to use him as a kind of physical proxy or placeholder in the world of the novel. The effect is the opposite of the raised centre of projection in *The Last Supper* or the implication of Allah as the viewer of the traditional illustrations in *My Name is Red*: the centre of projection here is inside the artwork, like a painting with the shadow of eye-sockets and a nose painted around the edges. There is no place for us to stand as a disembodied observer here, other than inside Lanark.

The life-story of Duncan Thaw begins with a scenario which is similar to Master Osman's imaginary exit from his painting, as young Duncan is drawing a picture and his father corrects his depiction of the sky: "the sky isnae a straight line, Duncan! [. . .] The sky is just the space above our heads" (121). Duncan's response is to question what would happen if we travelled through the sky to get to the other side, and his father corrects him again to reiterate, "There is no other side Duncan. None at all" (121). As Duncan dreams of reaching and breaking through this barrier in his picture, his world is shown to be surrounded by further barriers, rather than by empty, infinite space or by the "other side" of an alternative reality:

He dreamed that night of flying up through empty air until he reached a flat blue cardboard sky. He rested against it like a balloon against a ceiling until he broke a hole and rose through more empty air till he grew afraid of floating forever. Then he came to another cardboard sky and rested there till worried by the thought of the other side. And so on. (122)

The other side that Duncan imagines is really just an outside, which implies the possibility of a further possible layer outside this again.

Read on the epistemological or cognitive level that McHale identifies, Duncan's dream is evidence of his infant psychology, as he is trapped under layers of rules from his parents and authority figures. Duncan is situating himself at the centre of a complicated and overwhelming physical universe, in the same way as when Stephen Dedalus, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), lists his

address, starting with his name, right up to “the World, the Universe” (16). Stephen’s list makes him wonder what exists “after the universe” in a conflation of space and time, before concluding that only God can “think about everything and everywhere” in the way that would be necessary to find what is outside the universe (16).

In the light of the other half of *Lanark*, Duncan’s dream also gestures towards a reading in terms of his existence and the existence of his world as a spatially organised textual artifice. The barrier between this side and the other side is also between life and the afterlife, between the novel’s levels of nested narration, and between the possible points of view outside, looking onto the textual world. At certain points in *Lanark* this barrier is as insubstantial as Duncan’s cardboard sky. For instance, in bed suffering a series of asthma attacks, Duncan listens to “a murmuring in his own head, a vague remote sound like the conversation of two people in an adjacent room. One speaker was excited and raised his voice so much above the steady drone of the other that Thaw almost heard the words: ‘... ferns and grass what’s wonderful about grass ...’” (181). This is Rima and Lanark’s conversation after they have left the Institute and are travelling across the intercalendrical zone, and is also overheard by the couple as the strange chronology of the zone means they have contact with older and younger versions of themselves (381, 384). However, this is not really contact between Lanark and Duncan, but between the books that make up the novel: Duncan only *almost heard* the words in the quotation above, so there is another consciousness there – presumably the oracle-narrator – ‘overhearing’ the later exchange through the wall in the adjacent room to let us know the words Duncan himself missed. This is something that could only happen in narrative fiction where there is a containing consciousness there to report on this almost-hearing and to take in both narratives in one.

This spatial organisation of parallel textual worlds and breakable cardboard barriers between them shouldn’t really be a surprise when the final book of the novel sees Lanark entering a room through a featureless, page-like door marked ‘Epilogue’ to meet with Nastler, also called the author; a man who has trouble

remembering to avoid calling the world a book (480). So, when Duncan takes a turning out of his book he ends up in Lanark's world, in another book, but one which is also his afterlife. When Lanark takes the exit from his book, he ends up in the company of his creator. Significantly, the oracle's and Nastler's sections, the prologue and the epilogue, are established in such a way that these two characters are able to comment on Duncan and Lanark's narratives. This feature of the text is also significant for the place of the afterlife, or a position outside life, in the text, since the subtitle, "A Life in Four Books" implies a position outside these books and outside the life for the prologue and epilogue: a position occupied by the disembodied oracle and by Nastler, the author.

On the Other Side and in the Other World

Lanark is a text that embodies Brian McHale's distinction between modernism and epistemology and postmodernism and ontology. Before going on to examine the role of mapping in Alasdair Gray's novel and in other narratives about the afterlife, I want to focus on this association of postmodernism and ontology which McHale offers as a reaction against both the claims of realism to reflect the world and the concept of a single reality at all. In *Constructing Postmodernism*, McHale offers "ontological pluralization" as a feature of postmodern texts, and suggests that, "among the narrative motifs of pluralization are [. . .] visitors from other worlds (angels, ghosts, extra terrestrials) whose irruption into our world shatters its ontological homogeneity [. . .] or "mediums" who give access to other worlds" (126). While we have seen how the perspective of the narrator can be read as "homogenizing the medium" of the realist narrative world, the mediums of postmodernism are messengers of otherworldly origin, sent to explode this homogeneity. The personified mediums McHale identifies, the angels, ghosts, and extra-terrestrials, have perspectives outside our world, and can perceive with a kind of distance which might equate to the possibility of painting or narrating. McHale uses science fiction, and particularly cyber-punk, as his model of choice for examining the "self-consciously 'world-building' fiction" which also characterises postmodern and avant-garde literary experimentation, as they "[lay] bare the

process of fictional world-making itself" (12). He goes on to argue that the ontological concerns of both postmodern and cyber-punk fictions almost inevitably reach the "ultimate ontological boundary" of death (65). Despite an exploration of the place of the reanimated and bionic body, existence as electronic data stored and retrieved by computer, and states between Pynchon's "one and zero of life and death," McHale ultimately concludes that "conventional 'old-wave' science fiction of the *Star Trek* type has it all wrong: death, not space, is the final frontier of the imagination, beyond which only the most innovative adventurers boldly go" (267). Experimental literature is fascinated with the idea of afterlives as liminal, supplementary states which involve flirtation with endings and ontological boundaries, and McHale sees the frontier as the place beyond which experimentation takes place.

Constructing Postmodernism offers a variety of other possibilities for ontological pluralisation: entrances between worlds, dreams or hallucinations (which are real as they are experienced and narrated), and nested representations within the primary representation. Among this latter group, his focus is on television's particularly plural ontologies. Just as the dominant image for model worlds within the main narrative world of *My Name is Red* is the painting, McHale argues for television as the postmodern agent of choice for the depiction of worlds-within-worlds. The television's representation of another world in partial contact with our own is, McHale suggests, quite often associated with the other world it has usurped: death and beliefs about the afterlife. Death is "what in our real-world experience has always been the most salient example of 'another order of being'" but television comes to fill this space for certain twentieth-century writers (131). Just as traditional Ottoman art was linked to a separate, divine, order of being, television can also be connected to the world beyond ordinary existence. In *Constructing Postmodernism* a quotation chosen from an interview with Salman Rushdie is particularly illuminating on this point:

Prompted by an interviewer to reflect on how, in the contemporary world, "TV is a medium as much as an angel is", Rushdie remarks, "[T]he television in the corner is a kind of miraculous being, bringing

a kind of revelation. . .television is what we now have for archangels.

(qtd. in McHale, 130)

Television is therefore an agent of communication with another world. However, this leaves me wondering what the role is for other communication technologies. The revelatory potential and the qualities of uncanny, otherworldly communication seem quite firmly lodged in our relations with the telephone or the tape recorder, as Muriel Spark's *The Comforters* shows. If the difference with television is its immersive potential, the life-likeness of sound and image combined, then this would surely be eclipsed in contemporary culture by the added feature of user-participation and activity in MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* or, in an almost perfect example of parallel-life ontological pluralisation, *Second Life*. Part of the appeal of television as a metaphor for mediumship and the afterlife, as opposed to the novel, or online worlds like those just mentioned, is the sense that it is somehow a more passive and less participatory experience. So, for instance, in Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990) the Thanatoids "watch a lot of Tube" as part of their progressive death (170).

McHale analyses Thomas M. Disch's novel, *The Businessman* (1984) – a "tale of terror," as the subtitle puts it, set in the afterlives of some of its protagonists – and suggests that the experience of watching multi-channel television becomes a metaphor for the ease of travel between multiple worlds and the intermediate, half-living state of existence between them. The novel's main character, Joy-Ann Anker, is able to relive her life and watch current events on earth on Paradise's own TV station, while the details of her afterlife are informed by TV hospital dramas and Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals. The contact between the living and the dead who are still attached to the earth is organised by the medium which is most familiar to Joy-Ann; as her guide to the afterlife, the nineteenth-century poet and actress Adah Menken, explains: "none of this actually *exists*. It's a function of our two shared imaginations" (225). So, because television shaped her life, it organises Joy-Ann's afterlife too.

The barrier surrounding the nested worlds of earth and the spiritual holding area Joy-Ann ends up administrating is imagined differently by each of the

characters: John Berryman sees the barrier with “the Aether, the Other Side, Heaven” as an interference pattern of water ripples (158), while Joy-Ann’s daughter Giselle sees a “threshold, a field of pure geometry and color, like a painting that was simultaneously flat on the ground and covering every wall” (10). They agree that the urge is strong for them to enter the pattern itself, and it seems to signify the abstract nature of heaven, as opposed to the strongly narrative and familiar, almost archetypal, experiences of Joy-Ann’s Paradise. This distinction is reinforced later in the novel when the ghosts of John Berryman and Adah Menken are discussing Dante’s decision to place the poets in the first circle of hell, which meant they were able to spend eternity discussing poetry, rather than in the “higher reaches” where “one loses interest in poetry – and prose” (278).⁶⁹ Writing, then, has to always come down on the side of the human, the concrete and the meaningful: John Berryman imagines heaven as “a state of permanent mindless ecstasy” (278), and when Giselle manages to enter the grid and leave the known world she finds layer after layer of the same geometric pattern: “repeated, mindlessly, meaninglessly, again and again” (197). This infinite repetition in eternity makes the kind of human meaning that comes from difference, from poetry and prose which are structured by a sense of finitude, impossible.

In the novel, television provides a medium between worlds for travel as well as observation: it is a door as well as a window. When Joy-Ann’s son-in-law flicks between channels in a fruitless search for porn, the ghost of Giselle, his murdered wife, comes out of the screen and is (apparently) impregnated with the demon child who rampages through the second half of the novel. Television also serves as a wider metaphor for other aspects of the relations between this world and the other world. The ghost of John Berryman comments, “Ghosts only appear to people wired to receive them. It’s like cable TV” (245), and when Joy-Ann tries to watch Paradise’s television channel after her daughter has become a willow tree the static scene looks to her like a test pattern: something is broadcasting, but nothing is

⁶⁹ One of the novel’s running jokes involves Adah Menken’s decision to condemn poets to wander the earth indefinitely until they acknowledge that she is the better poet. Her ire seems to be specifically directed towards confessional poets, or perhaps towards suicides, since John Berryman and Sylvia Plath are the only poets who are named as the objects of her prohibition.

happening. One of the most significant features of television in Disch's novel comes when the novel's narrator brings to the readers' attention the focalising consciousness necessary for Paradise's version of Home Box Office: "HBO's unearthly cameraman did a slow pan about the room, a technical feat that entirely escaped the notice of the program's sole viewer; Joy-Ann took technology as much for granted as when she'd been alive" (206). In this visual medium, despite the viewer's choice of channels which ranges across space and time (although limited by the emotional "cable" that works in reverse for the visibility of ghosts) the scene is still organised by a consciousness which records and selects from all the other possible views of a scene. In the same way that the choice of perspective on the TV is taken for granted by Joy-Ann, the narrator is never explicitly interrogated in the course of Disch's novel: conventionally, the narrator's perspectival view is an *a priori* condition of perception in the novel, but this text constantly throws suspicious glances in the narrator's direction, just like the problem of who narrates Lanark's books in Gray's novel. Like the centre of projection in Renaissance art and the narrator in the realist novel, the position of the television camera in *The Businessman* is concerned with the artistic experience of other worlds through disembodiment and an imaginary single perspective, which the text as a whole opens to interrogation.

All these representations of the other (fictional, afterlife) world imagine it as world that is attached to this one, and imagine an enclosing, perceiving and selecting consciousness in a further world beyond the representation. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the invisible, disembodied and omniscient narrator invokes the other-worldly presence of ghosts and spirits, but the parallel worlds of the afterlife, the involved cartography of heaven and hell and their non-physical spaces that overlap with the world we know are always close at hand when we are dealing with the other worlds of fiction. *The Businessman's* heaven, made up of mindless layers of patterns, simultaneously flat and enclosing, mirrors the flat, nested worlds of artistic representations that apparently only contain room for one disembodied projected viewer. Yet televisions and paintings, and to a certain extent novels, are also presented as windows or doorways into other worlds, rather

than representations of the whole, embedded within the world outside: they are contiguous with, rather than contained by, the world. The novel, however, can also be read as a map, which does make more of an attempt to contain a whole, rather than just a view onto a part. In the next two sections we will be examining maps and mapping as alternative models for other worlds and the other side in the novel, which can take in the whole of a world, rather than just providing a window into another world or a mirror alongside this world.

Triangulation and Topography

The place of multiple perspectives in *Lanark* has been remarked upon in a number of studies of Gray's work: Cairns Craig notes the spilt perspectives of the two narratives and describes the novel as being "haunted by the possibility of a different way of seeing the universe" (1991: 103). In *Alasdair Gray* (1999), Stephen Bernstein describes *Lanark* as a novel with a focus on the elevated perspective, and finds that "it is through the novel's numerous images of ascent that it can most comprehensively be understood" (38). In contrast, Rachel Falconer's *Hell in Contemporary Literature* describes five alternative possibilities for deciding the ontological status of *Lanark*'s two narratives, but her interpretation ultimately reads the novel in epistemological terms, in the tradition of what she terms "dialogic katabasis," which involves the uncovering of truths (about the self and about the world) by descent into and return from the underworld (189). All of these models of space are characterised by an awareness of other positions within it: Falconer's work relies on the dialogic element of narrating descent and return from after the ascent; Bernstein's elevated perspective is defined against ground-level vision; Craig's evocative terms find the world "haunted" by other viewpoints. These readings have the potential to place too much emphasis on the novel's perspectival multiplicity, and not enough the question of its ontological pluralisation, making *Lanark* more about different views of the world rather than different worlds.

Craig's description of *Lanark* as "haunted by the possibility of a different way of seeing the universe" implies one universe with multiple viewpoints, like the

implied disembodied perspectives leading to the homogeneity of space and time that Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth saw in perspectival art and realist novels. The earliest part of Duncan's life is characterised by the clash of "realism and fantasy" (the terms his English teacher uses to criticise Duncan's style, when he rejects his early short story for publication in the school magazine) and, when read as haunting by different ways of seeing, this suggests that both the novel's narratives have to be subsumed into one consistent world. One of the pressing questions of the novel is whether realism and fantasy are two different modes of seeing the same thing, or whether they arise from the different subject material. The "ferns and grass" conversation Duncan nearly overhears from Lanark's narrative is a good illustration of this: examined one way, Lanark is remembering the oracle's story and subconsciously quoting it when he is with Rima in the intercalendrical zone or, with a similar outcome, Duncan's hallucinations of Lanark's story begin with this episode. In both these interpretations, one of the two stories has to be embedded within the other. Conversely, the conversation could also be read as actual contact between two genuinely existing worlds. In one instance we are left relegating one or other of the stories as a fiction-within-a-fiction, while in the other we encounter two contiguous worlds.

The afterlife is a concept that is able to mediate between these two readings and allow both to exist in the space of the novel, because it imagines possible other worlds and other states of being which are connected and dependent upon each other. Craig's haunting "possibility of a different way of seeing the universe" relies on a temporal and spatial self-division that is intimately connected with the afterlife. *Lanark* is not just about seeing individual objects and scenes from someone else's point of view, but about perceiving the whole universe from another position, which isn't limited to being a single person in a single body, situated in the world. As we saw in Chapter 2, the afterlife has been associated with the possibility of a kind of synoptic vision that is the only way of seeing an individual's life, and the world, from outside. It provides a way of both maintaining and escaping subjectivity – reflected in the way that Duncan and Lanark's identities are ambiguously joined together – and is the strongest model that we have for

imagining how we could continue to be ourselves but see the universe in a way other than our own point of view.

Thomas Nagel's study *The View from Nowhere* (1986) approaches the problems of uniting (or not uniting) these subjective and objective positions we experience as thinking, conscious beings. He states the problem as one of "how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included" (3). In *Lanark*, Duncan's out-of-body experiences are associated with psychosis, but can also be read as emblematic of a concern with the possibility of imagining the world as a whole with the individual as a part of it.

An element of Duncan's psychosis is this inability to integrate himself into a system which includes other people. According to Nagel, part of the difficulty in taking the objective view, which forms the layer of observation outside the individual perspective, is not the impossibility of observing the self from outside, but maintaining the sense of the individual subjectivity while doing so: Nagel asks, "How can I, who am thinking about the entire, centerless universe, be anything so specific as *this . . . ?*" (61). Standing on the moor before climbing Ben Rua, Duncan sees himself "as if from the sky, a small figure starting across the moor like a louse up a quilt" (140). Later, surveying his painting containing the history of the world, he looks down on himself "curled in the pulpit like a grub in a nut" (338). There is no way for him to maintain any sense of the validity of his subjectivity faced with the overwhelming knowledge of a wider world. When Duncan is able to maintain his sense of himself while attempting to imagine society or history in their entirety, the latter seem to be just extensions and projections of himself: the painting in the church is "the warped rat-trap world of a neurotic virgin" (340) and he imagines the world encircled by a huge Flealouse that has eaten every other Flealouse; "a titan curled round the equator like a grub round a pebble" (233).⁷⁰ In this fantasy he alternates between "sometimes being a victim of the Flealouse, sometimes a Flealouse himself" (233), just as he is unable to hold both his subjective and

⁷⁰ While this specific passage goes unacknowledged in Gray's index of plagiarisms, the all-consuming Flealouse has its origins in William Golding's *Pincher Martin* (1956). In Golding's novel the Flealouse equivalent is a maggot in a box who eats all the other maggots, like Pincher Martin's cannibalistic treatment of other people in his lifetime.

objective views in his mind at the same time. Gray's novel establishes multiple worlds and multiple selves to examine the problem of envisaging the world and the self together at once, and the afterlife's possibilities for maintaining and destroying subjectivity are central to this; something of us dies, but the afterlife relies on something of us remaining in the Other World.

Nagel suggests that death has a very specific place in the tension between our subjective and objective views, as something which can apparently only be experienced subjectively. There is a link here to Heidegger's observations in *Being and Time* (1927) about the possibility of experiencing death through the death of others:

When Dasein reaches its wholeness in death, it simultaneously loses the Being of its "there". By its transition to no-longer Dasein, it gets lifted right out of the possibility of experiencing this transition and of understanding it as something experienced. Surely this sort of thing is denied to any particular Dasein in relation to itself. But this makes the death of Others more impressive. In this way a termination of Dasein becomes 'Objectively' accessible. Dasein can thus gain an experience of death [. . .] (281)

This allows for some possibility of reconciling objectivity and death, but Heidegger goes on to raise further problems attached to this: what the living experience as death – loss – is what remains after a death, rather than the experience of the end of being, and what we can experience of the end of another is only in the terms of their being in the world we experience. It may seem like stating the obvious, but we only experience death – rather than dying – when another person dies. Paradoxically, given the apparently common-sense conclusion Heidegger reaches that "death is in every case mine, in so far as it 'is' at all" (284), Nagel argues that neither the objective view nor the subjective view can adequately encompass death. In the case of the objective view, death for each individual is impossible to include in the perception of the whole, while the subjective view cannot countenance its own end:

The subjective view does not allow for its own annihilation, for it does not conceive of its own existence as the realization of a possibility. This is the element of truth in the common falsehood that it is impossible to conceive of one's own death. [. . .] The sense of subjective possibility does not project itself into the past with the same imaginative reality with which it faces the future. Death is the negation of something the possibility of whose negation seems not to exist in advance. (227-9)

This is played out in *Lanark* when we see Duncan's life described for Lanark from the external point of view of narrative told retrospectively and in its totality, with Lanark in a markedly different world. However, his life in this other world means that he has not really experienced the end of his existence, and this can only come beyond the end of the novel, imagined and projected subjectively, in Nagel's terms, as "the expectation of nothingness" (225). This is the crucial point about anticipating a view from nowhere, which is impossible to reach. The afterlife displaces this possibility, by replacing death and extinction of the self with the promise of finally being able to conceptualise self and universe all at once.

In addition to this interpretation of the afterlife as permitting us to replace our unthinkable death with a thinkable union of subjectivity and objectivity, the other important feature of the afterlife is that it allows for a totality of history and events to be included, which are as much a part of the world into which we are attempting to situate ourselves. Narrative's power is its ability to situate the individual in a story that integrates subjectivity with the universe.

Rachel Falconer's analysis of *Lanark* as a descent narrative introduces these considerations of history and eternity as well as space. Falconer's reading of Duncan's paintings is particularly revealing on this point, and seems a perfect example of the problems of combining visual representation, eternity and narrative. She argues that Duncan's art fails because of his attempts to capture an eternal and supernatural perspective in his work: he "tries to achieve the total perspective of Dante as God's narrator, or as Borges's eternal aleph" (185). These examples are, tellingly, from narrative fiction, suggesting Duncan's problem is that

he needs to paint a story, in a medium which does not have the necessary grammar or emplotment. Falconer argues that is not just his intention to contain all possible perspectives in his work, but also to somehow escape time and decay. For example, when Duncan paints the church he finds that he has no trouble with painting Adam and Eve in perfection before original sin, but it is the background, “where history was acted in the loops and delta of the river on its way to the ocean” and “disaster followed disaster to the horizon,” that causes problems (320-1). The “furious figure of God” keeps placing itself in the picture as part of the disasters and injustices of history as, much like Stephen Dedalus, Duncan is unable to escape the traumatic weight of history piling up behind the present. Duncan’s painting can happily include unchanging Edenic perfection, but history compromises this aesthetic vision. Falconer’s reading of the place of God in Duncan’s mural is as the opposite of a representative of the “immortal, invisible” deity in the hymn he sings: “God interrupts his work, not to insist on perfection, but to introduce imperfection and dynamic narrative development. [. . .] In other words Thaw’s God expresses Himself as human time, the very element Thaw is determined to exclude from his painting” (186). In some ways, it is the pressure from the church to remove the explicit image of God from his plans that causes Duncan’s compositional difficulties. He can only show the presence of God through the horrific consequences of divine justice and retribution in the flood or the destruction of the tower of Babel, rather than symbolically hiding them all – with a trick of perspective only possible from a human viewpoint – behind the hill of Golgotha, while placing the God the Father a safe distance away in heaven.

The twin problems of perspective and imperfection occur together in Gray’s descriptions of the murals: Duncan regrets that the pure colours on his palette which “looked prettier than any picture” have to be mixed “to show distance and weight” (318); facing the problems of painting the historical scenes in the background, he consoles himself with the knowledge that “a painting, before it is anything else, is a surface on which colours are arranged in a certain order” (321); and his response to the minister’s concern that he could spend “an eternity” on the painting is to pre-empt criticism of the way “the events on the horizon distract from

the simple foreground shapes" (334). The painting as a painting seems to be in conflict with the painting as a representation of passing time or as a three-dimensional view of a scene: events are shapes, a scene is a surface, and the mural is both a world and a wall.

In the category of "dialogic katabasis" in which Falconer places *Lanark*, one of the important features of this dynamic descent narrative is its potential to change the self; to bring about a reversal of subjectivity by travelling to another world. So, the temporal aspect of journeying has as much significance as the possibility of seeing from another perspective, and both the world and the self are not static concepts. Travel through space is always also travel through time, and the central power of the descent narrative is in spatialising a journey into the afterlife, into eternity: a journey which should be time travel as much as space travel. In *Lanark* the two worlds exist nested within each other, in parallel with each other, and one after the other, all at once. Stephen Bernstein's analysis of the novel finds a model for mediating between these worlds in the form of triangulation. The concept appears repeatedly in *Lanark*, from the triangulation point on top of Ben Rua to the "author" invoking the trinity as a model for his relations with Lanark and the reader who is "a Holy Ghost who keeps everything joined together and moving along" (495). In Bernstein's study, the case for the mediating middle vision of triangulated perspectives is made by an optimistic man in Gray's novel:

You pessimists always fall into the disillusion trap. [. . .] From one distance a thing looks bright. From another it looks dark. You think you've found the truth when you've replaced the cheerful view by the opposite, but true profundity blends all possible views, bright as well as dark. (477)

This is interesting in comparison with Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth's position on the consensus of viewpoints in realist art. In her interpretation of Velasquez's *Las Meninas* she sees the figures of the king and queen reflected in the mirror as evidence of Velasquez drawing attention to the convention of perspective, and that "the convention is sustained by agreement" (69). She links this to the idea of

triangulation in René Girard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, as a way of conceptualising the apparently extraneous "third term" in the scene between subject and object. Triangulation could also be connected to Rachel Falconer's reading of the novel in terms of "dialogic katabasis" in which a third term emerges through and between the readings of the other two descent-and-return narratives.

Despite Bernstein's argument that triangulation and cartography represent the novel's "greatest monument of hope" (50), both of these are also shown to be part of the dark as well as the bright in the world. I would like to briefly examine the problematic status of triangulation and perspective in Duncan's sections of the novel, which has consequences for Bernstein's heavenly and hopeful sense of triangulation. This can be illustrated with reference to the illustration for the frontispiece of Book Four, which can be found in Appendix II.

The illustration follows the frontispiece for Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (also reproduced in Appendix II) in its allegorical representation of the body politic, but the landscape in front of the figure is both that of Duncan's attempt on history as well as a depiction of Glasgow towards the Forth Bridge. The man observing this landscape is not God "very black-coated and Presbyterian" riding a thundercloud (as in Duncan's mural), but a man who looks a lot like Alasdair Gray, booted and rucksacked after having climbed a mountain to look down on the scenery. The foregrounded elements of the image are also very relevant here: in Abraham Bosse's engraving for *Leviathan* the miniature frames at the bottom of the image show symbols and tableaux of the military and the church, while Gray's illustration demonstrates the state's twin arms of force and persuasion. These two elements of a disciplinary society are, as in Foucault, posited on surveillance and the ordering of bodies by institutions. The pictures show, on the one hand, the drilling of soldiers and the use of tanks on civilians while, on the other, children are arranged in ranks of desks and educated in the principles of (of course!) trigonometry, and workers man a Fordist production line.

Lanark's relationship with Hobbes's *Leviathan* is important and, while it is relevant to the novel's critique of social order and social relationships, the methodology Hobbes employed in his thought is also significant. In the opening

sections of *Leviathan* Hobbes explains the importance of a mathematical model for reasoning, and trigonometry is used as Hobbes's metaphor of choice in a number of instances, such as when explaining the necessity of language for the transmission of knowledge, avoiding the need for every person to begin afresh with "a new labour" by mathematical demonstration or deductive logic (I.4). In theory, Hobbes's ideas are as thoroughly proven and his axioms as self-evident, and therefore as unassailable. However, it is also a possibility that Hobbes's system is in danger of collapse if any faults are exposed in these propositions, with grave consequences. Criticism of Hobbes can be framed in particularly relevant terms: "Hobbes [. . .] can be suspected of mistaking limited local perspectives for global truths; indeed some of his postulates, seen from larger perspectives, are demonstrably false" (Grant, 7). Hobbes' thinking can therefore be toppled by the kind of triangulation Gray offers in *Lanark*, which is the possibility of an even wider viewpoint. Triangulation, therefore, has to have the potential to expand ever-wider in order to achieve its most hopeful aspects.

Bernstein's study constructs an important reading of the role of multiple spatial and temporal perspectives in *Lanark* particularly, and in Gray's work in general. The geography of the novel is a significant factor in *Lanark*, not only because of Glasgow's difficult topography, which Bernstein notes is a challenge to grasp mentally, but also because of the way it allows Gray to lay time and space over each other. The equivalence between Duncan's ascent of Ben Rua and Lanark's climbs to the Necropolis is in their ability to see across space and time: Duncan can see himself from above, imagining a future where he has climbed the mountain, while the novel's closing scenes see Lanark being delivered notice of his death the following day. The final sentences of the novel reinforce this sense of time and space as inseparable features of our perception of a landscape:

I STARTED MAKING MAPS WHEN I WAS SMALL
SHOWING PLACE, RESOURCES, WHERE THE ENEMY
AND WHERE LOVE LAY. I DID NOT KNOW
TIME ADDS TO LAND. EVENTS DRIFT CONTINUALLY DOWN,
EFFACING LANDMARKS, RAISING THE LEVEL, LIKE SNOW.

I HAVE GROWN UP. MY MAPS ARE OUT OF DATE.

THE LAND LIES OVER ME NOW.

I CANNOT MOVE. IT IS TIME TO GO. (560)

Bernstein reads this verse as Lanark's thoughts in the "paralytic final moments" of his life, as promised in the notification of his death in the preceding scene. For me, Lanark's dying words are an acknowledgement of the limitations of mapping since, even if they allow us to take in and triangulate different perspectives in human terms, with triangulation representing cartography as a process, situated in time, the only perfect maps can ever be those of spaces where time does not pass, like heaven or hell. Triangulation describes the process of making a map, and therefore indicates a temporal aspect, but maps of worlds outside eternity will always be out of date.

On the Goddamn Map

Mapping is a powerful metaphor for omniscience and the complete knowledge of a system, but it is also a peculiarly human endeavour: a way of making sense of the world on our terms. In the quotation from David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* that heads this section, Michael Pemulis – the Enfield Tennis Academy's undisputed champion of the tennis-based apocalyptic war-game, Eschaton – becomes enraged with other players who make the error of conflating the meteorological conditions on the tennis courts' "map" with the terrain they represent within the terms of the game. I want to look at the place of maps in writing about the afterlife, but I am also particularly interested in the idea of two colliding viewpoints, as represented by Pemulis's frustration with the other players; whether the goddamn map is God's imagined map-perspective on the world, a map of the god-damned in hell, or the cognitive maps readers use in order to think real and fictional spaces. Pemulis makes the distinction between the map and territory; the representation and the thing itself. But what if the map is all there is? If, as with the afterlife and with fiction, there is no territory to be surveyed and measured to create the representation? I am interested in exploring the problems with space connected to

narratives about afterlife, and the place of maps and mapping as a concept, from the spatial organisation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* to postmodern ideas about the compression of space and distance, and the power of mapping to organise them.

Will Self's *How the Dead Live* (2001) is a novel set in the suburban afterlife of a deceased Londoner, Lily Bloom, in which the characters become more and more concerned by their "incomplete information" even as the reader reaches the novel's final revelations, both about the story's narrator and its narratee. In the original hardback edition of the novel the endpapers featured 'A Map of Lily's London, Elsewhere and Nowhere', with insets of New York, Northern Australia, Suffolk and – less clearly delineated from the main map of London – The Wood Between the Worlds from C.S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew*.⁷¹

The novel contained between the two identical reproductions of the map redefines its terms and gives the reader a new sense of the possibility of any kind of comprehensive vision, through cartography, retrospection or death. On first viewing many of the map's places seem to be non-places or blanks, the kind of features Peter Turchi, in *Maps of the Imagination* (2004), describes as the "wide landscape of snows" that make up the omissions and silences of both cartography and story-telling (28). The map's "Wastes of Paper" (indicating branches of Lily's son-in-law's stationery business) could be as much a comment on the cartography as the geography, while its references to both the places of C.S. Lewis's fantasy landscape, and the style of the cartography and typography, mean that the "Waste of Paper" could also be read with reference to Lewis's Lantern Waste. However, as the novel reveals, the apparently geographically empty spaces, marked as "nowhere" or "waste of paper" on the map are not even just places in the posthumous world of the novel: they are genuine geographical locations in this alternative version of living London. The fictional world of any novel therefore becomes as much an 'other world' as the afterlife. Self's novel shows that these apparently non-signifying elements from the map are real places with significance in the narrative.

⁷¹ Reproductions of both these maps are included for comparison in Appendix III.

The maps in Self's novel also form part of a tradition of mapping afterlife spaces which is significant for the way they can be interpreted. Peter Turchi's study of cartography and fiction refers to the *mappaemundi* of the Middle Ages as an alternative conceptual model to maps with referents in a verifiable world. It is also important that the spaces in these maps conform to a different set of physical rules and conventions: according to Alfred W. Crosby, they are "a nonquantificational, nongeometrical attempt to supply information about what was near and what was far – and what was important and what unimportant. It is more like an expressionist portrait than an identification photo" (qtd. in Turchi, 35). These are the spaces of the spirit, which do not conform to the same rules as ordinary cartography meant for navigators, yet are also not the cognitive maps which represent the individual's subjective experience of a landscape. These maps aspire to a divine perspective as much as, if not more than, maps of landmasses and seas, because these take in things beyond human knowledge, accessible only from an external and transcendent position. Barbara Wertheim describes this alternative space as "soul-space" and observes: "Where our scientific picture encompasses only the body, and hence only the space of the living, the world picture of the Christian Middle Ages included the spaces of both the living and the dead (43). Given this radically different sense of existence, Wertheim argues that *The Divine Comedy* is "the ultimate *map* of Christian soul space" (43). Wertheim theorises that the new spaces of the internet show the resurfacing of soul-space which has been neglected since the Renaissance, but between medieval soul-space and modern cyberspace there has always been the possibility of entering spaces other than those appearing in atlases and of leaving your body behind to engage with situations which do not have any physical reality: I would argue that this has continued to happen in the form of narrative deixis.

The history of mapping takes a significant turn when it moves from mapping the world's natural geography to its created features. Once we are drawing street-plans and trade routes, can the conceptual space of a map still include the Garden of Eden, or the entrance to hell? Specificity and measurement mean that the areas of the unknown shrink, and edge these other worlds off the map. There have also

been changes in the perception of space and time in more recent times that have required similar changes in our representation of spatial relationships. In *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990), David Harvey argues that what he terms “time-space compression” leads to processes “that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves” (240). The changes of postmodernity, which took us from a “common-sense” approach to space to a world made of unthinkable, fragmented spaces was as much a change as from medieval mapping to Renaissance perspectivism. The objective qualities of time and space are altered, and painting, mapping and narrative – any ways that we “represent the world to ourselves” – are transformed to interpret and reflect them. Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991)⁷² describes how “this latest mutation in space – postmodern hyperspace – has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and to cognitively map its position in a mappable external world” because of “the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global, multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (44)⁷³ Ordinary mapping therefore becomes virtually impossible in these hyperspaces.

Using the perceptual tools of Euclidean and perspectival space, we might attempt to think postmodern hyperspace with the out-of-body projections that try to unite a subjective and objective view of the world as a prerequisite for philosophical thought. However, this is always doomed to failure because, in

⁷² At this stage, it is probably unnecessary for me to point out the potential for reading “late” in this sentence in the context of capitalism’s afterlife, or the significance of the “latest mutation of space” in postmodernity.

⁷³ Jameson’s choice of building for the endeavour of imagining postmodern space is relevant in the context of the very specific spaces of the afterlife, which I have already discussed in terms of hotel spaces. The Portman Bonaventure hotel itself in some ways emblematises postmodernity, with Jean Baudrillard also analysing its architectural significance in *America*. Curiously, none of the analysis of the Bonaventure actually examines its function as a hotel. As a reader of this building from another continent (and thirty years) away, I’m familiar with its shopping mall and the rotating restaurant on top, but a room in the Bonaventure is a mystery to me. Maybe it’s that these parts of the hotel would be entirely thinkable in ordinary terms, in contrast with the unmappable spaces and repellent surfaces of the building as a whole, something familiar inside these structures.

contrast with the paintings that relocate their centre of projection away from their viewer (like Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*), the postmodern hyperspace is *always* decentred: there is no single implied position that can make the picture 'come true', and the decentred networks are unmappable because there is no vantage point that our perceptual apparatus can assume. Postmodern hyperspace lacks edges, borders and a centre: unlike mapping, which has its origins in the journey plans for pilgrimages, with start and end-points and a spiritually inflected reading of geography, hyperspaces are networks and are mixed up with time. Their beginnings and endings are difficult to locate, and time and space do not look at all familiar. Their representations in narrative feel equally strange, as they foreground the inconsistencies in time and space within and between worlds.

Margaret Wertheim describes how medieval soul-space was eclipsed by the understanding of space as a non-signifying void, and suggests a narrative example for this distinction: where Brian McHale argued that death, not space, was the final frontier, Wertheim suggests that the premise of *Star Trek* is really the lack of frontiers, or the infinite, undifferentiated physical space of the universe. She contrasts this with the soul spaces of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which features "an intrinsically directed and finite space" meaning that "the narrative must end, the goal must be reached, sooner or later" (185). *Star Trek* can continue indefinitely, exploring an infinite array of new worlds, which explains why *The Divine Comedy* has just three parts, while the *Star Trek* saga is still going strong after more than three hundred episodes. However, the new worlds involved in *Star Trek* continue to be part of the same universe: the characters are still the same people when they travel between them, and time and space are continuous. In contemporary narratives – which problematise this sense of continuous space through the landscapes of the afterlife – travelling between worlds puts subjectivity in peril: the self is as difficult to locate in space as any other point. The attempts to represent these spaces, to plot them in human and narrative terms, means imagining other worlds and spaces beyond, around, and inside, as much as just after, life.

Chapter 7

Killing Time: Narrating Eternity

What the scientists . . . well what people do now . . . they find out – try to find out . . . about the little bitty ways of everything . . . how it works . . . in its tiniest . . . And they, you know . . . they seem to . . . put everything . . . in time . . . More in time . . . They want it all to be . . . stretch-out-able! Like a . . . you know, formula. But it was started by . . . something . . . that wasn't . . . in time.

Close to me and Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven)

In *Time and Narrative* (1983), Paul Ricoeur makes a claim for narrative as the only way of investigating aspects of time that put physics and philosophy in stalemate. At the very beginning of the study, Ricoeur sets out his position, with the observation that “speculation on time is an inconclusive rumination to which narrative activity alone can respond” (I: 6). As this chapter will investigate, narrative responds most powerfully to two temporal concepts that are not graspable by intuition or by explanation in the abstract. Firstly, in investigating the phenomenology of time, and particularly those aspects of the subjective experience of time that are not accounted for by time measured by clocks and calendars. Secondly, by taking concepts from modern physics that are not intuitively graspable and embedding them within a narrative temporality to try to translate them into human, thinkable terms. Both of these uses of narrative for time investigations can be found in the texts set in the afterlife which are discussed in this chapter.

Defining time is difficult because of the impossibility of finding a position outside it, or defining what time is not: unlike the systems examined in the

previous chapter, it isn't something that we can try to map from outside. Borges summarises the problem that our perception of time always involves our subjectivity, and our time-consciousness seems inseparable from any objective concept of time. In 'A New Refutation of Time' (1946) Borges argues:

Our destiny (as contrasted with the hell of Swedenborg and the hell of Tibetan mythology) is not frightful by being unreal; it is frightful because it is irreversible and iron-clad. Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire. (269)

The inseparability of time from being is what makes it so horrific: for Borges, even more horrific than the idea of existence without time, in hell for eternity, which does not have the logical and experiential support behind it of the irreversibility of time. Eternity might never happen, but the present keeps on inevitably eating up the future because, as human beings, we are made of time.

Even if there is no way of seeing time from outside, we do have the concept of time as used in physics which would seem to provide some solid definition that we can oppose to subjective temporality. However, Arthur Eddington, the physicist who first used the phrase "the arrow of time" to refer to the irreversibility of temporal processes, remarked, "The great thing about time is that it goes on. But this is an aspect of it which the physicist sometimes seems inclined to neglect" (qtd. in Coveney and Highfield, 83). There are complexities here in saying simply that physics sees time as untensed, as just a figure in an equation, while the phenomenological experience of time is tensed, with an awareness of the present and the past. For instance, Mark Currie's discussion of the present in *About Time* describes how some might see a problematic tendency to privilege tensed time in the history of philosophy: "The untensed view of time therefore maintains that the future exists, and that the ontological priority of the present is an error produced by a mere psychological experience of time" (15). Historically, then, we had two different systems relating to our concept of time, each apparently devaluing the other: where Eddington said physics was neglecting the way that time "goes on",

philosophy had a tendency to valorise presence in a kind of error of perspective based on a trick of the mind. Currie uses Ricoeur's work to suggest that narrative fiction is a "warning to philosophy" against oversimplifying the distinction between these two senses of time (18), by suggesting a way of organising and conveying some of the complexities of the experience and analysis of time.

As we saw in Chapter 3, time is defined against, and is mythologised as being created out of, eternity. Significantly, both time as a physical value (time that doesn't "go on" on Eddington's terms) and time as an entirely subjective experience have been offered as ways of thinking about eternity. Concluding a study of metaphors which aid our understanding of time, David Park discusses the difference between the Time 1 of physics (or, what the value t represents in equations) and the Time 2 of our consciousness. The t value definition of time does not "go on": in Park's terms, "Any value of t is now. Now is when events happen. There is no now in Heaven. Time in Heaven is marked by numbers; that is Time 1. Time 2 in the world of events, is marked by events. Now is the focus on these events" (*The Image of Eternity*, 107). There is no now in heaven because all times (on earth) are equally accessible from eternity, so there is no tensed time of past and future. As discussed in Chapter 3, narrative involves both Time 1 and Time 2; being and becoming; events both existing and being emplotted all at once, and unfolding in time; or, "time in Heaven" and the "world of events". In contrast, many of the texts set in the afterlife that this thesis has considered narrate their protagonists' translation into something approaching eternity as an infinitely extended present: an all-encompassing "now". In the final lines of *Murder and Walking Spirits*, for instance, we find the narrator in some state of finitude, perhaps eternity, in which he is told there are "[n]o moments here. Only Now" (357). Conversely, *My Name is Red* marks this same translation for the dead characters with the observation that, "all time had now become this time" (495). In these eternities, either there is only an unchanging present, or all times are condensed into the present.

In Ricoeur's discussion of Augustine, these issues of the human experience of time defined against eternity are foregrounded. For Augustine, time is the lack of

the perfect presence of all moments at once and, instead, a constant vanishing and dissolution of every instant and sensation into the past. Ricoeur analyses how the method of Augustine's meditation on time in Book XI of the *Confessions* is to establish something which is not time in order to comprehend it more fully, since it is something so difficult to define. In Ricoeur's summary of Augustine's method, it is the case that time is therefore set against both eternity, and against human temporality in an attempt to show what it is not:

Indeed, it was necessary to confess what is other than time in order to be in a position to give full justice to human temporality and to propose not to abolish it but to probe deeper into it, to hierarchize it, and to unfold it following levels of temporalization that are less and less 'distended' and more 'held firmly'. (I: 30)

The range running from 'distended' to 'held firmly' signifies the scale from time to eternity, with human temporality spanning the field in between. Even without a mind of God to conceptualise all times being "held firmly", this binary, as we saw in the case of omniscience, is still readily thinkable in terms of human beings creating a limit case for their own concepts. Immediately afterwards, Ricoeur introduces other divisions or gradations into this scheme to show the full range of human temporalities: "Chronology – or chronography – does not have just one contrary, the a-chronology of laws or models. Its true contrary is temporality itself" (I: 30). So, the things we have which are "other than time" include both chronology (human thinking about and measuring of time); human temporality, or the experience of time (which places measured time outside the experiencer), laws or models (time t in equations is therefore other than time); and, lastly, eternity. Narrative emplotment, for Ricoeur, is the most fruitful means of investigating and confessing (a wholly narrative activity) what is other than time, and how time is othered from itself by our inability to define it in anything other than human terms.

Ricoeur asserts that his own work's greatest task is to investigate the different ways that time is hierarchised, from Augustine's hierarchy with eternity at the top, to Heidegger's hierarchy topped with the "finitude sealed by being-towards-death" (I: 87). In the case of Heidegger, Ricoeur also indicates another

dimension to distinctions in time, between the personal (and concerned with individual mortality) nature of phenomenological time, and the public, collective time of history and the kinds of narratives that use this as a model. This is analogous with the distinction, familiar from Chapter 2, between narratives that model afterlife and narratives that model apocalypse. Ricoeur argues, "The most serious question this work may be able to pose is to what degree a philosophical reflection on narrativity and time may aid us in thinking about eternity and death at the same time" (I: 87). So, imagining both non-being and being always as each equally other than time.

This chapter examines Ricoeur's point about the unique capacity of narrative to negotiate and unite the indescribable aspects of time, and how this happens through the medium itself, being written into the time-structures of narrative and particularly of emplotment. Emplotment itself is, in several important ways, other than time, providing a synoptic organising force for bringing together tensional events in new signifying formations. The idea of identifying what is other than time leads to narrative methods which adopt an almost scientific approach to this, removing one aspect of what is other than time, in order to see how the system functions without it. So, the first text considered, *Pincher Martin* (1956), imagines an afterlife in which the protagonist's subjective temporality has completely free rein, in a world where at first there appear to be no time-pieces for him to reliably produce an external chronology or chronography, and eventually, it is revealed, no time at all anyway. Comparably, *The Human Age* (1928, 1955)⁷⁴ satirises the contemporary emphasis on the phenomenology of time, particularly in the form of the influence of Henri Bergson on writers and artists of the time. *Time's Arrow* (1991) takes Arthur Eddington's concept of the arrow of time and creates a narrative that hinges on the possibility of time reversal and the removal of time's unidirectionality from its narrative universe. *The Third Policeman* (1967)⁷⁵ realises popular understanding of Einsteinian physics, providing a model of time that is not

⁷⁴ The first volume of Lewis's trilogy, *Childermass*, was published in 1928, and was left incomplete with a fourth volume, *The Trial of Man*, part-finished at Lewis's death in 1957. *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta* were both published in 1955.

⁷⁵ *The Third Policeman* was published in 1967, a year after Brian O'Nolan's death, after initially being rejected for publication in 1940.

only other than common-sense and observable ideas about time, but also other than the theories themselves, taking its cue from popularisations of Einstein's work and then translating them again into comic form. These texts deal with different aspects of our understanding of time, and use the afterlife as an experimental narrative scenario for investigating not only with what time is, but what we interpret it to be.

The afterlife provides a ready-made testing ground for this kind of speculation. It offers various spaces which are defined by their unusual temporalities: heaven and hell in eternity, in contrast with the passing, yet highly relative time of purgatory,⁷⁶ and the liminal time of the *bardo* between lives and *berzah* before judgment. The afterlife is therefore a place for thinking through what is other than time, and what is other than the laws of physics: what hell would break loose in a heaven in which the second law of thermodynamics *did* operate? What heat death would ultimately mean hell freezing over? The afterlife is an economical conceptual space in which natural laws have already been suspended and which allows us to imagine what would happen to human beings in alternative temporal conditions.

The second feature of the afterlife which is significant here is in the particular properties of hell. In contrast with the more fortunate protagonists encountered in Chapter 4, these individuals are not meant to be moving up through the purgatorial complex to heaven. It is the threat (not the promise) of eternity which makes these narrative temporalities so significant. However, even while the texts all claim to represent hells, they share similar patterns of dissolving subjectivities with the examples of fictional purgatories from Chapter 4. Eternal torment requires the retention of subjectivity on the part of those being tormented in order to make the punishment valid: if a different person is being punished for your crimes, there is a problem for divine justice. However, subjectivity is still fragile in these narratives, no matter how much they insist that they are set in hell. Both these concepts are contained within the term afterlife: being after is a

⁷⁶ Recent Catholic teaching suggests that purgatory is subjective: a General Audience from Pope John Paul II from 28 July 1999 taught that, "The term does not indicate a place, but a condition of existence".

description of status in time, and a certain continuation of what has preceded it, but 'being after life' is also in important ways being after time and after the self.

These four texts engage with what is other than time by deliberately creating narratives that refuse conventional representations of time, whether that is of the *a priori* existence of objective time, or a phenomenological model of temporality: they are not using the uniform, linear time of the nineteenth-century novel, nor modernist techniques for writing psychological time, both of which form a tradition for representing some truth about the experience of time in the novel. They suggest that what time *is* might not be well reflected in our experience of it, particularly when modern physics has explanations of the world which are so at odds with how we feel it to be. This chapter will therefore explore two connected areas: firstly, with a starting point in Ricoeur, taking the idea of narrative as a testing ground for concepts of time and "what is other than time"; secondly, looking at the ways in which various narrative strategies handle this testing ground when the temporal conditions are so very different from those that its tools have been designed to work on. By necessity, this is also an investigation into deliberately anti-mimetic fictions which are as much about enacting the impossibility of telling something as telling it.

***Pincher Martin* and Subjective Time**

William Golding's *Pincher Martin* has perhaps the most conventional structure of the four texts: the narrative works at first glance to the familiar and-they-were-dead-all-along plot, where the final reversal is the revelation that all the action of the novel has been taking place in another world from the one we thought. However, what makes *Pincher Martin* interesting in terms of its temporality is the way that the protagonist's experiences are completely unrelated to the reality of passing time, and are situated somewhere between an eternity of punishment which precisely fits Pincher Martin's crimes, and the "distended" time-consciousness of a living human being.

The confirmation of Martin's death within the first pages of the novel only comes in its final line, with the captain's statement that the dead man "didn't even

have time to kick off his seaboots" (208). This is not only an indication that the preceding narrative was occurring without physical manifestation but also, in the captain's observation that Martin would not have had time to suffer, a judgment on suffering which is completely physical: the only measure by which Martin didn't suffer was one which doesn't allow for time-consciousness acting without reference to chronology. No time for physical actions, but plenty of time for his mind to construct all kinds of horrors for him. The results of this are that there is no way to measure time and duration in the novel other than by pages, words or paragraphs. This enforced sense of the passage of time made spatial in the form of a text is a necessary part of Golding's destabilisation of the story's duration. As a reader, by the end of the novel I know I only have access to the unmeasurable temporality of Martin's mind, and I have to fall back on measuring the story's time by the markers of the written text rather than the minutes or days of ordinary physical time. The final lines of the text seem to invite the possibility, at least, of the reader turning the pages back to the beginning of the novel to locate the exact paragraph in which Martin died, a feature obviously not shared by ordinary time.

According to the narrative we read, Martin successfully wrenches off his seaboots only a couple of paragraphs into his ordeal, following his first dissociative episode, when "there was a kind of truce, observation of the body" (8). The first hint that Martin is dying and dead comes from his separation from activity, from his body, and from any sensory information, as he sinks under the water. The final conclusions about his suffering demonstrate the different kinds of time at work in the narrative, and return us to the physical time which had been suspended for the time of reading. Martin's time balloons out of the time which is revealed to have passed at the end of the narrative, and out of the time that has passed in reading: the subjective time of the character adds a third element to the time passing *in* the narrative and the time it takes *to* narrate. Moreover, this is significant for a consideration of any mimetic rendering of time, since it implies that every character in a narrative could potentially have a different and contradictory temporality. During the course of the novel, Martin's reality is our reality, and our

only reassessment comes through appeal to the alternative, and supposedly objective, time-consciousness of the extradiegetic narrator.

As Pincher Martin tries to cling onto the things which make him alive, the final thing he can retain is his consciousness of time as an idea, even after any physical grounding for duration has become impossible. This also becomes one of the features which eventually undermines his delusion of continuing to live when, after his first realisation of the flaws in his created world, he loses consciousness and wakes to find “a separation between now, whenever now was, and the instant of terror” (167). This separation is not the difference between then and now, because the loss of consciousness is distinguished from sleep “because time had stopped or come to an end” (168). Without Martin’s consciousness the world ceases to exist, and there is no time whatsoever, so he wakes up to the same moment, but with a disconnected thought. On the rock, he is afraid to sleep and recognises that “sleep was a consenting to die [. . .] there the carefully hoarded and enjoyed personality, our only treasure and at the same time our only defence must die into the ultimate truth of all things, the black lightning that splits and destroys all, the positive, unquestionable nothingness” (91). When nothing exists outside his own consciousness, falling asleep is the second death and black lightning that he will face at the end of the novel.

The novel sets up a curious interplay between the internal and the external, organising this as a metaphor for all of the experiences that Pincher Martin undergoes. The island where all the action takes place follows the contours of his tooth, with the limited sensory information from inside his own body being projected hugely to create an entire world. The interface between the self and the world is inscribed in Martin’s changing position relative to his body. On either side of the seaboots episode at the beginning of the novel he can see his body from outside, and loses any sense of ownership over it. In the most telling indication of Martin’s death, his body becomes “the body” and his snarl is contrasted with “the real jaw” of the face that no longer belongs to him:

Could he have controlled the nerves of his face, or could a face have been fashioned to fit the attitude of his consciousness where it lay

suspended between life and death that face would have worn a snarl. But the real jaw was contorted down and distant, the mouth was sloped full. (8)

Later, the place of Martin within his body itself reinforces this sense of separation from physical existence, as though he's situated in a perception of his body rather than a physical body itself, which does not fit comfortably together: "The man was inside two crevices. There was first the rock [...] his body was a second and interior crevice which he inhabited [...]. He himself was at the far end of this inner crevice of flesh" (48). Rattling around inside a body which seems the size of a universe, what remains of Pincher Martin is projecting layers of physical space around him in a replica of living. Both time and space in the novel are first read as typically mimetic of physical reality, but then have to be reread as a complete construction of Martin's own consciousness.

The time-consciousness here is particularly interesting in the context of reading, since it is not so unusual to encounter an imaginary place, but the insertion of a segment of an alien time within a linear time scheme has greater implications for the novel's experimental approach to subjectivity. The time taken for the reader to progress through the novel finds absolutely no equivalence in the real duration of the story, and there seems to be no way that even imagining these events could fit into the time indicated by the novel's opening pages, before Martin removes his sea boots. Gabriel Josipovici describes this relation between the time of reading and the two time schemes of the novel as central to its purpose: "In this way the act of reading becomes the subject of the novel, and the final twist shocks the reader into the recognition of what novels normally pass over in silence: the difference between our imagination and the world" (263). Encoding its temporal concerns in its structure, *Pincher Martin* investigates both the time of narration and the time of reading. It is also worth recognising that the novel suggests that the distinction is threefold; between the imagination, the world and the distinction between time-consciousness and time-unconsciousness, which is the difference between the time it would take to consciously imagine all the events of the story and the time it would take to dream them. And, most importantly, how different

the time would *feel* between imagining and dreaming: time-consciousness is always othered as time-subconsciousness.

Josipovici's discussion of *Pincher Martin* in his study *The World and the Book* (1971) is concerned with the relations between the way we read and the way we experience the world, and one of the concerns of this novel is how this relates to time. Josipovici makes the interesting observation that *Pincher Martin* could be read as an answer to *Robinson Crusoe*, a text situated at the very beginning of the history of the novel, and establishing the divergence between time in the world and in the book. The elements of the novel that foreground Crusoe's concerns with his own spiritual fate, and his reading of himself and the world (like a book) for clues to his election or preterition contrast with Martin's complete attachment to his living self, but also to his perception of the values of life on earth. Where Crusoe is concerned with the future of his soul (and the indicators that his physical survival provide for this), Martin is concerned with the necessary dissolution of his subjectivity that any afterlife would bring: as his friend Nathaniel notes, "Take us as we are now and heaven would be sheer negation. Without form and void. You see? A sort of black lightning destroying everything that we call life" (70). Rather than performing a Protestant reckoning of the likelihood of his election, Martin copes with death by trying to maintain a hallucination of existence, using his consciousness of duration unanchored to physical time to trick himself into extending his life. *Robinson Crusoe* demonstrates temporality for the characters which finds its meaning in another world of reference: the writing of the account which comes after the events, and the system of posthumous punishment and reward, both of which explain the life that has gone before. *Pincher Martin* works in a different way, moving the division from time and eternity (which can pattern and interpret events in time) to the distinction between physical and phenomenological time. Death, in Golding's novel, is a negation both of time and the self, and Martin's experiences can be read as a process of mastering Nathaniel's "technique of dying into heaven" and accepting a loss of control and self-determination. This is particularly important for a man who lived by taking exactly what he wanted from people around him.

The concentration on Martin's internal time-consciousness separated from the reality of time passing does make his ontological position rather ambiguous. Golding said of the novel that he intended, "to write it so vividly and accurately and with such an exact programme that nobody can mistake exactly what I mean" (Kermode, 1959: 50). However, there is something ungraspable in the concept of Martin's position, to the extent that Golding felt he had to summarise the novel's purpose outside its pages:

Christopher Hadley Martin had no belief in anything but the importance of his own life, no God. Because he was created in the image of God he had a freedom of choice that he used to centre the world on himself. He did not believe in purgatory and therefore when he died it was not presented to him in overtly theological terms. The greed for life which had been the mainspring of his nature forced him to refuse the selfless act of dying. He continued to exist separately in a world created by his own murderous nature. His drowned body lies rolling in the Atlantic but the ravenous ego invents a rock for him to endure on. [. . .] Just to be Pincher is purgatory; to be Pincher for eternity is hell. (qtd. in Kermode, 1962: 60)

The continuing ambiguity here is that Martin's experience can be read as either a punishment like the contrapasso of Dante's damned, or as the product of the continuation of Martin's existence, leaving divine agency essentially irrelevant and potentially turning eternity into the infinite duration of moments made possible by individual time-consciousness. However, it is only because Martin is in some senses godlike – able to create a world around himself – that the novel exists at all. Created in the image of God, Martin's mind creates a terrifyingly accurate afterlife for himself that conforms to the logic of a divine order, yet this becomes another of the novel's infinite regressions: God and man could be working to the same logic because they are each created by the other. Yet what undoes Martin's creation is the realisation that the difference between his own creation and the world itself is the lack of disorder and contingency in his imagination. The accumulation of his

suppressed suspicions about his existence on the rock is the dawning awareness that there is “a pattern emerging from circumstances” (169). He is punished too neatly for his sins in the plot he contrives, and the logic is the human logic of dreams, which is also the logic of the afterlife.

The logic of the mind separated from the external stimuli is equivalent to an individual separated from the world in the afterlife, and the novel offers both of these as sources of the logic of eternity and afterlife. As I have shown above, the novel establishes a strong mind-body dualism, initially, and Golding emphasised the theme further in the more explicit title of the American publication of the text: *The Two Deaths of Christopher Martin*. Not only does this rather give the game away both about the identity of the protagonist (whose name we do not learn in the text until a third of the way through, and which never calls him “Pincher”), but also gives a clue to the final twist of the plot. In a novel so opaque as to require Golding to explain its meaning in the *Radio Times*, perhaps this is not such a problem, but the novel’s alternative title makes explicit the separation between the death of the body and the death of the mind that Golding describes in his opposition of the “drowned body [. . .] rolling in the Atlantic” and the “ravenous ego” on the rock.

Golding makes it clear that the element which would make this hell rather than purgatory (“Just to be Pincher is purgatory; to be Pincher for eternity is hell”) would be the absence of any possibility of time passing and therefore of redemption and escape. Eternity in this text opens up infinitesimally, in the ever-extending time of Martin’s consciousness. The model for this extendable time comes from the idea of a life flashing before a person’s dying eyes. Other texts have explored the narrative potential of the proverbially full time just before death, and the extension of this time marks the difference between physical and psychological time.⁷⁷ This, for instance, is the “secret miracle” granted to Jaromir Hladik in

⁷⁷ This final, extended moment has a famous place in Ambrose Bierce’s short story ‘An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge’ (1890). In the story the protagonist, Peyton Farquhar, is to be hanged from the bridge by Union soldiers, but manages to escape from the noose and run home to his wife, only for his salvation to be revealed as imaginary. The journey time only passes inside Peyton Farquhar’s head, as the end of the story finds him back at the end of the rope. The passage through water which marks the transition point in both stories seems similar enough to suggest Golding alluding to Bierce’s text. The most striking similarity of all is the physical suffering and damage endured by the

Borges' 1956 short story of that title, when God gives the protagonist the time to complete his drama while he stands in front of a firing squad. It's worth noting that when, for Hladik, "the physical universe came to a halt" his first thoughts are of eternity: "I am in hell, I am dead" [. . .] "I am mad" [. . .] "Time has stopped" (123). Hladik's life's work has been dedicated to a study of eternity and to a drama which is eventually revealed to have taken place only in the "circular delirium" which a character "lives and relives endlessly" (121). Rather than this repetitious eternity, Hladik discovers the potentially infinite extension of the individual moment, but his first thoughts are that this could be equally hellish. The conclusion hanging over *Pincher Martin* is that an infinite moment expanded to eternity, even if it is hell, is Martin's preferred option, and he would rather be suffering eternally and existent than dissolved away in the perfection of a heaven. In his final conversation with God, Martin argues that he has created both God and the afterlife himself, and he prefers this hell rather than a heaven which would require the forfeiting of his subjectivity.

The Human Age and Bureaucratic Time

Golding's novel accepts the possibilities of subjective time as a form of eternity, separated from objective time, and suggests that a modern man might (ill-advisedly) prefer the existence of the self in hell to its eventual dissolution in heaven. In contrast, the unfortunate protagonists of Wyndham Lewis's unfinished, multivolume work, *The Human Age*, find themselves in an afterlife that is ruled by these modern concepts, which the text condemns as misconceptions appropriate to a hellish afterlife. Where *Pincher Martin* takes subjective time as a fact, Lewis's exploration of similar ground problematises this aspect of time by making temporality the responsibility of the rulers of each part of his afterlife.

The text's first book, *Childermass*, is set "Outside Heaven" in a refugee camp ruled by the Bailiff, who judges supplicants on their representativeness of

characters, which seems really surprising given the emphasis we have here on the separation of physical and mental time.

categories of human personality before they are allowed to enter heaven.⁷⁸ He has built and controls all the conditions of the landscape, including its time and space: the Bailiff explains, “were you not in Space-Time you could not exist at all, you can regard yourself as existing in a sort of mental excrescence, or annexe, of Space-Time” (279). The characters journeying in this afterlife, Satterthwaite and Pullman, end up in the closest thing to eternity: a “Time-scene” which is frozen like a panorama, and through which they travel back in time, with all the perspectively reducing objects in the landscape making them feel like giants. This part of the text is filled with puns on time and its experience, as the time flats have become mountains with their own alpine “Time-air” (122); as objects shrink, Pullman worries that “Time is short” (124); and Satterthwaite is called a lout by one of the tiny historical figures, “in spite of your dimensions” (129). Making real the figurative aspects of language about time ultimately suggests that the ways we talk about time do not match how it really is. Pullman and Satterthwaite are describing what is really happening to them, in a world which has been controlled by another consciousness.⁷⁹ In some senses the Bailiff’s power can represent a malevolent god, omniscient and omnipotent, and with a mind larger and information more complete than an ordinary human being’s, or a novelist creating the Space-Time conditions of a world. The Bailiff has created the timescape in *Childermass* according to the model of Bergsonian time, or what Lewis condemned as the “Time Cult” in *Time and the Western Man* (1927). Fredric Jameson’s interpretation of Lewis’s position, in *Fables of Aggression* (1979), suggests a connection between the

⁷⁸ The refugee camp continues to be associated with the afterlife in twentieth-century literature. It is an important model for a purgatory before heaven in D.M. Thomas’s *The White Hotel* (1981), in which the main character emigrates to Israel in her afterlife. Similarly, and with more explicit intertextual reference to *The Human Age*, J.M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* (1999) contains an afterlife which seems tacked together from literary and historical memory (Kafka, concentration camps, *Childermass*). Elizabeth Costello faces a bailiff who asks her what she believes, and requires a statement of belief from her.

⁷⁹ Alasdair Gray lists *The Human Age* in the index of plagiarisms in *Lanark*, and his greatest debt to Lewis comes in the passage in which Lanark and Rima journey through the intercalendrical zone between city administrations, where time is elastic, looped and excrescent. The answers to the same questions of redemption and the self are, however, very different in *Lanark*: for one thing, Lanark has chosen Rima to journey with him, and love, parenthood, art and political activism are all genuine, if only partial, solutions to the problems of integrating the individual within a system of bureaucratic power, none of which are acceptable outcomes for Lewis’s characters.

shortcomings of modernity and this “Time Cult”: “On his diagnosis, the commitment to temporality as an experience, the valorization of historicity and durée over the timeless objectivity of the lived present, stands at the very center of the unreality of the twentieth century man” (124). The unreality of experience in modernity which leads to a kind of living death is, for Lewis, a result of accepted ideas about temporality. *The Human Age* is characterised by settings that have a similarly modern concern with the place of bureaucracy and the state, in both disciplinary control and in state support.⁸⁰

As Pullman and Satterthwaite’s progress through the afterlife takes them to other locations, their experience of time changes according to their setting. The second book, *Monstre Gai* begins with the chapter “This is not Heaven” and introduces the setting of a European city with a culture of endless shopping and café visits. None of its inhabitants work, age or grow old, but they can have their bodies damaged irrevocably and end up living in pieces in cupboards or drawers.⁸¹ As one of the other characters explains, “The central fact is that time does not exist here” (20). The camp in *Childermass*, like purgatory, has time of some description, even if it is drastically deformed, or simply a ramshackle addition to the Space-Time of the world. In the Third City, time does not exist, yet time seems to pass for the characters and the narrative unfolds rather conventionally. By the third volume of *The Human Age* it is this title-value of humanity itself which is at stake, as the angels are threatened with being brought down to the size, scale, mortality and time-consciousness of the ordinary mass of human beings.

The narrative strategies that are used to reflect this engagement with temporality are embedded in the framework of the text’s origins as a radio drama. Firstly, the narration takes place entirely in the present tense, in a form similar to stage directions, and some portions of the text are framed entirely as dialogue. Moreover, the protagonists are, in the first volume at least, explicitly identified as

⁸⁰ Like many new to the afterlife (Lily in *How the Dead Live*, Elizabeth in *Elizabeth Costello*) Pullman is awarded a kind of death pension. In this regard, he is much better off than Alasdair Gray’s Lanark, who is forced to take out a credit card in the afterlife!

⁸¹ The Third City seems to be where bodies come back into their own, since in the camp Satterthwaite and Pullman didn’t have to urinate, were unable to eat, and the murdered simply came back to life eventually. Once in the concentration-camp hell of *Malign Fiesta* people are actually killable.

characters, while descriptions of set pieces and scenes are also notable. All this means that the narration is able to maintain the baseline value of a constant narrative present, even as time is stretched and reorganised. However, the narrative is also, on a larger level, shaped by the familiar concern with endings that has been so prevalent in many of the texts already discussed here. Fredric Jameson's analysis of the experience of reading Lewis's work describes the effects of this desire for imagining the ultimate ending:

It is as though, when the imagination of death fails you at some primary level, its commonplace or stereotypical representations need to be repeated, worked through, and exhausted by a narrative which, having taken you through death unsuccessfully a first time, can now recuperate this failure by bringing the reading mind up short against the unpremeditated shock of a *second* dying.
(163)

Jameson analyses this second death in the context of the death drive, the aim not just to realise every desire by dying once, into the afterlife, but to transcend this false ending, cheat eternity and die doubly and forever. We have seen the importance of the "two deaths of Christopher Martin" in Golding's novel and how, in the context of narratives that use purgatory as their framework, the second death is often an investigation and exposure of the way that narratives exploit the power of endings (see Chapter 4). However, when the narratives, as in these cases, are being used as tools to investigate how we think about time, these double deaths do the narrative work Ricoeur identifies as "thinking about eternity and death at the same time" (I: 87). They flirt with the possibility of both the existence of everything all at once in eternity, and complete extinction. However, they also enact the process of the unnarratability of both of these things. What we are finding here is not just that, as Jameson identifies, "representations of death will always prove, under closer inspection, to be complex displacements of an indirect, symbolic meditation about *something else*" (160), but also that thinking about time is a displacement that becomes a meditation on something else: on death and on eternity. In narrative, these are united by the end of the narrative coinciding with

the realisation of the connections across its plot. In Ricoeur's words: "Fictional narrative thus detects temporalities more or less extended, offering in each instance a different figure of recollection, of eternity in or out of time, and, I will add, of the secret relation between eternity and death" (II: 101) .

The Third Policeman and Iterative Time

Golding offers an experimental scenario in which objective time has been removed, and only temporality remains: *Pincher Martin* is a fiction about the possibility that time itself might be a fiction. This experimental method is also at work in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, but the novel begins by questioning the usefulness of this methodology. It posits the possibility that the paradoxes of modern sub-atomic physics leave us in a situation in which, not only do we have to give up relying on a common-sense, intuitive model of the world, but we also can't avoid putting time and the self into our experimental models. In the novel's opening sentence the nameless narrator admits he is responsible for a murder and goes on to describe his experiences afterwards in a strange Parish where the laws of physics seem to be broken on a daily basis. At the end of the novel he meets the third policeman of the Parish, Sergeant Fox, who promises to return him to his home with a box of omnium, a substance which can create anything in the universe. The narrator then returns to his home to find he has been dead sixteen years, and goes back to The Parish with his memory wiped out, to begin the experience again. Anne Clissman notes that O'Brien's original title for the novel was *Hell Goes Round and Round* (1975: 152): like Golding, O'Brien entertained the idea of a more explicit title for his novel, which would have revealed the story as an afterlife from the beginning. Where *The Human Age* involves arbitrary quickening, slowing and stopping of time, and *Pincher Martin* involves a kind of time bubble that opens up inside objective time (Martin does not markedly *lose* objective time; his experiences are supplementary), *The Third Policeman* works as an enormous time loop, starting from the moment the narrator kills a man, and running until the time, sixteen years later on earth but only a few days later in his afterlife, when he returns to his home.

The end of the novel repeats virtually word-for-word the narrator's first experiences of the confusing afterlife in *The Parish*, with the implication that this repetition will be infinite. Repeating the same paragraphs just once is enough for the text to make clear, as O'Brien observed in a letter, appended to the published novel, "that this sort of thing goes on for ever and ever" (207). Narratology has tools to name and explain the way *The Third Policeman* works, in Gérard Genette's concept of iterative narrative, in which multiple occurrences of an event are narrated just once. In *Narrative Discourse*, Genette's example is the stultifying Sunday routine at Combray in *Swann's Way*, an example which demonstrates the difference at the heart of these two texts. Marcel narrates once for a hundred days that *seem* all alike, establishing not only a reconstructable sense of genuine happenings, but also the experience of Marcel's perception of these happenings. In *The Third Policeman*, the events are genuinely identical, and we are aware that there is no reason to construct a coherent reality from this narrative. The repetition is a non-mimetic representation of time in *The Third Policeman*, rather than being in service to a demonstration of higher psychological verisimilitude.

O'Brien's impossible story is fuelled by an engagement with counter-intuitive modern science, and a large amount of comedy at its expense. His main source is the work of J.W. Dunne, whose concept of serialism seems to have shaped the theories advanced by the novel's fictitious thinker, de Selby. Dunne's work straddles the line between thought-experiment and the downright bizarre, such that Anthony Cronin, O'Brien's biographer, explains that, while Dunne's ideas read like "fairly classy hokum today [. . .] perhaps because they gave the illusion of discussing the problems which Einstein, whom nobody understood, had dealt with, they were popular in [O'Brien's] circle" (103). Dunne's ideas centre on the idea that our sense of time passing is an issue of attenuation, and that all times are equally open to us if we can only access them. Significantly, he argued that we can access other times, both past and future, when our attention loses focus on the narrow present. In Dunne's *Nothing Dies* (1940),⁸² serialism becomes an answer to

⁸² *Nothing Dies* collects together Dunne's work in a new form and with the explicit purpose of explaining "the author's famous 'Time' theory [. . .] for those who wish to know merely, without

death: if all times are co-existent then they should be equally accessible once we are freed by death from our focus on the present. He also argues that we are able to recombine these elements so that, like dreams, our afterlife can be a fantasy of time revisited and recombined but, presumably, you would need to have the material from your life to fuel it. He writes: "You will have everything you have wanted always in this life – a world wherein every wish is fulfilled. It is a little heaven of private pleasure – and a hell of utter loneliness" (79). Odd as Dunne's ideas sound, they were not all that dissimilar to the beliefs Einstein seems to have held. Einstein consoled the family of a deceased friend with the assertion that death was not the end of existence: "For we convinced physicists," he wrote, "the distinction between past, present and future is only an illusion, however persistent" (qtd. in Coveney and Highfield, 30).⁸³ Whether this posthumous time-travelling could still be called an afterlife raises some interesting questions; even though past and future might be illusions and all times are co-existent, before and after should still maintain some significance in terms of cause and effect. This is a distinction which Martin Amis explores in *Time's Arrow*, and which we will consider below.

In *The Third Policeman* the thinker de Selby offers a similar relation between time and the afterlife, admittedly stated in a rather more outrageous way. He asserts that, contrary to the experience of our senses, the world is a sausage-shape, which we perceive to be spherical because of our restriction to unidirectional time. Travel, longitudinally, along the barrel of the sausage would open "a world of entirely new sensation and experience" (98). Unfortunately, movement into this new direction is generally coincident with death. De Selby also apparently subscribes to an extreme view of time as a series of moments, which are only joined by human perception. The narrator contests de Selby's consequent observation that "every journey is an hallucination" by noting,

[De Selby's] theory, insofar as I can understand it, seems to discount the testimony of human experience and is at variance with

mathematics, 'what it is all about.' "(8). The earlier books that are potentially a source for *The Third Policeman's* de Selby are *An Experiment with Time* (1927) and *The Serial Universe* (1934).

⁸³ This is from a letter to the family of the engineer and fellow Swiss patent office employee, Michele Besso. He died in March 1955, predeceasing Einstein himself by about a month.

everything I have learnt myself on many a country walk. Human existence de Selby has defined as 'a series of static experiences each infinitely brief', a conception which he is thought to have arrived at from examining some old cinematograph films. (52)

This captures very accurately the difference between the physics derived from human experience and observation and the physics opened up by new technologies. After Einstein, more than ever, the world cannot be said to match the testimony of human experience, and the novel's claims to anything other than a realism of subjectivity get torn in two.

In *The Third Policeman*, the time that the narrator experiences in the Parish takes place neither in de Selby's earth-time, nor the all-times accessible along the barrel of the sausage. It is also distinguished from eternity which, in the Parish, is an underground building reached by way of a lift. In this place called eternity, where no time passes, razors stay sharp and cigarettes don't burn down. Yet even this place without time is still narratable, and things do still happen there, even if they can have no effects, other than memories, when the characters return to ordinary time. This spatialisation of eternity is one of the models for representing what is other than time in narrative fiction. Traditionally, it becomes a place, usually the underworld, and the descent narrative means travellers can go there and return and tell the story, because they are going to a location, not a time. O'Brien also plays with this model and its relations with ideas about counter-intuitive time in his final novel *The Dalkey Archive* (1964), which reworks some elements from *The Third Policeman* manuscript after it was rejected for publication. *The Dalkey Archive* features a similar underground eternity, this time in an underwater cave, where De Selby makes contact with the dead.⁸⁴ He calls up St Augustine and asks what it's like to be "in heaven for all eternity" and Augustine replies, "For *all* eternity? Do you then think there are fractional or temporary eternities?" (43). In O'Brien's novels that is exactly what there are because that's all that can be contained within narrative and, implicitly, within human

⁸⁴ In this second novel, when we meet the character in person rather than just through his writings, de Selby has become De Selby, but their philosophy seems to be identical.

comprehension. The dead Augustine can say (in construction so similar to all the other afterlife “nows” listed at the beginning of this chapter), “I have no tomorrow. I am. I have only nowness” (43), but this constant present is still sliding into the past through grammar and sentence structure, indicating the basic incompatibility of language and eternity.

This is just one way of encoding eternity in narrative, which also pits the perception of temporality against the measurable passing of time: the narrator in *The Third Policeman* continues to experience the Parish’s version of eternity as ordinary lived time. This is important when we consider that this iterative model of infinite time is juxtaposed in the novel with the visit to the policemen’s eternity, where no time passes, razors stay sharp and cigarettes don’t burn down. Yet even this place without time is still narratable, and actions still take place there. Is this because there are no coherent physical laws here, because this is a place controlled by the narrator’s consciousness, contorted as it is by his absorption of the bizarre theories of de Selby?

There is some evidence that the narrator’s experience in *The Third Policeman* is of a completely subjective hell, occurring within his own mind and governed by the temporality of consciousness. This is also the situation, familiar from *Pincher Martin*, in which both temporality and punishment are generated in the mind itself. This would mean that the ‘deselbiana’ cluttering up his head results in the creation of an afterlife which responds to his fears and his guilt. Keith Hopper, in his study *Flann O’Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (1995), refers to an interesting hypothesis about this, asserting that “de Selby” is “a variation of the German ‘der Selbe’; meaning ‘the self’”, so that all the references to de Selby are references to the narrator, and the “greatest sin” he committed for the sake of de Selby was committed for himself (209). Der Selbe is closer to ‘the same’ in German, but I think Hopper’s point certainly still stands: there is some link between de Selby and the narrator beyond an academic influence, to the extent that the landscape his mind creates as an afterlife is made from de Selby’s ideas. There is some evidence that he is somewhat aware of this from the beginning, unlike Martin’s frantic efforts to convince himself of his own madness in order to deny the

facts of his situation. For instance, on his arrival in the Parish, the narrator walks through the unfamiliar landscape that he still believes to be just a few miles from his lifelong home, and where the season has inexplicably changed from winter to summer overnight, yet he only admits to some “doubts and perplexities” about the situation. Specifically, he worries that it all seems “almost too pleasant, too perfect, too finely made” (41). In response, the narrator occupies the front part of his brain with de Selby’s theories and leaves the back part to enjoy the scenery. This displacement activity suggests that he is deliberately avoiding thoughts on the constructedness of the landscape. The division in his mind is also reminiscent of the tactics Pincher Martin uses when one part of his mind is creating the world on the rock and the other part is struggling to interpret its phenomena and to explain away the inconsistencies as madness. The divisions inside the narrator are also reinforced by the presence of his soul, Joe, who conducts conversations with the narrator about their predicament. Hopper observes that Joe is part of O’Brien’s “serious and sustained critique of modern, secular Cartesianism” representing the narrator’s soul and body split in two, yet is also deeply ironic, since he believes he is existing when he is neither alive nor real, but a dead, fictional character (265).

If the narrator of *The Third Policeman* pushes away the thought that the landscape is created by a human mind, it pushes back in the form of Inspector Fox, whose hand is eventually suggested to be at work in the Parish: the “far-from-usual consideration” shown in the arrangement of the trees is his. However, this is exactly the explanation the narrator wants, just like Martin’s refuge in madness as an explanation of the apparently inconsistent world around him. *The Third Policeman’s* narrator grasps this hope of common-sense laws at work, even through the medium of the fantastical substance, omnium. The coherence provided by this unlikely explanation means a welcome end to the cognitive dissonance that the narrator has been suffering throughout the novel. He would rather believe that a substance exists which can alter the laws of physics he already knows than try to reconcile atomic theory, for instance, with his own experience of the world. The emphasis that the narrator places on belief at this point, rather than empirical

evidence, suggests he has given up trying to connect these two competing worldviews:

If I could believe him he had been sitting in this room [. . .] calmly making ribbons of the natural order, inventing intricate and unheard of machinery to delude the other policemen, interfering drastically with time to make them think they had been leading their magical lives for years, bewildering, horrifying and enchanting the whole countryside. I was stupefied and appalled by the modest claim he had made so cheerfully, I could not quite believe it, yet it was the only way the terrible recollections which filled my brain could be explained. (195)

The narrator longs for a single explanation that will bring together all the events in one thought, no matter how outrageous. To me, this reads like a description of plot at work in the narrative, as the narrator searches for a sense to read back into his recollections, desperate for someone else to have plotted and ordered his experiences in advance. In this particular vision of hell, coherence is offered and then snatched away repeatedly, and the repetitive structure means there will never be an end-point from which to organise the preceding material. Hell is a never-ending story with all the anticipation but none of the sense that comes from a plotted ending.

Like Golding's supplementary précis of *Pincher Martin* in the *Radio Times*, O'Brien's explanation of the situation implicit in the text serves to highlight the potential for different readings of the plot. Despite O'Brien's statement that the infinite repetition of the story is "made clear" in the text, the publisher's note in the text published after his death carries two excerpts from O'Brien's other writings to explain some aspects of the novel. It is only the note that mentions the narrator is in hell, for instance, in an interesting second-person anticipation of the reading experience:

When you get to the end of the book you realize that my hero or main character (he's a heel and a killer) has been dead throughout the book and that all the queer and ghastly things which have been

happening to him are happening in a sort of hell which he earned for the killing. (207)

This representation of hell through iterative narrative is an important commentary on the problems of narrating eternity. Either this place is timeless and nothing narratable can happen, or the happenings betray the fact that time is really passing. The circular structure of *The Third Policeman*, with the iteration to infinity it implies, is one way of side-stepping this problem and narrating a time that can approach eternity through a closed loop. This combination of forward progression ultimately turning to circularity is the opposite of the novel's dominant image of the bicycle, in which circular action generates forward motion. However, it's also significant that this afterlife seems to contradict the model offered by de Selby, in which death is a second direction, an infinitely extendable linear journey, rather than the repeated, circular journey of living.

The other narrative feature I want to examine here is the role of this final revelation in the organisation of the novel. As in *Pincher Martin*, this aspect of the text seems to invite a return to reread the novel, as the reader is forced back to reconsider the preceding narrative. The process also works on a smaller scale within the text as individual elements have to be reprocessed in the light of later information. This adds to the circular processes at work, but also has implications for how the narrative functions as a whole: rather than remembering and mentally reordering previous information in retrospect, the text's word-for-word repetition gives a specific place from which to restart the story again and decode every detail afresh. In Hopper's study, delayed decoding is analysed as a technique for increasing ontological uncertainty, because the expectation of one level of reality is established, only to be pulled away with a jolt. One example of this is in the narrator's description of his own death by hanging, which is subsequently revealed, when he has woken up, to be a dream.⁸⁵ Hopper points out that a text means that, "a page describing a dream moment occupies the same material, textual space as a waking moment, and unless it is clearly signposted the reader makes no connection between the two states of being, both fictional" (141). The same is also true of

⁸⁵ This is the plot of Bierce's 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge' in reverse.

Pincher Martin, since one of the reasons Golding's commentary in the *Radio Times* was necessary is because of the final revelation of the novel, which moves its action wholesale from the familiar time and space of reality into the internal time and space of subjectivity. Golding's version of this trick is certainly subtle and easiest to miss, partly because of the sheer duration of the preceding narrative: we have lived inside Martin's creation for two-hundred pages before the truth of the matter is revealed to us.

A hell that existed only in the narrator's head would also undermine the torture of the experience, since it's the narrator's fate to be constantly trying to reconcile the physical world as he perceives it with his knowledge of the laws of physics. Where Pincher Martin's mind-time balloons out of an infinitesimal measure of physical time, the horror (and the humour) of O'Brien's hell comes from trying to fit an eternity you can reach via a lift with what we and the narrator know to be true about time from our ordinary experience.

These two techniques of delayed decoding and iterative narrative are both linked to modernism's exploration of our perception of the world and the way events present themselves in time to our consciousness, yet O'Brien uses them in *The Third Policeman* to comment on the world rather than the mind: using Brian McHale's categories from *Constructing Postmodernism*; the focus has moved from revealing epistemological truths to showing ontological uncertainties. The potential of iterative narrative is pursued to its limits as the events are not just told *as though* they were repeated identically; they are meant to be played out forever. Similarly, the delayed decoding of a perception of the world into a coherent pattern happens for both the narrator and the readers as we try to reconcile different worlds and ideas into one. The reader has a greater chance of success with this when the narrator is trapped and amnesiac in endlessly repeating events. Given the first-person narration, we are also unable to tell how many times previously the events have happened, leading to an infinite repetition of iterative narrative that seems to be the closest narrative can get to othered time in the form of eternity.

***Time's Arrow* and Oscillationist Time**

Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*, like *The Third Policeman*, elides the distinction between eternity and infinite time to make some approaches on eternity that ultimately imply its narrative impossibility. Like *The Third Policeman*, the novel looks at the aftermath of murder, but the protagonist of Amis's novel has been complicit in the murder of a whole people as a Nazi doctor at Auschwitz. The novel's well-known narrative technique involves a reversal of time that becomes clearer as the story progresses: the man who dies in America as Tod T. Friendly at the beginning of the novel was born Odilo Unverdorben in Solingen.⁸⁶ As his life reverses out of the "blackest sleep" (11) we find that he has "someone else inside [him], passenger or parasite" narrating this backwards existence (16). The novel's afterword indicates Amis's debt to Robert Jay Lifton's study, *The Nazi Doctors* (1986), and Amis's approach was informed by Lifton's ideas about the psychological splitting that went on for the doctors: "the key to understanding how Nazi doctors came to do the work of Auschwitz is the psychological principle I call 'doubling': the division of the self into two functioning wholes, so that the part-self acts as an entire self" (Lifton, 418). This division and repression of one part of the self indicates that the narrator is that part of Tod that was silenced and cut off at Auschwitz, only to be reawakened post-mortem. The narrator's lack of awareness of Tod's past is a necessary part of how the backwards time works as an afterlife that both exposes the horrific inverted world of Auschwitz, but which also finds something redemptive in a backwards time, to the extent that every sin is negated, even while every good action becomes a crime.

The entry-way into infinite circular time that is explicit in O'Brien's novel is left obscured in *Time's Arrow*, but there are some implications that the back-and-forth of Tod's life and afterlife will continue indefinitely. We leave before his anticipated and remembered birth, when the narrator inside him sees an arrow fly

⁸⁶ For the sake of brevity I am going to refer to Tod/Odilo as Tod, since this is the name the reader is given for him initially. However, it is worth bearing in mind the pairing of these two identities, which seem to me to indicate the double role of (T)Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake*, reinforcing the idea of one person performing a pair of inverted roles.

the other way and there is a hesitant moment in which time has the potential to turn back again for a second time.

Amis does seem quite attracted to this idea of reversed time as a structure for the afterlife that allows for a measure of both punishment and atonement, and which has the potential to continue infinitely as a partial eternity. His novel, *Other People* (1981) takes its title from the description of hell in Sartre's *No Exit*, the most famous twentieth-century model of hell as self-torture. In an interview with John Haffenden, Amis said he felt his book had been misunderstood (apparently, only Ian McEwan really 'got' the novel) and he explained it in significant terms: "The novel is the girl's death, and her death is a sort of witty parody of her life. [. . .] At the very end of the novel she starts her life again, the idea being that life and death will alternate until she gets it right" (17-18). Amis is quick to add that this is just a technique for his fiction rather than an espousal of a serious belief in reincarnation, but the concept of alternating life and death as a model for an infinity of afterlives does have implications for a similar reading of *Time's Arrow*.

Unlike Mary in *Other People*, there is no indication that the protagonist of *Time's Arrow* could modify his behaviour and somehow "get it right", but there is a sense that the universe is somehow righting or rebalancing itself. The afterlife as a parody of life is a telling comment on this model of time reversal: rather than a supplement to life, coming after it and somehow adding to its completed total, or answering it with a corresponding deserved punishment or reward, a parody runs alongside and holds a mirror up to life, with all the reversal and distortion that entails.

The second source for a reading of time reversal as the closest possible thing to eternity comes from a short story in Amis's collection *Einstein's Monsters* (1987). The collection deals with the intersections of personal mortality and the mass mortality of the apocalyptic scenario of nuclear war, and Amis's story, 'Bujak and the Strong Force, or, God's Dice' tells the story of a Polish man who tracks down Nazi collaborators after the war, and whose hero is Einstein:

Bujak spoke of Einstein as if he were God's literary critic, God being a poet. I, more stolidly, tend to suspect that God is a novelist. A

garrulous and deeply unwholesome one too . . . Actually Bujak's theory had a lot of appeal for me. It was, at least, holistic. It answered the big question. [. . .] You know the question. It reads: *Just what the hell is going on around here?* (38)

The answer, in *Time's Arrow*, could be that it *is* hell that is going on around here, but it is also a valid answer that *time* is going on around here, given that the major property of time is that it "goes on". Bujak's theory, as it is explained later, is rooted in Einsteinian physics, and the narrator cannot help but imagine some of its effects for narrative processes, causation and free will:

Einsteinian to the end, Bujak was an Oscillationist, claiming that the Big Bang will forever alternate with the Big Crunch, that the universe would expand only until unanimous gravity called it back to start again. At that moment, with the cosmos turning on its hinges, light would begin to travel backward, received by the stars and pouring from our human eyes. (47)

The outcome of this story is the possibility for the reversal of the murder of three members of Bujak's family, and then their dissolution into non-being before birth. In *Time's Arrow*, an oscillationist universe would see the doctor as killer alternating with the doctor as healer for infinite time, doing and undoing every action in this narrative's approach to eternity. As in the underground eternity in *The Third Policeman*, there can be happenings as long as they have no effects. If anything is to *happen* in the afterlife we end up with a logic problem, time has to either go "round and round" like in *The Third Policeman*, or it must go back and forth like *Time's Arrow*.

Another influence that Amis acknowledges in the afterword is the memoirs of Primo Levi, which are particularly important in the text's concern with logic and anti-logic. Levi said of Auschwitz, "Here there is no why," and it is this quotation that heads the chapter of the novel relating to Tod's actions at Auschwitz. Levi establishes parallels with *The Divine Comedy* in many parts of his writings, but in all the parallels with Dante's journey into the Inferno, there is no logic of punishment for sins or even any predictable outcome of his experiences: in a world where a

chance allocation of ill-fitting shoes can casually decide life or death, there is not even the care that goes into the meticulously chosen torments observed by Dante. *Time's Arrow* uses the time reversal to show that there is a kind of anti-logic that produces this senselessness by turning the Nazis' beliefs that Auschwitz was a creative force into reality: this can only happen in a reversed time. However, simultaneously, the novel suggests the only way to write after Auschwitz, to take any emplotment from this monstrous lack of meaning, is to reverse time.

Psychological doubling and making sense are both linked to the exploration of time in Amis's novel. As I have already shown, the splitting of Pincher Martin's subjectivity allows for him to separate a part of his mind into generating the island and the other into perceiving it, allowing for errors in his creation to eventually undermine his delusion. In *Time's Arrow* it is the perception of time itself which becomes split, with Tod perceiving the arrow of time as pointing in one direction and the narrator in the other. Moreover, the narrator's time perception is variable, with the time at the beginning of Tod's life (and the end of the novel) accelerating. Both their perceptions of time (and everything else) are set against each other, leaving us with no sense of objective time outside their half-shared mind.

Once time rewinds back to Auschwitz, the narrator's subjectivity rejoins Tod's (who became John and is now Odilo) and they are identified as "I" rather than "we": "I was one now, fused for some preternatural purpose" (125). The novel's past-tense narration is twisted by that crucial "now" to reinforce the importance of presence and the new wholeness of Odilo's being. Lived forwards, Tod's purpose is determined by the mythology of National Socialism but, lived backwards, what is the spur for the narrator and the reason for the reversal? Is there a preternatural logic that justifies the time reversal as something which can give meaning to this life or punish Tod's crimes: is this just a stylistic logic, or should we be looking for some universal power which has ordered the time reversal to set things right? Fiction is stepping in here to demonstrate a corrective to Auschwitz, where nothing makes sense.

The novel closes with little Odilo in a field, at about three years old, after a scene remembering his future return to the womb and eventual division into sperm

and ovum. It is not just the time reversal which is unusual here: we get to the end of the novel and Odilo is not erased out of existence because his conception is told as either analepsis or prolepsis (the narrative terms for this don't work here). In the same way that a conventional autobiography can only ever gesture forward in time to death, completeness and its own end, this reflection on life-writing has to flash (forward or back) to its own beginning. The text constantly relies on the fact that we half-know this story already, so any reconstruction of events in forward time, relying on historical knowledge, is always in tension with the text: the discourse tells precisely the opposite of the story, but readers can infer a single chain of events.

The reconstructability or unreconstructability of story events into a recognisable timeline indicates a significant difference between the texts discussed here and the mimetic framework at work in realist fictions. In Chapter 6 we encountered other worlds that called on an inheritance of narrative fictions that claimed to be holding a mirror up to the world of the reader. In many ways the fictions which investigate narrating eternity are also considering the extent to which other kinds of time have ever been effectively narrated. Where *Pincher Martin* and *The Human Age* critique the status of the phenomenology of time as a mimetic force in narrative fiction, *The Third Policeman* and *Time's Arrow* perform the same function for both objective time and concepts from modern physics. Ultimately, the sense that we get from all these texts is that time is something not fully contained by our own experience of it, and therefore not well served by a mimetic representation: if we are holding a mirror up to the world, it is always a mirror manufactured by human beings.

David Herman's *Story Logic* (2002) is concerned with many of these problems in the light of what he terms "deictic shift theory" (15). The shift from the time and space of the real world to those of the story world – and back again – entails a concomitant re-ordering of the mental models and processes used to construct these worlds. The logic of Herman's title is, like the hierarchical time that we are familiar with from Ricoeur's hierarchised temporal possibilities, a preferential or fuzzy logic, rather than a binary logic. Ricoeur shows that objective

time can be ranged against eternity, death, subjective time, chronography and chronology, and laws and models (and all these against the others), and that narrative can combine thinking about all these. In the terms of Herman's project for a post-structuralist narratology, a narrative does not just situate events in time and then give us a sense of their interconnection atemporally through plot; there is a range of possibilities for narrative temporality and atemporality (if we consider everything that is other than time) that are invoked preferentially or fuzzily. Herman suggests that twentieth-century fiction has disturbed this binary by refusing to make its story events readily orderable in time.

In a novel like *The Third Policeman*, for instance, events are unsituatable in any coherent logic of time and space outside the story itself. Herman's own analysis of O'Brien's novel finds that it is this impossible world created by the novel's space and time that makes it hell:

Arguably, the point of this narrative is bound up with the protagonist-narrator's use of discourse strategies that at once trigger and inhibit readers' attempts to construct a cognitive map of the storyworld being recounted [...] *Hell*, in this context, names less a place than the cognitive dissonance caused by the narrator's efforts to model the otherworld as a place. (285)

The analysis of *The Third Policeman* is situated in a discussion of spatiality, but the place of unthinkable time is clearly as important to an eternity spent in this afterlife. As I mentioned above, the torment is the impossibility of making sense of the narrative, in large part because it is without an ending. In Herman's discussion of narratives whose temporalities are unreconstructable into a linear time order, D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* is featured as an example of fuzzy narrative temporality in action. In this novel, already considered in terms of causal reversal in Chapter 3 of this thesis, there is no single way of making sense of the novel's temporal ordering that also respects the logic of the plot connections made between events. Like all of the novels here, it allows for thinking through what is other than time, and suggests the problems of reading fiction as a mimetic representation of any events. Writing about the afterlife

forces us to ask more widely, why the time in fiction should ever be anything like the time in life.

All of these ways of narrating what is other than time bring together eternity and death as the shaping forces for our understanding of time and life. In the texts considered in this chapter, time is reversed, looped, annexed or ballooned, and certain elements are removed in experimental scenarios. The outcomes read as equally experimental. However, they all establish infinite time (as repetition, as reversal, as infinitesimal subjective thought processes, or simply as endlessness) in place of eternity, apparently admitting defeat on writing this other to time. In her study of nonsense writing, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (1979), Susan Stewart identifies “play with infinity” as one of its features. She writes, “As fictions move away from realism and the temporality of the everyday life world, the paradoxical spectre of infinite time emerges with its problems of origins and endings” (118). This division of associations is inescapable: realism and time with life, and infinite time – and its paradoxical spectre – with the afterlife. However, all of the narratives considered in this chapter are focused on sense and nonsense in all their forms: from counterintuitive modern physics, to the incomprehensible detail of genocide, to the logic of the modern mind, to the sense that comes from an ending, and which is so threatened by infinity. The nonsense aspects of these texts are what make them so other than time, in that their reference is not mimetic, yet the always-othered nature of time means that the attempts at representing what is not time, and what is not life, bring as much to investigatory practice as attempts to render the experience of lived time in narrative.

Chapter 8

After Life Writing

To go against the
way of things
Right Now
Break the rhythm If you Break it
Keep doing
That
No one
Dominates you No past can
Close to me and Closer . . . (The Language of Heaven)

One role of life after death in literature is as a ready-made space for exercising ideas for non-mimetic fictions, and therefore for ways of narrating which do not necessarily fit the models of narratology. So far, the main narrative emerging in this thesis has seen contemporary writing about the afterlife as a reaction against widely realist attempts to represent the world and the human experience of it; against the general category of life-writing. Concomitantly, settings in and voices from the afterlife that undermine ideas about narrative temporality, plot, deixis, and the descriptive labels for narrators, force us to reassess many of the categories and concepts of narratology. In this final chapter, I want to examine some other hypotheses which have contributed to the power and timeliness of the afterlife as a medium for narrative exploration, but also as a bearer of ideas with wider cultural currency.

This chapter looks at how the fictional engagement with the afterlife plays

into a more general concern with after-, post- and meta- as models for history, for culture and for thought quite widely. This provides an alternative, parallel context for the significance of the afterlife as a subject for texts that are deeply concerned with the practice of both narrative and fiction.

After: Post-

In narratives of individual death, what comes post-death for the reader can be survival or mourning, but these narratives also force recognition of the ways in which we are living in a context which places us already after life. This sense of our belatedness represents a relationship to history and to the present that is always about afterlife, about living with death. In all these fictions there is a general awareness of what it means to be 'after' in many different areas of experience; both a historical sense of what has come before, and a self-consciousness about the past and present of the processes and techniques of the novel. It is these two senses of after, as the Latin 'post' and the Greek 'meta,' that I want to examine in the conclusion of this study of the afterlife, and ask how afterlife is used as a concept to negotiate between the aftermath of these two ideas in contemporary culture.

A useful case study of the post/after distinction at work can be found in some of the critical responses to the idea of the end of theory. Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* (2003), Martin McQuillan et al's *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism* (1999), and Michael Payne and John Schad's *Life.After.Theory* (2003) all take this as their premise,⁸⁷ and all these titles (and texts) can be interrogated as theories of after or post, theories of life after, theories of reading after, and so on.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ I could also add to this list the variety of perspectives offered in the examples of Thomas Docherty's *After Theory* (1996), David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, eds., *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996); Valentine Cunningham, *Reading After Theory* (2002); and, in a similar vein – and with a title perhaps even more relevant to the present discussion – Paul Bové's *In the Wake of Theory* (1992). It is also worth comparing the dates of these publications with the increasing popularity of the afterlife as a topic in the same period: see the chronology in Appendix I.

⁸⁸ The trick of reading these studies as commentaries on post or after doesn't work with something like Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism* (1980), and this isn't only because of a difference in syntax, but a difference in theoretical approach. Lentricchia begins his work by identifying the anti-historical qualities of the New Criticism, which he argues are its major bequest to certain strands of contemporary criticism. He connects the New Criticism's tendencies towards the atemporal with a consequent "subtle denial of history" in his own time: "In my opinion it is the very condition of contemporary critical historicity that there is no 'after' and 'before' the New Criticism: no absolute

In some of these studies there is a distinction between after and post that associates post with the theory that has been consigned to the past. So, Terry Eagleton's return to straight-talking and ethical and political practice means a choice of after over post in *After Theory*. Similarly, the choice of post for the title of McQuillan et al's collection indicates the "new directions" of the work's subtitle, maintaining but developing previous theoretical positions. The connotations of these words are one consideration I have taken into account in investigating the value of afterlife as a conceptual term.

The analysis of theory's long-standing, even integral, postness is central to much of the analysis of post-theory. For instance, the editors of *Post Theory: New Directions in Criticism* suggest that they believe they "are the first to call for an end to reporting the death of reporting the death of theory" (ix). The introduction to the volume argues that the operation of theory is dependent on a concern with its own end, and locates this within the general problem of post. Post-theory (the theory of post, and theory which is post-theory) is what theory should really have been all along, if it had thought through all the consequences of a critique of presence:

'Post-Theory' must be a Theory which comes before and after itself, taking its own postness in the sense that Lyotard considers the post in postmodernism, by which Theory would be 'constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant' with the reflexive double-bind of Post-Theory. In other words, the temporo-spatial effects of a 'postness' which disrupts and challenges the sclerotic and the unquestioned must be an effect of *différance*, the differed space of the post and the deferred time of postness. Post-Theory then is not just a Theory which is not present but is potentially so, rather it is a theory (an experience of thought) which cannot be fully activated even potentially. Post-Theory is a state of thinking which discovers itself in a constant state of deferral, a position of reflexivity and an experience of questioning which constantly displaces itself in the negotiation with the aporias

presence *in the present* means that the present is opened up to the 'drift from the other ends of time'" (xiii, quoting Fredric Jameson at the end).

of Theory. Post-Theory speaks to the Other to whom it must be addressed. (xv)⁸⁹

Are the temporo-spatial effects of post different from the temporo-spatial effects of after? In the last two chapters we saw how afterlife fictions have attempted to situate themselves in different spaces and deferred times, which are other than and after life. It is this sense of life after death as the Other World that comes strongly to the fore in this temporo-spatial distinction.

The editors of *After-Theory*, in the quotation above, identify the importance of Jean-Francois Lyotard's reading of the post in postmodernism. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard finds a sense of both the forward and backward casting of time in the "future anterior" of the word postmodern: "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state and this state is constant" (79). Postmodernism is therefore a life *inside* modernism, rather than a life *after* modernism, meaning that both terms contain and contextualise the other, making a before-and-after historical relationship problematic. This is a relationship of gestation, and life inside, rather than death, and rebirth after. This tension is at the heart of the connection between the postmodern and the afterlife. It is infinitely extendible: after the avant garde is something newer than the new, which is always after itself and projected forward into a life beyond life.

Jeremy Tambling's *Becoming Posthumous* (2001) makes use of these connotations of post, rather than after, with his title indicating a dynamic process rather than a state of posthumousness. It could be argued that there has been a sense of inhabiting a space and time after death in cultural experience quite generally (or, more significantly, the imagination of inhabiting this time and space), and this is the starting point for Tambling's study. He suggests that ideas like the postmodern, the post-historical and the post-human circulate to give a general

⁸⁹ The use of small-t theory and capital-T theory (as demonstrated within just one sentence of this quotation) also mark dividing lines between studies of theory's aftermath. Colin Davis's *After Poststructuralism* (2004) describes the practice of capitalising in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* as "an enabling gesture which confers false unity and totalizing pretensions on an otherwise bewildering diversity" (164). This is significant in the light of this quotation from *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism*, which is addressing the aporias within theory itself, and post-theory's turn outward and beyond itself.

sense of a movement towards posthumousness, and these ideas represent an alteration of our relationship with the past, and our conceptualisation of what is meant by the present. More specifically, the posthumous invites a disturbance of the categories of both past and present, indicating that the past is never entirely over and done with while, conversely, the present contains portions of the dead past and is therefore built around a deficiency in itself:

The word 'posthumous' cannot be enlisted either on the side of life or death, and its undecidability allows thoughts of either other state to intrude onto the meaning that is being preferred. The word allows consideration of the presentness of the past (that it is dead) or the pastness of the present (that this is dead). To read texts of the posthumousness is to reflect on this undecidability of meaning, and to see either state as allegorical of the other. (60)

The concept of the allegorical becomes an important subsidiary strand in Tambling's conclusions about the posthumous, as it represents one way of dealing with the relations between past and present – in the form of Auerbach's concept of figuration – by which earlier events become figures, allegories of later events. In Tambling's concluding analysis, "The afterlife as allegory describes a posthumous state," (149) so the afterlife indicates that what came before was *already* posthumous. The example is of the translation of a text, which is an afterlife and an indicator of the posthumousness of the initial text itself: "the translation becomes an allegory of the work in the past, a fragment pointing to something whose nature is posthumous, since only an act of translation can make it survive" (149).⁹⁰ If the afterlife can be considered a supplement which indicates a lack within life, *Becoming Posthumous* indicates that this lack indicates something of the posthumous remainder in life, which needs an afterlife to allegorise it and lend it meaning.

Tambling also argues for a sense of modernity that centres on the concept of the posthumous, in an age in which we have experienced the end of history and the

⁹⁰ Walter Benjamin also sees translation as a form of afterlife in "The Task of the Translator" (1923): "Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife" (72).

death of subjectivity, and in which our dealings with all cultural production are filled with a sense of the already-completed which, at the same time, is an awareness of incompleteness. At the very end of the study he quotes Baudelaire's description of Paris in 'Le Cygne', which sees "New palaces, scaffolding, blocks, old neighbourhoods; for me, all this becomes allegory".⁹¹ Interpreting allegory to mean "fragmented, not to be read literally, the space of an absence in itself," Tambling suggests this reading of the city invites a specific understanding of the posthumousness of modernity:

The city will not be 'nice when it's finished', as is often said of Hong Kong, for that, if it was possible, would *finish off* an afterlife set up by the past. [. . .] As Paris has been torn down and as scaffolding proclaims that it is being rebuilt, modernity is marked by a temporal rupture with the past, and its buildings allegorise that break: they allegorise in other words, lack of continuity with the past, which means that the past can only be brought back as a fragment, as a ruin, as an allegory. (150)

These half-finished buildings that allegorise the afterlife of the future city are the direct antithesis of the "mid-air explosions and crumbled buildings" which signify the imagination of the apocalypse, and both of these are intricately connected to models of temporality and of history. Both involve a projection forward in time which relies on allegory as the fragment requiring something else to complete it, and therefore indicating something beyond itself.

The posthumous experience is liberating, but also a position of loss, in which we are deprived of our own origins – like Tambling's fictional examples of posthumous children, David Copperfield and Posthumus Leonatus – and forced to replace them with an autobiographical self-making. This seems to me to play into the importance of the narration by the dead which I have discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Tambling notes that David Copperfield's statement "I was a posthumous child" is the closest it's possible to get to the impossible statement, "I died" (24). This statement is clearly not impossible in the fictions of the afterlife I have been

⁹¹ My translation: the original reads, "Palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,/ Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie."

exploring, and this is the crux of the distinction between the posthumous as a cultural concept and the contemporary fascination with fiction about the afterlife. The afterlife and the posthumous obviously do have some significant points of overlap, and fiction about life after death could be read as simply the extension of the thought experiments of the posthumous to an extreme, via fiction's capacity to write these counterfactual, impossible sentences.

One of the other benefits of after over post, for me, has been a greater versatility in meaning. For instance, in John Schad's preface to the book of interviews, *Life.After.Theory*, he explores the implications of its title and observes that "there are those who point out that the word 'after' can mean not only 'following in time' but also 'in pursuit of' or 'in imitation of'. *Could* life be in pursuit of theory? *Could* life ever imitate theory? And, indeed, what is 'life'?" (x). In the epilogue, Schad returns to this question to give a possible answer, identifying the etymology of the word 'life' in the Old German 'lib' meaning to remain or to be left alive after a battle (176). This is also the sense of remainder that Judith Butler explores in her introduction to the collection *What's Left of Theory?* (2000). In Colin Davis' commentary on the title in *After Poststructuralism* (2004), "Theory survives, if only as a remnant or ghost" (171). This sense of a remainder or trace of afterlife within life itself is a powerful metaphor for the supplementary nature of both afterlife and fiction to life, both of which, like theory, end up being opposed to the practice of living.

Contemporary writing about the afterlife could therefore be a response to what comes after theory if we accept Schad's opposition; life versus theory, life after theory, afterlife theory. The importance of the aesthetics of post-realism is also important here. In the terms of the novel a focus on the afterlife is a critical take on the life-likeness claimed by the techniques of realism. Writing the afterlife comes after writing life, but also exposes a core of the afterlife already present in the way narrative claims to render life. Afterlife fictions are therefore less responses to capital-T Theory, as constructed by these studies of post-theory, and more a response to some specific aspects of theories of narrative. As we have seen, one of the most significant features of contemporary fictions set in the afterlife is

that they are rooted in a response to the models and descriptions from formalist or structuralist narratology, destabilising ideas like the binary opposition of first-person and third-person narration with dead narrators, or models of narrative order, frequency and duration with eternity. Writing about the afterlife today is 'after' (in all the senses identified above, of searching for and of supplementing) the twentieth century's huge shifts in the study of narrative. At the beginning of his study of non-mimetic narrators in modern and contemporary fiction, Brian Richardson describes how "many extreme forms of narration seem to have been invented precisely to transgress fundamental linguistic and rhetorical categories" (ix). Richardson does not investigate this position much further, but I would like to think we have established that the texts he considers in *Unnatural Voices* (2006) and the texts in this study are necessarily after, even the result of, narrative theory. Ironically, many of these developments in narrative theory were 'after' other experiments in fictional narrative form. Examples I have used in this thesis would include Genette's studies of narrative time in Proust, and Dorrit Cohn's work on narration in Woolf and Joyce. The sense of after as 'in pursuit of' is important here, signifying narrative and theory of narrative each in pursuit of the other, and both in pursuit of an understanding of how we represent the world to ourselves.

The problem with this retrospective self-consciousness, as Mark Currie identifies in his aptly named introduction to *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (1998), 'Narratology, Death and Afterlife', is how to "tell the story of the transition in the study of telling a story without getting too far up my own backside?" (12). The easy way out of this for me, and for the contemporary authors who are dealing with this post-meta-life, is the ready-made cultural concept of the afterlife and all its iterations of alternative times and spaces, which provide exactly that space, one step removed, to do the thinking from.

After: Meta-

The etymology of the prefix 'meta' is in the Greek for 'after', as in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, so called only because of its place after the *Physics*. The OED gives meanings for the term that have the same associations of both temporal and spatial

displacement as 'post', offering an anatomical meaning of meta that can mean posterior to, or behind. The Greek term means 'after' but also 'with' and 'between'.

Narratives of the afterlife seem to be profoundly at odds with realism's strategies and the world they have been developed to convey. Writing about the afterlife means writing about the metaphysical, but also involves the metafictional, because it leads to a consideration of the fit between the tools for representing the world and the world itself. One of the main strategies I have been examining in this study is the revelation of the connections between the techniques of realist narrative fiction and the afterlife, as techniques like omniscience, the narration of events from after they are over, the reader's anticipation of retrospection, and so on, get exposed as relying on a loose idea of the afterlife.

In Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction* (1984), the category of meta-concerns is identified as an area of growth in the twentieth century: "terms like 'metapolitics', 'metarhetoric' and 'metatheatre' are a reminder of what has been, since the 1960s, a more general cultural interest in the problems of how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world" (2). Writing about the afterlife implies that if you want to widen this out to a consideration of 'metalife' then the ground to start from for this is the concepts we already have around the idea of the afterlife. Moreover, metafiction comes after a death, or at least the report of a death: in Waugh's analysis, reports of the death of the novel were greatly exaggerated, and, "far from 'dying', the novel has reached a mature recognition of its continued viability and relevance to a contemporary world which is similarly beginning to gain awareness of precisely how its values and practices are constructed and legitimated" (19). The reflexive consciousness in all areas of life has to be met by the same from the novel in order for it to continue its functional relationship with living.

Appropriately, in the earlier study, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979), Robert Scholes was already proclaiming the death of metafiction. His consideration of the future of fiction comes in the final chapter headed "Imagination Dead

Imagine",⁹² in which he suggests that metafiction cannot give readers what they need from fiction, and amounts to "muffled cries of 'Go 'way, I got my own problems" which will only drive readers away (218). Scholes suggests that, as a result, "a certain kind of imaginative self-reflection may indeed be going through a death which is a kind of metamorphosis," with the end result that, thanks to revitalisation from pop culture, "fabulation lives" (218). Perhaps it is just part of metafiction's self-consciousness that it should have already been proclaimed dead as early as possible, in order to place metafiction truly after itself.

To be fair to Scholes, the construction of the phrase "Imagination Dead Imagine" is close to the logic of John Barth's literature of exhaustion/literature of replenishment. Coloured with a reading of narratives of the afterlife, Scholes's title looks like a newspaper headline reading "Imagination Dead: Dead Imagine" in which the dead have taken over responsibility for enlivening fiction. In John Barth's theorisation of the concepts of exhaustion and replenishment for literature, the movement to an external, self-conscious position is the same as the consideration of the literature of the past from a position afterwards. The afterlife takes a retrospective view of what has gone before, but it also takes a discriminating, judging view of that past, which reconceives the idea of life.

Writing about the afterlife is a strand of self-referentiality in fiction, but one which is in some ways quite reactionary, or a deliberate avoidance of some of the avant-garde associations of postmodernism. It's a way of playing safe in an imaginary space which does not make the same claims as an alternative world or a complete and radical denial of mimesis. In writing about the afterlife there is a pre-created concept of another world, and a ready-made turn towards self-referentiality in the form of judgment. Rather than relating to life and the present, afterlife fictions refer to the future and to non-existence, to things which are the antithesis of realism.

⁹² The title is from Beckett's short prose work of 1965. In *Beckett's Dying Words* Christopher Ricks memorably describes how "the syntax of that title has fallen from a great height and its bones pierce its skin and shatter its articulation," and, in an exercise reminiscent of the mental demands of the *memento mori*, asks the reader to "Try, just try, to imagine the death of your own imagination" (45).

In Nicholas Royle's essay 'Memento mori', on Muriel Spark's novel of that name, he investigates the term metafiction in the context of *memento mori's* sense of ourselves and our own demise. He uses Waugh's definition from *Metafiction* to meditate on whether the term "needs to be *revived*, but with a new heart" (191). Rather than a focus on self-consciousness, Royle argues that the term needs to be "spectrally revived" with a sense of the problems, gaps and hauntings already present in self-reference:

[W]hat is most historically significant about the emergence of so-called metafiction [is] a new sense of how circumscribed, displaced, aporetic and spectralized the notion of self-consciousness becomes in the course of the twentieth century, the century summed up by Jacques Derrida as 'that of the techno-scientific and effective decentering of the earth, of geopolitics, of the *anthropos* in its onto-theological identity or its genetic properties, of the *ego cogito* – and of the very concept of narcissism'. What is distinctive about 'metafiction' is a logic not so much of self-consciousness (as Waugh's study suggests) but of self-referring. Fiction cannot but refer to the fact that it is fiction (it cannot 'live' without this ghostly self-referring), but this self-referring remains irrevocably a moment *within* that fiction. (192)

So, the rise of metafiction (or, really, our concern with metafiction) coincides with the period in which we are most aware of the displacement of the self we are referring to. And this appears in fiction after metafiction (fiction after after fiction) as a concern with both the dead self and the self-referring fiction. The fiction after fiction and life after life intersect through the absence and haunting involved in self-reference.

What does this after after fiction look like? To close this study I want to consider David Foster Wallace's story 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' (1989), a text that brings together these issues of post, meta and after and in a productive combination. Wallace's long short story identifies the area for its investigation by way of two epigraphs:

“As we are all solipsists, and all die, the world dies with us. Only minor fiction aims at apocalypse.” – Anthony Burgess

“For whom is the Funhouse fun?” – *Lost in the Funhouse*⁹³

As Wallace’s copyright acknowledgements note, parts of the story are “written in the margins” of John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* and the story considers how fiction is possible after and around Barth’s literatures of exhaustion and replenishment. Similarly, the story also negotiates the space between the literatures of apocalypse and personal endings, by imagining a variety of projections forward from the present. Both metafiction and all varieties of eschatology are established as writing concerned with coming after.

The plot involves a couple of creative writing students who are attending the Reunion of Everyone Who’s Ever Represented the Product in a McDonald’s Commercial. The possibilities of metafiction and endings are brought into different combinations in the story, in ways which reflect the uncompleted journey to something impossibly after metafiction. The two students, Mark and D.L., are newly and unhappily married, with D.L. pregnant with the fictitious baby that prompted their marriage. They met as students of the creative writing professor, Dr C. Ambrose who, in this fictional universe, is the author of the paradigmatic metafictional text, *Lost in the Funhouse*. D.L. is a rather unlovable self-proclaimed postmodernist (“Specialising in language poetry and the apocalyptically cryptic Literature of Last Things, in exhaustion in general, and metafiction” [328]) who has dropped out of the writing program after a disagreement with the professor, while her husband, Mark, attempts to formulate a way of writing after the literature of exhaustion. His secret desire is, “some distant hard-earned day, to write something that stabs you in the heart. That pierces you, makes you think you’re going to die. Maybe it’s called metalife. Or metafiction. Or realism. Or gfhrytytu” (332). His philosophy of fiction is informed by his love of archery in the same way as Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* was informed by his devotion to tennis. The potential of metalife to be a third option after the attempt to represent the world as it really is, and the self-referential representation of this attempt, is at the heart of this story:

⁹³ *Lost in the Funhouse* stands as an authorless text at this point: not attributed to either John Barth or the Dr Ambrose of Wallace’s story.

this is an acknowledgement that life and writing, the world and fiction, are not in opposition to each other, but are each functioning as displaced and self-referential objects.

This appears in the text in the image of Zeno's paradox of the arrow, constantly traversing infinitesimally more divided distances but never reaching its target. We travel westward with Mark, towards, but never reaching, the town called Collision. This might seem like simply a rehearsal of Beckett's endings, in which writing about the end is a vital delaying tactic, creating the only possible literature from a situation always so close to the end, and complete presence. However, Mark's westward course is also a tangent which is the only way to finally hit true. He imagines three archers as a requirement for a new, third order, of post-metafiction writing, of which the westwards arrow is just the first shot. The second shot seems to be metafiction, a splitting of the first arrow by the second. The third archer has to be the target: "To be the beloved. The willingly betrayed. To wear the bright bull's-eye and dance, under one light. To invite the very end we object to, genuflecting. To be aimed at: the at-last Reunion of love and what loves" (348). The invitation towards the end (the apocalypse's "even so come") is the action of openness, of love beyond the individual, but it is also an end that will never arrive.

Mark's greatest fear arises out of his solipsism, in a horror that he may be the only person alive who feels that he is the only person alive. Metafiction fuels this fear because, for Mark, it represents an enclosed, self-consuming love of self-referentiality. Even if Barth's and Ambrose's funhouse claims to be for lovers, metafiction itself is only "the act of a lonely solipsist's self-love" (332). For the solipsist, then, literature after metafiction has to be a way of reacting to the fear of the all-consuming self, answering more profound fears than minor literature's apocalypse. This is exactly the strand of concern with the place of the individual in an overpowering system which has made the thread of the afterlife in twentieth-century fiction so powerful. The legacy of Sartre and Beckett is a reading of the afterlife that is all about the fate of the individual and what it means to be part of a community and a society.

Their westward journey to the town of Collision is incomplete in the course of the narrative, but the reunion is imagined in terms of a unity of life and fiction by the advertising executive responsible for its organisation, J.D. Steelritter. This reunion is conceived by Steelritter in his fantasy as a moment of both consummation and completion, as the ultimate advertisement:

Life, the truth, will be its own commercial. Advertising will have finally arrived at the death that's been its object all along. And, in Death, it will of course become Life. The last commercial. [. . .] Their wishes will, yes, come true. Fact will be fiction will be fact. Ambrose and his academic heirs will rule, without rules. *Meatfiction*. (310)

Meatfiction creeps up with awful predictability as the possible punchline to the story's set-up of hamburgers and experimental literature, but this meatfiction is more significant than just throwaway wordplay. Meat is the fact opposed to the fiction, the physical opposed to the metaphysical, the bodies opposed to the souls. Both are contained within the term meatfiction, just as afterlife contains both life and its opposite in death and in the representation of life.

Fictions of the life after death have engaged with the combination of a sense of cultural postness and the question of what comes after metafiction for writing about life. This thesis has identified some of the ways in which modern fiction has responded to the weight of the past and a sense of its own status afterwards. These responses have included using the afterlife to expose the workings of narrative conventions and techniques, and suggest they have always contained within them aspects that are after life, both imitating life and displacing it from the present. The exposure of something lacking in our tools for representing the world mirrors the lack exposed in our understanding of the world that has historically been filled with ideas about life after death. Both, ultimately, provide a supplement that feeds back into making meaning from life, but exposes this meaning as always displaced onto something other and something after.

Appendix I: Chronology of Afterlife Fictions

Novels referred to in this thesis, with summary of their narration and the afterlives they describe, where relevant. Listed in chronological order of publication.

1. Dead narrators

Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881) – ultimate memoir, after *Tristram Shandy*.

William Faulkner *As I Lay Dying* (1930) – Addie Bundren, one chapter among multiple narrators.

Muriel Spark *The Comforters* (1957) – suggestion of a possible dead narrator: a Holy Soul in purgatory.

Flann O'Brien *The Third Policeman* (1967) – the nameless narrator experiences the iterative hell.

Vladimir Nabokov *Transparent Things*. (1972) – possible collective of dead narrators.

Alasdair Gray *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981) – reincarnatory hell; Duncan's sections narrated by the disembodied Oracle, a possible dead narrator.

Julian Barnes *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989) – in the final chapter, The Dream.

Robertson Davies *Murther and Walking Spirits* (1991) – narration of the afterlife as a family history film festival.

Martin Amis *Time's Arrow: Or the Nature of the Offence* (1991) – division between the dead character and the narrating part of him.

Gilbert Adair *The Death of the Author* (1992) – dead narrator modeled on Paul de Man.

Susanna Moore *In the Cut* (1995) – it's implied that the narrator dies at the end: change from first person to third person.

David Foster Wallace *Infinite Jest* (1997) – the wraith of James Orin Incandenza shares speech patterns and knowledge of certain aspects of the plot with the text's apparently extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator.

Orhan Pamuk *My Name Is Red* (1998) – three dead narrators (Elegant, the first corpse, Enishte, and Olive, the murderer).

Will Self *How the Dead Live* (2001) – the narrator is Jewish, but the afterlife is reincarnatory.

Ali Smith *Hotel World* (2001) – opens with a dead narrator, among multiple narrators.

Alice Sebold *The Lovely Bones* (2002) – Susie Salmon narrates heaven based on a high school.

Neil Jordan *Shade* (2004) – the narrator is a ghost who has haunted herself all her life.

Margaret Atwood *The Penelopiad* (2005) – *The Odyssey's* Penelope is the narrator, set in the underworld.

Amy Tan *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) – narrator in the Buddhist *bardo* between incarnations.

Glen Duncan *Death of an Ordinary Man* (2005) – the dead character's ability to read minds casts the novel's omniscient narrator into the position of one of the dead.

2. Texts set in the afterlife without a dead narrator.

Wyndham Lewis *The Human Age* (1928, 1955) – roots in dramatic form, settings analogous to purgatory, heaven and hell.

William Golding *Pincher Martin* (1956) – afterlife generated from subjective time.

Muriel Spark *Hothouse by the East River* (1973) – characters in New York who are unaware they're dead.

D.M. Thomas *The White Hotel* (1981) – final afterlife section set in a camp for new migrants to Israel.

J.M. Coetzee *Elizabeth Costello* (1999) – final section set in a kind of ante-purgatory, based on literary clichés.

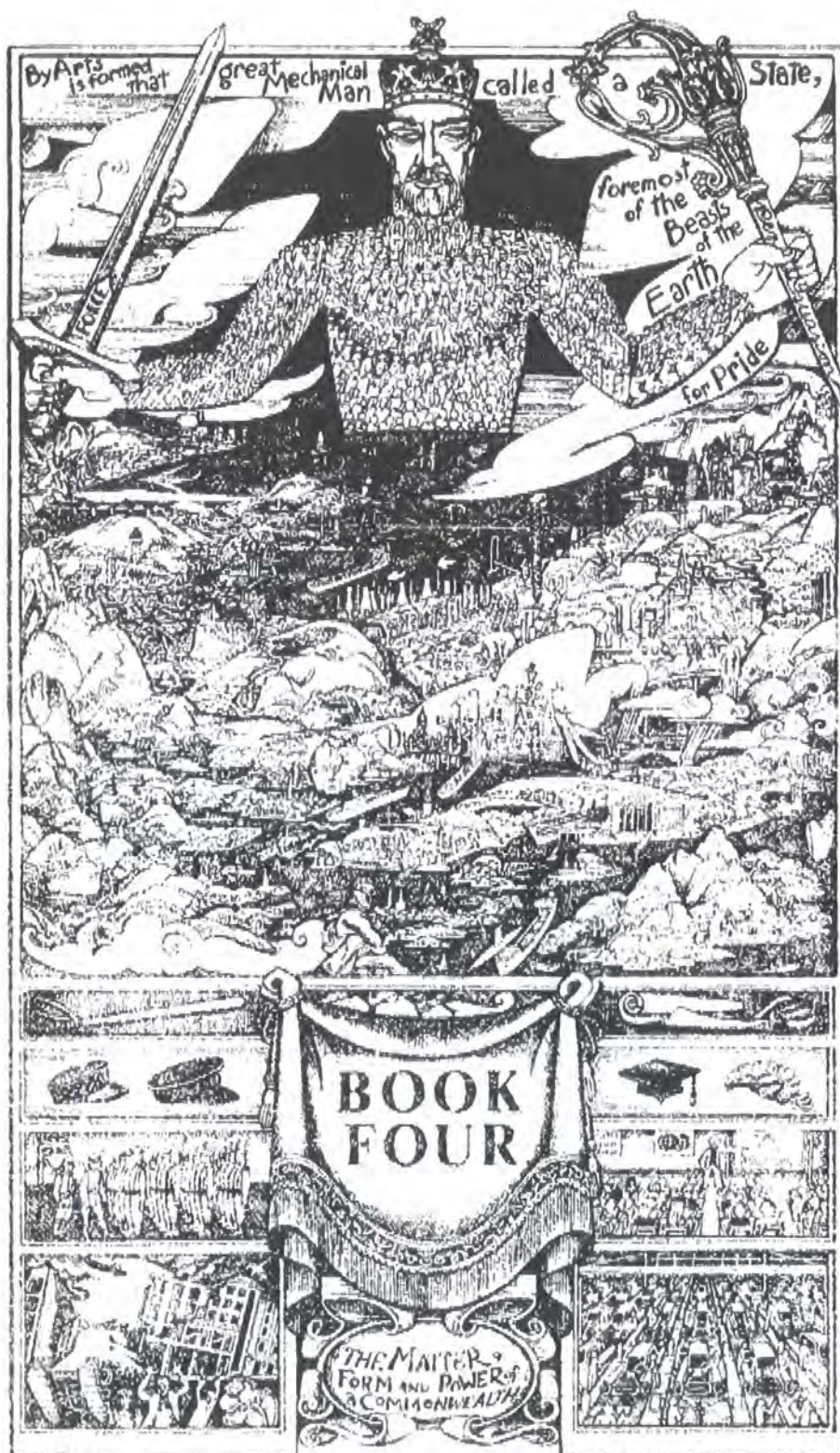
Kim Stanley Robinson *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002) – group of four characters reincarnating through alternative history.

Appendix II: Leviathan and Lanark Frontispieces

Abraham Bosse *Frontispiece to Leviathan*, 1651.



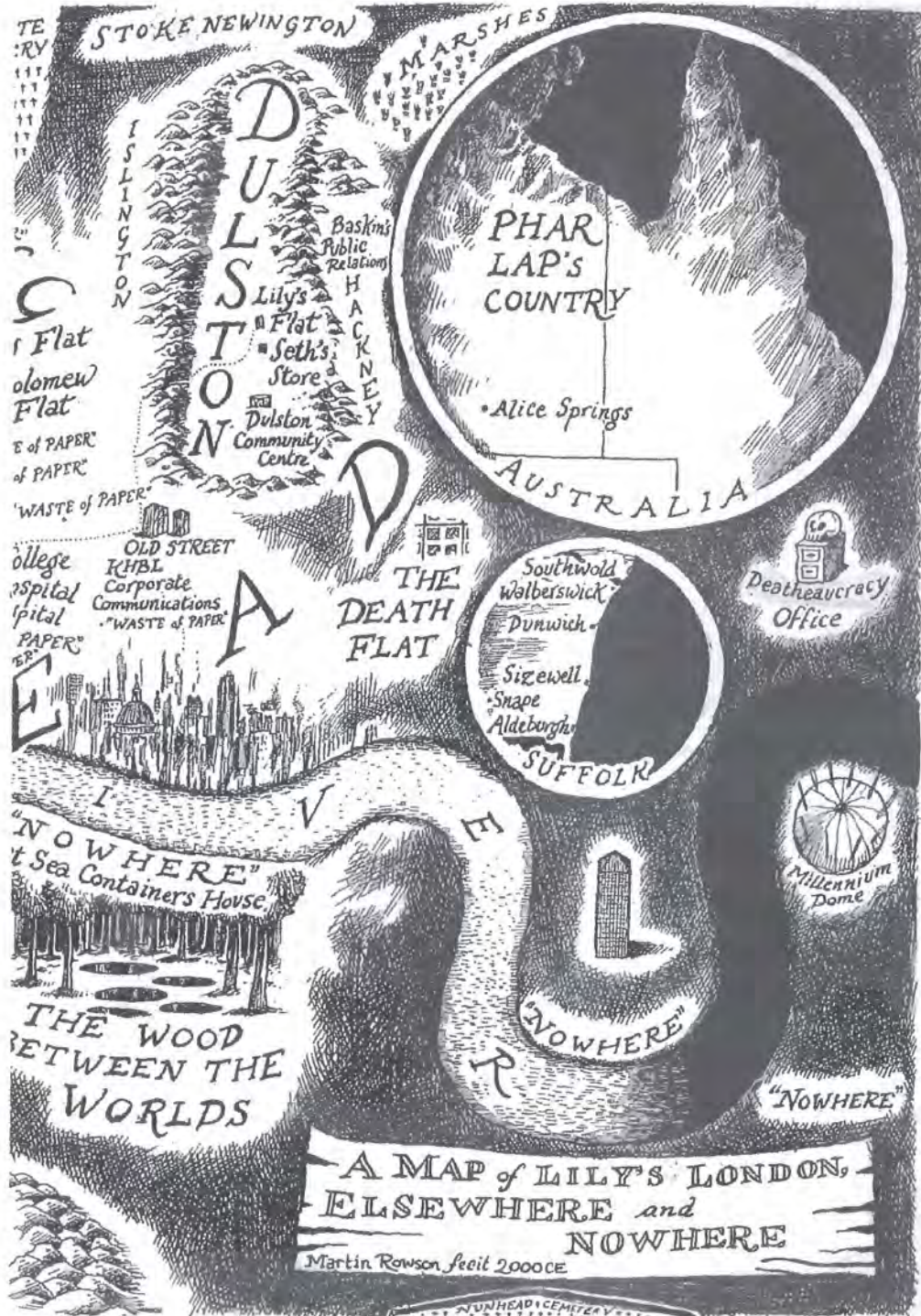
Alasdair Gray *Frontispiece to Book Four of Lanark, 1981.*



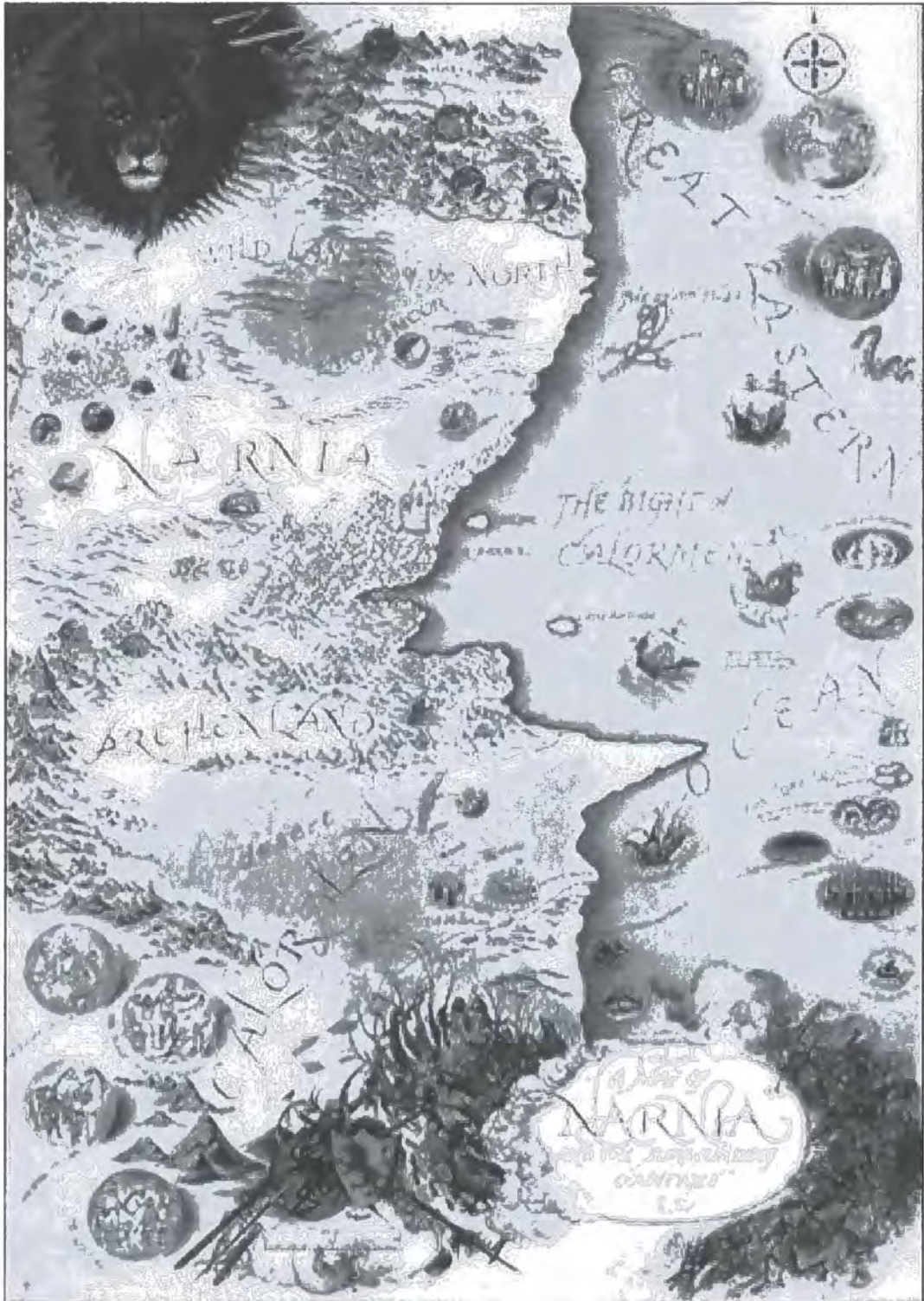
Appendix III: Maps from *How the Dead Live and The Chronicles of Narnia*



Martin Rowson *A Map of Lily's London, Elsewhere and Nowhere*, 2000 (left and right pages).



Pauline Baynes *A Map of Narnia and the Surrounding Countries*, 1970.



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