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SELF-SEEING IN PAUL AUSTER , PHILIP ROTH AND DON DELILLO

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PhD in Modern and Contemporary Literature,
Culture and Thought

Submitted to the University of Sussex, June 2014.

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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PhD in Modern and Contemporary Literature, Culture and
Thought

'SELF-SEEING IN PAUL AUSTER, PHILIP ROTH AND DON
DELILLO'

Summary

This thesis considers how Auster, Roth and DeLillo write in order to see themselves in the world.

If Kafka's burrowing into himself and Nabokov's inscription of a chalk-white "I" on the inner blackboard of his shut eyelids exemplified Modernist strategies for projecting the isolated self into the world, my subject authors have confronted a theoretical situation in which the world as a permanent and common object doesn't exist. Negotiating an increasingly unreal American popular culture that stands in for this object and that has disassembled the monadic self, they re-imagine the sight of darkness and premonitions of death inherited from their precursors' self-seeing as a means of reifying our world.

The thesis proceeds in three author-specific chapters. The first traces Auster's chimeric appearances in the glass of fictive representation using popular cultural symbols. These symbols repeatedly erase the self, figuring its disappearance into the continuing present and giving the lie to a permanent visible world in which the self can be located. The second chapter explores

Roth's writing characters as "darkening[s]" of the fictive glass. His fiction interrogates the obscure "inside of me" to locate an unseen point where the self is remade through transformative connections with the world. This connection, which he names "reality", remains invisible, communicated in distorted images of grief and mourning that also reflect the unreal character of popular culture. In the final chapter, a new connection between the self and the world becomes visible in DeLillo's work. He reifies our dissembling culture by rendering it as a smeary, visible reflection of the unfixed, continuing present into which Auster's selves disappear. The sight of this unfixed, different world is co-eval with a new form of self-seeing in which the world is not permanent nor transparent but formed in characters' relationships to it, reciprocating today's wavering possibility of there being the world at all.

In tracing the pursuit of self-seeing in the world in these three exemplary writers, the thesis develops a new relationship between the aesthetics of character and the world-rendering potential of novel-writing. In a period of theoretical transition after postmodernism, such new paradigms are vital for grasping how we envision selves now as reciprocations of the world's precarity, responding to the pressure of the real.

For Ron Sadler

I might finally see myself

let go

...

into the world.

Paul Auster

—

I was only that substance, I thought, those limbs, that face that I saw in front of me. I looked, but the outside of me gave up little information about the inside of me.

Philip Roth

—

He closed his eyes again, briefly. He could feel himself contained in the dark but also just beyond it, on the lighted outer surface, the other side, belonged to both, feeling both, being himself and seeing himself.

Don DeLillo

Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	9
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	11
Introduction	12
I ELASTIC CHARACTER AND SELF-SEEING IN PAUL AUSTER	51
PART 1	
1. Elastic Character	
2. Sublime Visibility	56
3. Self-Seeing in Extreme Character	63
PART 2	
4. The Continuing Present and Self-Seeing From the Poetry To the Fiction	78
5. The World's Traumatic Visibility In the Contemporary Fiction	88
6. The Impossibility of Writing Character In the Contemporary Fiction	100
II REALITY AND THE FICTIVE GLASS IN PHILIP ROTH	105
PART 1	
1. Nothing but a Burrowing Mouth	
2. Roth's Characters On the Fictive Glass	113
3. Invisible Reality	124

II REALITY AND THE FICTIVE GLASS IN PHILIP ROTH

PART 2

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| 4. Impostor Scenarios | 135 |
| 5. Zuckerman's Transformations | 148 |
| 6. Self-Seeing Over a Distance | 159 |

III SELF-SEEING AND THE DIFFERENT WORLD IN DON DELILLO 166

PART 1

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| 1. Getting the World Right | |
| 2. The Different World | 169 |
| 3. The World's Broken Appearance | 178 |

PART 2

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 4. Reconstructing the Different World: The Possibility That <i>This</i>
Is How <i>It</i> Is | 185 |
| 5. Seeing the Nuclear World-At-Large | 191 |
| 6. Self-Seeing In the Different World I: <i>Libra</i> | 194 |
| 7. Self-Seeing In the Different World II: <i>Cosmopolis</i> | 212 |

Conclusion 230

Bibliography 243

Abbreviations

Works by Paul Auster

CLT = *In the Country of Last Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

CP = *Collected Prose: Autobiographical Writings, True Stories, Critical Essays, Prefaces and Collaborations with Artists* (New York: Picador, 2003).

GW = *Ground Work: Selected Poems and Essays 1970-1979* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991).

I = *Invisible* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).

L = *Leviathan* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011).

MP = *Moon Palace* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).

NYT = *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).

SP = *Sunset Park* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).

Works by Don DeLillo

AE = *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories* (London: Picador, 2011).

C = *Cosmopolis* (London: Picador, 2012).

EZ = *End Zone* (London: Picador, 2011).

GJS = *Great Jones Street* (London: Picador, 2011).

LB = *Libra* (London: Penguin, 2011).

U = *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1999).

Works by Philip Roth

EG = *Exit Ghost* (London: Vintage, 2008).

F = *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989).

GC = *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).

PC = *Portnoy's Complaint* (New York: Vintage International, 1994).

RMO = *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Vintage International, 2001).

ZB = *Zuckerman Bound: A Trilogy and Epilogue* (London: Vintage, 1998).

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The project is dedicated to my great-uncle and first reader, Ron Sadler, in memory of our letters to one another.

Introduction

I wish to start between the poles of two aphoristic statements. The first is from the American writer Richard Powers' story "The Seventh Event", published in 2005, in which the character Mia Erdmann, an ecological writer, describes the human brain:

A whole reef of neural modules, all updating each other, changed by everything we look at, and little bits of self scraping off on everything we brush up against. And we want to simplify all *this* into character? Personality? Self-realization?¹

The second is from Vladimir Nabokov's memoir *Speak, Memory*, published in 1967:

How small the cosmos (a kangaroo's pouch would hold it), how paltry and puny in comparison to human consciousness, to a single individual recollection, and its expression in words!²

Powers' story demonstrates the extent to which contemporary scientific knowledge of the planet, its organisms, its microbiology, and the human brain wear at the limits of the concepts of human character and the human self. The story suggests that any possible survival of our species far into the future in the Earth's ecosystem would depend on a capacity to really see the world beyond the individual human life span - that is, beyond the limits of the self: "As far as I can see," argues Erdmann, "what Einstein called the 'optical delusion of consciousness' is exactly what has pulled this whole game apart. Slows you down and leaves you permanently exiled. The so-called integrated self is

¹ Richard Powers, "The Seventh Event", *Granta*, 90, Summer 2005, p.70-71.

² Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.9.

exactly the thing that made us torch the place.”³ For Nabokov, meanwhile, consciousness expands the “paltry and puny” confines of the world, exemplifying the longstanding Shakespearean confidence that “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players”⁴; that the world is so much material subjugated, malleable and transformed within the integrated self’s imagination and expression.

This thesis seeks a middle way between these two positions on the human self. “Self-seeing”, the action I study in the work of Paul Auster, Philip Roth and Don DeLillo, is a term I use to mean the action of seeing yourself in the world through writing. I draw the idea of instantiating oneself in the world through writing from the French writer and theorist Maurice Blanchot’s account of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ambition to “say everything” in his writing:

...his entire story, his whole life... At the same time he is aware that to say everything is not to exhaust his story, or his character, in an impossible integral narrative, but just as well to seek in his being or in language the moment of the first simplicity, where everything is already given, ahead of time, where all is possible.⁵

For Blanchot, Rousseau’s self-realization entails not integrating his being within an exhaustive story or character portrait, but instantiating in writing the very “moment of the first simplicity”: that he is alive in the world.

The simplicity of being, rather than its simplification into character, suggests complete freedom for the self; a self that in the present moment, unbound from

³ R. Powers, “The Seventh Event”, p.70.

⁴ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Juliet Dusinberre (London: Arden, 2006), p.227.

⁵ Maurice Blanchot, ‘Rousseau’ in *The Book to Come* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.45.

the obligations of being a person, can be whatever it wants in the world.

However, the through-narrative of this thesis' three chapters is that the Blanchotian simplicity of being alive in the world does not equate to a self's freedom from delimiting character. In response to an amorphous world in which the self must "take nothing for granted" (CLT, 1) and be "ready for anything" (NYT, 301), Paul Auster's fiction develops a concept of elastic character; he writes characters described in a flung momentum, only seeing themselves in the world when returned to the bottom or beginning of themselves; "This is where I start," thinks Marco Stanley Fogg looking out at the "end of the world," the Pacific Ocean, "this is where my life begins" (MP, 298). Yet Auster's presentation of a blank possibility for the self in the erasure of character only *represents* the simplicity of being; as the thesis' first chapter examines, figures of darkness, blindness and erasure preclude the first simplicity's instantiation in his writing. Philip Roth and Don DeLillo, on the other hand, locate the simplicity of being *within* limits imposed on the self by the world: in Roth it is disclosed in the work demanded of the self by its inexplicable, uncontrollable and singular position in the world - what "must be done, and by no one but you" (F, 17); in DeLillo, meanwhile, the first simplicity is located through the instantiation, within paradigms of history and everyday life, of the self's already being in the world, "ahead of time,"⁶ so that when the self changes the world changes co-terminously. As the thesis' second and third chapters explore, there is no absolute freedom from the delimitations of character in these two latter writers; rather, both put a self's delimitations in transformative connection with an

⁶ M. Blanchot, *The Book To Come*, p.45.

amorphous world so that they aren't limits forever, and the self's transformation *in* the world, out of these limits, is possible.

In tracing modes of literary self-seeing that connect with and reciprocate an amorphously changing world, the thesis witnesses how character-writing moves beyond the fictive simplifications of being in the world discussed in Powers' story. The reality in which we are "changed by everything we look at" and we "scrape off on everything we brush up against" is reciprocated by self-seeing fiction that transforms the self within the new limits imposed on it at every moment in a mutable world. My accent on visibility - on *seeing* the self, rather than Rousseau's "saying everything" - derives from two forces. The first is the importance of visibility to the self's location in the world in each of my subject authors' work. Auster's novel *Invisible* includes the following lines of George Oppen's poem "Parousia", from "Five Poems About Poetry":

Impossible to doubt the world: it can be seen
And because it is irrevocable

It cannot be understood, and I believe that fact is lethal. (I, 182)

The dovetailing of the world's visibility with its irrevocability in these lines creates a crisis of seeing: the world can be seen but the force of this certainty exceeds any seer's attempt to order and understand it. In Auster, Roth and DeLillo the location of the self in a world that is simultaneously visible and incomprehensible produces distorted images of character: in Auster, figures of darkness, blindness and blankness that mediate the simplicity of being; in Roth, distortions that amplify the distance between where a character is and where he

can no longer be; in DeLillo, smeared appearances that reflect our inability to see the world at a fixed point in time. All three writers construct dilations of the Einsteinian “optical delusion of consciousness” in order to see the self in a world that is irrevocable - that cannot be taken back and is beyond the self’s control. The second reason for my accent on visibility is the predominant visual distribution of both the individual and the world in contemporary technological society. As I explore immediately below, the technological visibilities to which every single person on Earth today is to some extent subjected have produced in Western culture a popular aesthetics of concealment and transparency that neither fulfills the integrated self nor takes us away from the self’s desires that, in Powers’ story, continue to result in practices of consumption with which we have “torched” the planet.

The rest of this Introduction expands on and opens out the thematic occupations of this thesis précised above. The Introduction is organised into three sections that reflect these preoccupations: “Visibilities of the Individual”, “Character, the Self, and Self-Seeing” and “The Different World”. The purpose throughout is to frame an exploration of Auster, Roth and DeLillo’s writing that might erode the sense of opposition between the celebration of the self in Nabokov and the necessity for its dismissal in Powers, by considering how we envision selves now as reciprocations of the world’s precarity, responding to the pressure of the real.

1. Visibilities of the Individual

1.1 Visibilities Outside the Life

The visibility of the individual person in the contemporary world is unprecedented; so too is public awareness of that visibility. The Wikileaks organisation and Edward Snowden's whistle-blowing in 2013 have alerted people to the scale on which they are under surveillance by both their own and foreign governments. Snowden's disclosures of the US National Security Agency's activities in particular alerted people to the extent to which companies such as Apple, Google, Microsoft, Twitter and Facebook co-operate with the American government agency, allowing it access to their users' personal data. This information also prompted greater media and public attention to the way such companies monetise user data by selling it to companies and providing targeted advertising tailored to their users based on that data. Journalist and television creator David Simon has questioned Google executive Ross LaJeunesse's insistence that his company, unlike a government agency, is "completely transparent. We give control to the users," asking:

But is it a matter of hunting down these moments where Google... informs you that it is going to use your information in some new and varied way, and you have to negate [that use]?

I had to opt out of a program where stuff I said online could be used in advertising. That's a rather cynical performance. Shouldn't I have to opt into it, something that extraordinary?⁷

⁷ Emma Green, "David Simon and E.L. Doctorow on 'the Orwellian Nightmare'", *The Atlantic*, 5 December 2013 <<http://www.theatlantic.com/events/archive/2013/12/david-simon-and-el-doctorow-on-the-potential-for-the-orwellian-nightmare/282063/>> [accessed 19 March 2014].

Simon's comments locate a contradiction in the character of services such as Google: they present themselves as democratic services that facilitate limitless innovation and individuality, opening up "creativity and the free exchange of ideas to be heard"⁸; yet in actuality they impose significant limits on their users, controlling the content they are shown for profit motives, their models relying on their users not "hunting down" and opting out of the selling and further use of personal information, rather than users' "active consent."⁹ In other words, these companies design their monetisation of user data to be as invisible as possible.

Governments' and private companies' perspective on the individual as a compilation of data is further demonstrated by contemporary modes of surveillance data analysis. The "pattern of life" analysis America's CIA uses for its drone strikes in the Middle East identifies "suspected militants" based on their age, sex, ethnicity and their behaviour in surveillance footage filmed by cameras on the drone aircraft; suspects are killed from above "even when their full identities are not known."¹⁰ Following the Boston Marathon bombings in April 2013, the city of Boston is now surveilled by a video system called "AISight", pronounced "eyesight"; the artificially intelligent system "enables a machine to monitor its environment, and build up a detailed profile of what can be considered "normal" behaviour. The AI can then determine what kind of

⁸ E. Green, 5 December 2013.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ David S. Cloud, "CIA drones have broader list of targets", *Los Angeles Times*, 5 May 2010 <<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/may/05/world/la-fg-drone-targets-20100506>> [accessed 21 May 2014].

behaviour is abnormal, without human pre-programming.”¹¹ Wesley Cobb, the chief science officer at Behavioral Recognition Systems, Inc., the company that developed “AISight”, says the system’s detection of “abnormal” behaviour means it could help prevent crimes before they happen: “In a lot of cases, you can see someone casing the joint, poking around the back of buildings, going where they shouldn’t be... Our system will find that and alert on it, because it’s different from what it usually sees. It’s taught itself what to look for.”¹² Under these systems of surveillance, the individual behaving differently to “normal” is in danger of arrest in Boston and of being murdered in the Middle East.

In Don DeLillo’s novel *Cosmopolis* Eric Packer tells Jane Melman, “Do you know what I see when I look at you? I see a woman who wants to live shamelessly in her body... This is the woman you are inside the life” (C, 49). The recent public revelations of surveillance and monetisation have heightened individuals’ awareness of how they are seen *outside* the life by governments and private companies: as a compilation of information, a “pattern of life” posing a higher or lower level of risk; the surveillance provokes an exteriority of self-perception that is frighteningly separate from who we believe ourselves to be deeply, freely and individually. Meanwhile, a gap has opened up between companies that claim to be democratically transparent agents of personal freedom, and more authentically democratic organisations such as Wikileaks,

¹¹ Paul Cooper, “Introducing AISight: The slightly scary CCTV network completely run by AI”, *IT Pro Portal*, 16 April 2014 <<http://www.itproportal.com/2014/04/16/aisight-the-surveillance-network-completely-run-by-ai/>> [accessed 21 May 2014].

¹² Ibid.

whose logo - a dark world leaking from the top of an hourglass into a lighter world below - depicts it contributing to the creation of an unconcealed future.

The person is also visible outside the life today on various online “social media”. The writer and rapper Donald Glover, also known as Childish Gambino, emphasises, “We can curate what’s real everyday on our timeline or feed”¹³; for the majority of young people this curation is constant, measured in minutes by Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. The virtual and physical promiscuity facilitated on smart phone dating applications such as Tinder and Grindr and on “cam” sites has produced experiences of sex and relationships that Gambino’s track “life: the biggest troll [andrew auernheimer]” describes as disorienting and desubjectifying:

Waking up in these places I don’t remember,
 Texts from people I never met,
 Doors left open...
 I don’t know who I am anymore.¹⁴

The above activities do not simply absent the self. They all involve advertising one’s face and body, either as avatars of an attractive self or desubjectified desirable phenomena, and who I am inside the life today is routinely subject to the pressures of creating these exterior versions. The relative anonymity of hook-up apps and cam sites, though producing the feeling of disconnection from others and oneself described in Gambino’s lyrics, can also open the self to new forms of impersonal freedom - to the excitement of ways of acting that he or she would not try “face-to-face”, as well as the possibilities of acting as other

¹³ Childish Gambino <<http://iamdonald.com/deepweb>> [accessed 2 June 2014].

¹⁴ Childish Gambino, *Because the Internet* (Glassnote Records, 2013).

than oneself. At the same time these technologies have for Lena Dunham, creator of the HBO series *Girls*, “decreased our ability to engage romantically and personally”¹⁵; the displacements of our engagements with one another on to machines, as well as new means of engaging anonymously, have made our interior selves less visible to ourselves and to one another, and less available to share. For Dunham, the “proliferation of pornography and the ease with which we can see it” contributes to the self’s concealment, making sexuality “a little less personal and a little more thoughtlessly dirty.”¹⁶ We can anonymously see each other naked, and find someone to talk to however alone we are, and these redistributions of our relationships to others are by turns exhilarating and isolating.

1.2 The Darkness of the Self

The above aesthetics of concealment and transparency frames the usage and ethics of the technologies that today produce new visibilities of the individual person. It is an aesthetics that occludes the interior self, so that from the self’s perspective our technologies are like the “Machiavellian sun” in Paul Auster’s *Sunset Park*; “a hypocritical sun, and the light it generates does not illuminate things but obscures them” (SP, 7). As Lena Dunham’s comments suggest, in the light of exposure shone by Wikileaks and by webcams, who I am inside the life is not visible.

¹⁵ Jon Snow, “Star of *Girls* Lena Dunham talks to Jon Snow”, *Channel 4 News*, 20 January 2014 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3flbO2bQbc>> [accessed 2 June 2014].

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

In Modernist fiction the inner self was often considered a darkness, an obscure depth into which one had to enter, rather than light up. Kafka's story "The Burrow", in which an unspecified creature builds itself a labyrinthine structure in the soil, exemplifies this descent into the darkness of the self. When inside the burrow, the creature considers itself "in a different world"¹⁷ to anyone outside; it calls this interior world "my castle which can never belong to anyone else, and is so essentially mine that I can calmly accept in it even my enemy's mortal stroke at the final hour, for my blood will ebb away here in my own soil and not be lost."¹⁸ The singularity of the creature's burrow becomes its supreme value in the story, beyond its protective function and separation of the creature from the outside world. Concern for this singularity renews the creature's contact with the world, as it imagines a whistling sound in the walls is a beast digging towards it. Kafka's placing the burrow in the world is neither immediate nor visible like today's visibilities outside the life; in the darkness the creature can only posit the beast's "bor[ing] its snout into the earth"¹⁹, and imagines that the "instant" they were to see each other they would "both blindly bare our claws and teeth"²⁰; yet in the feared intrusion of the world into the dark space that Kafka's writing forged within himself, the self is vulnerable and communicable. "Slip[ping] into the skin"²¹ of Lee Harvey Oswald at the beginning of *Libra*, DeLillo reconstructed the burrow's passages as the subway tunnels under New York; the beast's whistling is a "rising... shriek" as the train "smashed through the

¹⁷ Franz Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (London: Vintage, 2005), p.338.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.340.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.354.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.358.

²¹ Don DeLillo, "The Power of History", *The New York Times*, 7 September 1997 <<https://www.nytimes.com/library/books/090797article3.html>> [accessed 30 May 2014].

dark” (LB, 13, 3). Down here Lee descends into himself and finds communion with the city beneath its lighted surface, feeling an “inner power... this secret force of the soul in the tunnel” (LB, 13). The connection resonates with a line that is repeated in the novel: “There is a world inside the world” (LB, 13). There is a dark, interior world obscured in today’s technologies of seeing, unseen in the serene azure gloom that pools in the bottom of the Wikileaks hourglass, and in this world’s depths is that depth of me that engages with you deeply, in the experience of being in the world.

1.3 The Discovery of Talent

Philip Roth describes “The Burrow” as a “very unromantic and hardheaded fable about how and why art is made, a portrait of the artist in all his ingenuity, anxiety, isolation, dissatisfaction, relentlessness, obsessiveness, secretiveness, paranoia, and self-addiction, a portrait of the magical thinker at the end of his tether, Kafka’s Prospero...” (RMO, 290). For Roth, the creature’s burrowing is a commentary on writing as a way inside the darkness of the self. This impression of “how and why art is made” is at odds with mainstream cultural conceptions today of what gets called “art”, or, still worse, “talent.” Talent is our most popular means of connecting individuals to an idea of art, by means of its “discovery” in people. Television shows such as *The X Factor* and *Britain’s Got Talent* draw passable singing voices out of checkout counter workers as a supreme justice, while Channel 4’s *Hidden Talent* tests people for talents they never knew they

had, and documents their instant transformations from novices to experts. How the discovered persons go on to live is a secondary concern on these shows; the drama is bringing the gift into society.

Narratives of the discovery of talent coincide with the aesthetics of transparency outside the life discussed above. *The X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent* depict creations of the artist that reveal a dependence on not only talent but a sympathetic personality and the opportunities of publicity, while *Hidden Talent* explains the science of talents and its participants' instant developments of expertise. Similarly, the shifted dynamics of American high-school and college comedy and drama, which once witnessed aspiring unpopular male protagonists affirming the social hierarchies but now celebrate various "geek", female and, to a lesser extent, gay, disabled, African-American and Asian-American character types across from more sensitively rendered "jock" antagonists, are not only open to the talents of *any* character but demand their outing; witness the film *Pitch Perfect*, in which Beca, having denied she can sing to her college's glee club, is accosted while singing to herself in the shower.²² In all these examples there is a conception of "talent" or "art" as something inside the self to be exposed, explained and instrumentalised within broader frameworks visible to everyone in society.

The singularity of the self's expression is lost in these rituals of discovery. This can be seen on *The X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent* in the repeated ascription of "star quality" to contestants so that the exceptionality of their gift is ruined by

²² See *Pitch Perfect*, dir. Jason Moore (Universal Pictures, 2012).

its same discovery in other people; contestants are frequently shown displaying fits of enchanted ecstasy at the “Judges” approval, as if they are undeserving and the talent is itself awarded *by* the shows. A similar impersonal simulation of recognising the individual is common in contemporary advertising: direct, informal addresses to a “you” (such as O2’s “Thinking of You”²³; Vodafone’s “Power to You”²⁴; Microsoft Xbox’s “You Are the Controller”²⁵) simulate for the individual the effect of having been singled out for a tailored service, while in fact indiscriminately inviting everybody to consume. When encountering these media there is a peculiar sensation that it is not really you being asked and it is not really you being discovered.

In “On What We Can Not Do”, a short essay from his collection *Nudities*, Giorgio Agamben argues that “today’s man” is “blind not to his capacities but to his incapacities, not to what he can do but to what he cannot, or can not, do.”²⁶ The blindness of today’s aesthetics of transparency to any value to the reasons why a singer cannot (or can not) sing in public exemplifies the manner of exercise of power that Agamben sees by a corporate elite undemocratically endorsed by “democratic” Western governments:

Separated from his impotentiality, deprived of the experience of what he can not do, today’s man believes himself capable of everything, and so he repeats his jovial “no problem,” and his

²³ See “O2 ‘Thinking of You’. VCCP/HSI.”, *Prime Focus Group* <<http://www.primefocusgroup.com/work/o2-thinking-you-vccp-hsi>> [accessed 2 June 2014].

²⁴ Anne Cassidy, “Vodafone revamps brand to reflect customer power”, *Campaign*, 21 September 2009 <<http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/news/939741/>> [accessed 2 June 2014].

²⁵ See “Kinect Ads: ‘You Are The Controller’”, *Microsoft News Center*, 21 October 2010 <<http://www.microsoft.com/en-us/news/features/2010/oct10/10-21kinectads.aspx>> [accessed 2 June 2014].

²⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), p.44.

irresponsible “I can do it,” precisely when he should instead realize that he has been consigned in unheard of measure to forces and processes over which he has lost all control.²⁷

Corporate invitations to self-realisation - to *show your capacity or be talented* - belie for Agamben exploitations of labour that the individual is made to feel *gifted*, or lucky, to be able to perform. The concealed monetisation of personal data and delimitation of individuals to “patterns of life” by companies that claim to facilitate individuality and limitless possibilities for their users is part of this exploitation. As Jaron Lanier notes in his book *Who Owns the Future?*, “[w]hen it was sold to Facebook for a billion dollars in 2012, Instagram employed only thirteen people...[but] Instagram isn’t worth a billion dollars just because those thirteen employees are extraordinary. Instead, its value comes from the millions of users who contribute to their network without being paid for it.”²⁸ The work of appearance on Instagram done by its millions of users creates the app’s worth. Such apps and sites - from Facebook to dating apps to cam sites - locate and set financially viable parameters within which the self ought to become visible. The invitations to these forms of visibility, premised as possibilities for the individual, surreptitiously negate any space for the darkness of a self that can not appear.

²⁷ G. Agamben, *Nudities*, p.44.

²⁸ Jaron Lanier, *Who Owns the Future?* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), p.xii.

2. Character, the Self, and Self-Seeing

As Part 1 of this Introduction shows, in our culture the self finds itself increasingly represented - and, in the discovery of talent that occludes impotentiality, negated through “exposure” - by modes of visibility outside the life. Self-seeing - the term I use to mean the action of seeing yourself in the world through writing - is a difficult action in today’s society, occluded by the attention the culture demands to exteriorised versions of the individual. Insofar as these appearances are at a remove from who I believe myself to be inside the life, they produce the sensation, when responding to the invitations to be talented documented above, that it is not really you being asked and it is not really you being discovered. The interior self finds no reciprocation and no space for itself in the mainstream cultural landscape of visibilities outside the life; for the self, this landscape is unreal and uninhabitable.

It is my thesis that Paul Auster’s, Philip Roth’s and Don DeLillo’s fictive visions of the self in the world get inside our culture, and thus make space within it for the self. Roth published his first novella in 1959; DeLillo his first novel in 1971; Auster his first book of poems in 1974 and his first book of prose in 1982. Roth has stated that 2010’s *Nemesis* is his last book; Auster and DeLillo are still writing and publishing today. I am not suggesting that the late work of all three of these writers has penetrated the twenty-first century visual social and cultural transformations discussed above. However, though the aesthetics of transparency that surveils the individual, discovers their “talent” and facilitates the corporate seizure of their cultural capital on online apps such as Instagram

is specific to today, the effect of negation of any space for the self has clear Modernist and Postmodernist legacies that stretch across the twentieth century into this one. This section offers a brief literary history of self-seeing, and a history of Modernist and Postmodernist perspectives on the self; it further considers how the work of Auster, Roth and DeLillo - each of whom have previously been associated with Postmodernism and the Return of the Real - shares a formal and thematic emphasis on the visible and the invisible, and an interest in self-seeing as a means of getting inside the world and making it real for the self. Read together, their work presents possibilities for making the contemporary world inhabitable for who I am deeply and really, inside the life.

2.1 Character and the Self

At this juncture, it seems pertinent to specify my use of the terms “character” and “self” in this thesis. Character is a strangely diachronous concept; it can seem to belong to the classic sense of the European novel constructed, as Georg Lukács wrote in his *Theory of the Novel*, as the “development of a man”²⁹; yet it remains one of the most predominant devices for storytelling and world-making in contemporary culture. John Frow accentuates the lack of modern theoretical consideration given to character in his book *Character and Person*, published in 2014:

To the extent that there is a consensus among literary theorists about this most inadequately theorized of literary concepts, it is that neither of the classes of answer that have traditionally been given to this question - the ‘ethical’ answer that characters are to be treated and analysed

²⁹ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p.82.

as though they were persons, having lives that transcend the texts they appear in, or the 'structuralist' answer that characters are to be treated purely as textual constructs - deals satisfactorily with the theoretical problem.³⁰

Frow's opposed "classes of answer" might also be summarised: either characters have interior selves "as though they were persons", or they don't. Theories of characters as "purely textual constructs" - theories that I will be discussing in the work of Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes - had great influence on literary Postmodernism, and James Wood's analysis of a shift over the twentieth century from novels with "human and metaphysical... foci" by writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Saul Bellow to "novels of immense self-consciousness with no selves in them at all"³¹ by writers such as DeLillo, Richard Powers, Zadie Smith, David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers presents a well-worn narrative of the disappearance of the interior self from late twentieth-century Anglo-American fiction and culture.

The relationship between character and the self in my thesis departs from this stark distinction between characters either having selves or not. As précised at the beginning of this Introduction, my interest is in the idea of writing oneself as an instantiation of being alive in the world. Auster, Roth and DeLillo all employ the device of fictional character as a means towards this instantiation. In my thesis characters are thus not "treated and analysed as though they were persons," but treated and analysed as mediations of the self. "Character" in this thesis simply refers to a figure that represents the self in these authors' writing,

³⁰ John Frow, *Character and Person* (New York: OUP, 2014), p.vi.

³¹ James Wood, "Tell me how does it feel?", *The Guardian*, 6 October 2001 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/oct/06/fiction>> [accessed 2 June 2014].

and “character-writing” refers to the narration of characters that represent the self. Whether literary characters *themselves* are reified by the self’s instantiation - as in the sense that Roth’s Nathan Zuckerman or DeLillo’s Eric Packer are real people living in the world - is a different matter. When I write that Eric Packer is instantiated *in* the world, Eric does not *become real* in the sense of *his being a real person*; rather, the character functions as a locus through which DeLillo communicates a sense of the world’s reality to the reader. The simplicity of being in the world is written through this character; any reification of *him* would fold immediately into this first simplicity.

On a related matter, when I discuss the self’s instantiation in the world in a writer’s work, the instantiation isn’t necessarily autobiographical. Where Auster writes in his poem “Search for a Definition” “I might finally see myself / let go / ...into the world” (GW, 94-95), I infer and discuss Auster’s desire to see himself, on the basis of both this poem and a wider perspective on his work. However, I do not therefore mean that in *Libra* DeLillo sees himself in Lee Harvey Oswald; *Libra* gets inside how it is to live in a world in which the ability “to see things as they are, to recall them clearly, be able to say what happened” (LB, 301) is broken for the self - which might mean DeLillo himself as much as any other one person, but not in a biographical register.

2.2 Modernist and Postmodernist Perspectives on the Self

The history of self-seeing in literature reaches back as far as Ovid's myth of Narcissus, the beautiful young man whose "own eyes destroyed him"³² by his falling in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Narcissus' self-love is a death sentence, as described in Ted Hughes' translation of "Echo and Narcissus" from the *Metamorphoses*; he dies of misery, crying "My beauty is in full bloom – / But I am a cut flower."³³ His reflection seems to want him but when he goes to grasp it "leave[s] me with my arms full of nothing."³⁴ This is the forerunner of the untrustworthy selves that narrate some of the first English novels, such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift published his novel under Gulliver's name as a travel narrative, and swears in the text "I have not been so studious of Ornament as of Truth."³⁵ Nevertheless, the portrait of Gulliver that serves as the text's frontispiece resembles Swift, and the text contains manifold further hints about the true identity and intentions of its author, creating what Claude Rawson terms a "protracted tease about the truth content of the work."³⁶ Such Narcissan allusions to the image and identity of the author, or to other public personages, continue to inform perceptions and presentations of modern and contemporary fiction, from Humbert Humbert's pretence in Nabokov's *Lolita* that his diary containing details of his desire for Lolita is a novel he is writing, to the wife of the character "Philip Roth" in Roth's *Deception* seeing adulterous dialogues in her husband's notebook as evidence

³² Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p.920.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.921.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Claude Rawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.272.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.xii.

of an affair: “It is *not* myself,” “Philip” retorts, “It is *far* from myself – it’s play, it’s a game, it is an *impersonation* of myself! Me *ventriloquizing* myself. Or maybe it’s more easily grasped the other way around – everything here is falsified *except* me.”³⁷ Like Narcissus’ ungraspable reflection, these fictive reflections of the self slip treacherously away from easy identification in the world.

The Narcissan untrustworthy “I” has also historically been deployed in literature to speak of *more* than “myself.” This was most famously exemplified in the Renaissance by the essays of Michel de Montaigne, who studied “myself more than any other subject”³⁸ in order to write discussions of wide-ranging religious, philosophical and classical subjects. In *Moon Palace* Auster’s character Marco Stanley Fogg imitates Montaigne’s method, writing essays on clothes, suicide and Dada that each feel like a “subterranean version of my own life story” (MP, 226), connecting his experience to the world-at-large. The exemplarity of the “I” is evident in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, which preceded the modern genre of autobiography, and his *Dialogues*, in which “Rousseau” discusses the life and work of “Jean-Jacques.” “Rousseau”, Blanchot’s essay on the writer’s “nomad passion” to make the “daily flight outside of the world, the public retreat to the life of the Forest,”³⁹ is concerned with an exemplarity emerging from Rousseau’s self-seeing. As discussed briefly at the beginning of this Introduction, Blanchot perceives in Rousseau an ambition to keep himself

³⁷ Philip Roth, *Deception* (London: Vintage, 2006), p.184.

³⁸ Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays: A Selection*, trans. and ed. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2004), p.374.

³⁹ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.43.

“incessantly before his own eyes”⁴⁰ in his writing so as to “say everything” of himself, “his entire story, his whole life”; not in an “impossible integral narrative” enumerating the details of his life, but in an instantiation in language of the “moment of the first simplicity” - that he is alive in the world.⁴¹ Jean Starobinski writes that this language would not “*reproduce* a prior reality, but... *produce* its truth in a free and uninterrupted development”⁴²; the exemplary “I”, not as a representation of the self but as a direct expression of being in the world, would thus render reality’s truth in language.

Much modern literary theory has responded to a tension between the literary text’s instantiation of the “first simplicity” of being in the world and a supposed truth or authenticity of a monadic self reproducible in the text. Roland Barthes observed that the concept of the Author premised the text as the reproduction of “his” prior reality:

The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*... In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*.⁴³

For Barthes the Author functioned as a self whose life pre-determined the text’s meanings; the instantiation of reality’s truth “*here and now*” becomes perceptible in the text with the “death”⁴⁴ of that self as a cultural and critical

⁴⁰ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.43.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.45.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.46.

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p.145.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.148.

phenomenon. The space of literary reality is for Barthes a “negative where all identity is lost”⁴⁵; its production in language requires the removal of the self’s authorial identity. Similarly, Blanchot wrote in “The Essential Solitude” that language where “being speaks” in a literary work is “a language which no one speaks, which is addressed to no one, which has no center, and which reveals nothing. [The writer] may believe that he affirms himself in this language, but what he affirms is altogether deprived of self... Where he is, only being speaks.”⁴⁶ In *Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson took these theories of the erosion and disappearance of the monadic self in modern writing as part of a wider poststructuralist critique of what he calls the “depth model.”⁴⁷ Regarding the monadic self with reference to its exemplification in Edward Munch’s painting *The Scream*, Jameson describes its “depth” as an interior:

The very concept of expression presupposes indeed some separation within the subject, and along with that the whole metaphysics of inside and outside, of the wordless pain within the monad and the moment in which, often cathartically, that “emotion” is then projected out and externalized, as gesture or cry, as desperate communication and the outward dramatization of inward feeling.⁴⁸

The metaphysics of inside and outside in self-expression that Jameson discusses here reflect those we have observed in Kafka’s “The Burrow”; through a description of the vulnerability of the dark space that his writing forged within himself, Kafka makes his interior self communicable to the outside world. For Jameson, such means of the self’s expression in the world is disavowed in modern literary theory. A text that is “in no way equipped with a being

⁴⁵ R. Barthes, p.142.

⁴⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p.26-27.

⁴⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p.12.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.11-12.

preceding... the writing”⁴⁹ clearly cannot reproduce in language the monad’s wordless interior pain; moreover, when the text’s language is one which “no one speaks, which is addressed to no one, which has no center, and which reveals nothing,”⁵⁰ what “catharsis” is there for the writer who doesn’t even possess this language that he writes, but falls silent for it? Jameson thus described Postmodernist fiction as offering no depth for its reader to enter. E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* reified the postmodern world for him through the radical depersonalization of its content. The novel combines famous historical figures and a family who are named Father, Mother, and Younger Brother:

I would argue that the designation of both types of characters - historical names and capitalized family roles - operates powerfully and systematically to reify all these characters and to make it impossible for us to receive their representation without the prior interception of already acquired knowledge of doxa - something which lends the text an extraordinary sense of déjà vu and a peculiar familiarity one is tempted to associate with Freud’s “return of the repressed” in “The Uncanny”...⁵¹

A “sense of déjà vu” and a “peculiar familiarity”: these reader responses are elicited from *outside* the personal self, from the Freudian unconscious or a depersonalized collective cultural memory; they are triggered by “free-floating and impersonal”⁵² signifiers on the surface of Doctorow’s text that contrast with Modernist fiction’s working within the depths of the self. For Jameson, this literary shift was part of a wider ““death” of the subject”⁵³ in postmodern culture that he argued spelled the very decline of writing as a medium, since a

⁴⁹ R. Barthes, p.145.

⁵⁰ M. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p.26.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.24.

⁵² F. Jameson, p.16.

⁵³ Ibid., p.15.

population living impersonally are drawn to the “democracy of the visual and the aural”⁵⁴ - to media more suited to living outside the life.

However, the cultural picture that Jameson’s *Postmodernism* set out in 1991 has been outmoded by a cultural shift, what Hal Foster and others have called the “Return of the Real.”⁵⁵ As discussed at the beginning of this Introduction regarding Richard Powers’ “The Seventh Event”, the increasing proof and awareness of human-made climate change today has produced a demand for fiction that can see beyond the wants, needs and lifespan of the “so-called integrated self.”⁵⁶ Meanwhile, 9/11 precipitated James Wood’s appeal for a literary return to fiction with selves in: “A space may now open, one hopes, for the kind of novel that shows us... human consciousness... reflecting helplessly the newly dark lights of the age.”⁵⁷ Though the politics of writing fictions of the self remain contested in these literary responses to the pressure of the real, there is a consensus that any fictive encounter with the contemporary world within the limits of the self will be “helpless”, articulating the helplessness of the human individual in the face of contemporary reality.

Much of the existing critical work on Paul Auster, Philip Roth and Don DeLillo locates these writers in the context of one of the above cultural pictures:

Postmodernism, or the Return of the Real. Aliko Varvogli’s *The World that is the Book: Paul Auster’s Fiction* discusses how the mysteries of identity in Auster’s

⁵⁴ F. Jameson, p.318.

⁵⁵ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996).

⁵⁶ R. Powers, p.70.

⁵⁷ J. Wood, 6 October 2001.

novels perform the “impossibility of turning another man’s life into a story that could correspond to that man’s ‘real’ life”⁵⁸; Jamesonian “outward dramatizations of inward feeling” disrupt identity, such as the terrorist Benjamin Sachs blowing himself up in *Leviathan*, and the narrator Aaron “put[ting] the pieces back together, even when he knows that Sachs can never be whole again.”⁵⁹ Mark Osteen observes a similar Postmodern “explosion” of the Jamesonian depth model in Don DeLillo’s characterization of Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra*; the potential cathartic effect in the novel of Lee’s involvement with the Presidential assassination as an “outward dramatization of inward feeling,” an outlet for Lee’s “wordless pain,” is for Osteen presented as “only a fleeting unity that... ultimately explodes any lasting coherence.”⁶⁰ Recent Philip Roth criticism has assessed the turn to the Real in his late work: *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, The Plot Against America*, edited by Debra Shostak, examines Roth’s concern with “vast historical trauma”⁶¹ in these late novels, and with “‘America’ as place, culture, political environment, and idea”⁶²; Claudia Franziska Bruhwiler’s *Political Initiation in the Novels of Philip Roth*, discusses from a social scientific perspective the emergences of political consciousness in Roth’s characters. For Peter Boxall in *Don DeLillo: The possibility of fiction*, the “pressure of 2001” exerts itself on DeLillo’s fiction from the 1990s; he argues these novels are in Gillian Beer’s phrase “haunted by the

⁵⁸ Aliko Varvogli, *The World that is the Book: Paul Auster's Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), p.153.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.149.

⁶⁰ Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p.161.

⁶¹ Debra Shostak (ed.), *Philip Roth: American Pastoral, The Human Stain, The Plot Against America* (London: Continuum, 2011), p.4.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.3.

future,” auguries of the Real that reasserted itself on postmodern culture on September 11th.⁶³

My contention in this thesis is that Roth, Auster and DeLillo’s fiction instantiates new possibilities for the self in the contemporary world through the project of self-seeing. These three authors’ work open up a different perspective on writing the self today, that exceeds both Jameson’s “death of the subject” and Wood’s conception of the post-9/11 novel’s “helpless” response to the real.

2.3 Self-Seeing Beyond Postmodernism: Auster, Roth and DeLillo

The choice of Auster, Roth and DeLillo as the subjects of this thesis on self-seeing is on account of these writers’ formal and thematic emphasis on the visible and the invisible in their work. The foregrounding of coincidence in Auster, such as the character Benjamin Sachs being born the day America bombed Hiroshima in *Leviathan*, makes visible “some dark, complex pattern embedded in the real” in his fiction (L, 36). Apparently arbitrary coincidences “scar[]”⁶⁴ characters; the bomb takes “root inside” Sachs (L, 36), determining his future life as a terrorist and his death in an explosion. As I argue in the following chapter, such scars are Auster’s means of bringing the self out of invisibility in his writing, as if “I might see myself / let go / ...into the world” (GW, 94-95), as he writes in his poem “Search for a Definition.” Self-seeing is challenged by the

⁶³ Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The possibility of fiction* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p.157.

⁶⁴ Paul Auster, *Winter Journal* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p.5.

self's invisibility at the end of Roth's first novella, *Goodbye, Columbus*: Neil Klugman looks at his reflection in the library glass and narrates, "I was only that substance, I thought, those limbs, that face that I saw in front of me. I looked, but the outside of me gave up little information about the inside of me" (GC, 96-97). One can see outlined at the end of *Goodbye, Columbus* the task that would shape Roth's writing career: what he calls in his late novel *Indignation* "the attempt to unravel and to be revealed."⁶⁵ DeLillo, meanwhile, is peculiarly attuned to a crisis in media and documentary visibility dating from the Kennedy assassination. The visibility of the President's murder "shaded into... a condition of estrangement and helplessness, an undependable reality. We felt the shock of unmeaning."⁶⁶ A rupture in the legibility of visual media, and concurrently in our capacity to "see things as they are, to recall them clearly, to be able to say what happened" (LB, 301), produces for DeLillo a crisis of self-seeing in which visual versions of the self have an impersonality irreconcilable with the self "inside the life" (C, 49). For example, in *Libra* Lee Harvey Oswald's eyes are "gray, they are blue, they are brown. He is five feet nine, five feet ten, five feet eleven. He is right-handed, he is left-handed. He drives a car, he does not. He is a crack shot and a dud. [Nicholas] Branch [a CIA historian] has support for all these propositions in eyewitness testimony and commission exhibits" (LB, 300). The work of DeLillo's fiction is to "slip[] into the skin"⁶⁷ of these visual versions of the self, as he writes in his essay "The Power of History"; to write characters such as *Cosmopolis*' Eric Packer, who "could feel himself contained in the dark

⁶⁵ Philip Roth, *Indignation* (London: Vintage, 2009), p.212.

⁶⁶ Don DeLillo, "The American Absurd", *Harper's Magazine*, February 2004
<http://harpers.org/archive/2004/02/the-american-absurd/> [accessed 30 May 2014].

⁶⁷ D. DeLillo, "The Power of History", 7 September 1997.

but also just beyond it, on the lighted outer surface, ...being himself and seeing himself" (C, 201); to unravel, like Roth and Auster, the invisible *in* the visible.

The dynamics of visibility and invisibility in Auster, Roth and DeLillo's respective self-seeing have an emphatic import on the multiple visual distributions of the individual and the world in contemporary culture discussed in Part 1 of this Introduction. Roth's Neil Klugman, unable to see the "inside of me" in his reflection, describes his image as a "darkening of the glass" (GC, 97). *Goodbye, Columbus* thus proposes an idea that is antithetical to our cultural logic of surveillance and popular cultural aesthetics of transparency: the individual's appearance might be a "darkening" on an image; the individual "outside of me" does not fully open to the camera lens that today surveils and constructs me outside the life. In unravelling and seeing the self "inside the life" (C, 49), all three writers exceed the model of contemporary fiction presented in Jameson's *Postmodernism*. For Jameson, Doctorow's "Father," "Mother" and "Younger Brother" function in *Ragtime* as impersonal signs without depth; in Auster, Roth and DeLillo characters function as means to slip inside exterior versions of the self and rediscover Kafka's burrowed interior space. The thesis' three chapters examine these writers' respective means of getting inside the world in their writing by delving into this darkness, to produce the distorted visions of character précised at the beginning of this Introduction: Auster's figures of darkness, blindness and erasure; Roth's amplifications of the distance between where a character is and where he can no longer be; DeLillo's smeared appearances that reflect our inability to see the world at a fixed point in time.

These distorted appearances of the self are not the “helpless” reflections of the Real that Wood imagines. As discussed below in the final part of this Introduction, these three writers put the self in transformative contact with a world made *different* by nuclear technology and human-made climate change. Self-seeing in contemporary American literature is an action that can make our vulnerable, altering world visible.

3. The Different World

3.1 The World’s Appearance

In Auster, Roth and DeLillo, self-seeing through writing is a means of getting inside the world. This world is simultaneously visible and incomprehensible. As discussed at the beginning of this Introduction, a sense in all three writers’ work of the world’s co-terminous visibility and incomprehensibility follows on from the American poet George Oppen’s poem “Parousia”, from “Five Poems About Poetry”, reproduced in Auster’s novel *Invisible*:

Impossible to doubt the world: it can be seen
And because it is irrevocable

It cannot be understood, and I believe that fact is lethal. (I, 182)

As noted at the Introduction’s beginning, the dovetailing of the world’s visibility with its irrevocability in these lines creates a crisis of seeing: the world can be seen but the force of this certainty exceeds any seer’s attempt to order and

understand it. Oppen's emphasis on the world's visibility certainly compares with our culture's predominantly visual distributions of the individual and the world discussed in Part 1 of this Introduction; yet the Oppenian relation between visibility and comprehensibility is antithetical to our culture's aesthetics of concealment and transparency. Today's visibilities outside the life fetishise the individual's transparency to the world; "talent" and "art" are conceived as things inside the self to be exposed and explained, negating any space for the darkness of a self that can *not* appear. The world seen in "Parousia", by contrast, "cannot be understood"; by virtue of its visibility it is irrevocable and refuses explanation. For Oppen, the world does not automatically disclose itself when surveilled; one cannot fail to see it, but one can fail to perceive it.

Each chapter of this thesis will witness a writer encountering world pictures that seem to refuse understanding: a world of nuclear destruction with the potential for mutating the human species and ending the world; a world of fame that indiscriminately elevates movie starlets and mass murderers. For Auster, Roth and DeLillo these world pictures are irrevocable - they cannot be taken back and must be faced. All three writers get inside these pictures by exploring their own failures to perceive themselves in the world. Such failures are implausible within the perspectives of governments that have removed personal privacy and private companies that purport to light any darkness of the self; indeed, these entities profit from an aesthetics of transparency, either through the production of forms of visibility that confine the individual to a compilation of cultural and monetary capital, or through an atmosphere of generalised fear of concealed

threats to society that generates public support for policies that increase transparency and remove personal freedoms. In his essay “The Decisive Moment”, on Charles Reznikoff, Auster quotes the following Reznikoff poem:

The tree in the twilit street -
 the pods hang from its bare symmetrical branches
 motionless -
 but if, like God, a century were to us
 the twinkling of an eye,
 we should see the frenzy of growth. (CP, 380)

Auster notes Reznikoff’s separation of the human perspective from a divine sight in eternity in this poem. The perspectives present two images: a “bare”, “motionless” tree in twilight, and the “frenzy” of a world of active possibilities pictured not only in the tree’s growth and decay but the changing light and the changing street in which the tree stands, all invisible to the naked human eye’s sight. For Auster, the poem destabilises the aesthetic fixity of any single human sight of the world that might assert how a being or thing in the world, or how the world itself, *is*: “[T]he eye is not adequate,” he writes, “Not even the seen can be truly seen” (CP, 381). The failure to truly, fully see with the eye the “frenzy” of the world changing irrevocably in time opens up the space negated in our culture’s visibilities outside the life: the space of the darkness of a self that can not appear. Auster, Roth and DeLillo make use of the incapacities in their sight so as to get inside visibilities of the individual outside the life already existing in a world of nuclear destruction and a world of indiscriminate fame.

In his prose poem “White Spaces”, Auster describes how writing the failure of a total sight of the world might get him inside the world; he describes the process as a connection of two worlds:

[T]o note the things that are most near, as if in the tiny world before my eyes I might find an image of the life that exists beyond me, as if in a way I do not fully understand each thing in my life were connected to every other thing, which in turn connected me to the world at large, the endless world that looms up in the mind, as lethal and unknowable as desire itself. (GW, 83)

Auster locates in this passage a refuge from the “lethal” and “unknowable” Oppenian world (both adjectives refer back to the passage from “Parousia” cited above) in the “tiny world before my eyes”; furthermore, he hopes his narrow and fallible sight of this tiny world might connect him to the “world at large” - the Oppenian world. In “White Spaces” Auster’s writing thus sees in the “effort to create presence”; sees as a “way of being in the world,” just as he writes of Reznikoff’s poetry (CP, 376, 374). Such strategies of inhabiting the irrevocable, incomprehensible world through self-seeing are the interest of my thesis.

As I detail in the thesis’ first chapter, Auster’s writing has since 9/11 lost a sense of the above connection of two worlds and rejected the world at large; he has retreated inside the tiny world immediately before him. Despite this shift in Auster’s late writing, the thesis traces a steady and incremental reification of the Oppenian visible world from Auster, through Roth, to DeLillo. What is remarkable about the process of the world’s reification in these writers is that it involves not only getting inside falsely totalising visibilities of the individual outside the life that purport to show everything and transparently know the world, but also the consideration of how these falsely totalising perspectives

have aesthetically altered our sense of the real today. The corrupt Tony Blair-esque Prime Minister Alec Beasley's aphorism in David Hare's spy drama *Salting the Battlefield* "It's not a question of how it is, it's a question of how it appears"⁶⁸ is a deeply recognisable reality of contemporary political and public life amid news media. This powerful emphasis on the world's appearance features in Roth as a point of public ignorance that the self's protean creativity can invisibly exploit; but in DeLillo as a deeper truth that today appearance in the world and being in the world are co-terminous. In DeLillo seeing the self through writing is an action that *happens* in the world and changes the world. In attending to the reification of our contemporary world of appearances, my thesis is attuned to the world's Oppenian irrevocable visibility, as opposed to its purported transparency through technological surveillance.

3.2 The Different World

The thesis' last chapter, "Self-Seeing and the Different World in Don DeLillo", is interested in how the contemporary world is *different*; not only different from the world in the past, but different from itself. Don DeLillo's early fiction tests the necessity for a form of fictive vision of the contemporary world that includes the nuclear capacity to alter climates, habitats and species reproduction - natural conditions generally thought to be eternal before the advent of nuclear technology. In *End Zone*, published in 1972, Major Staley lists the long-term effects on a population exposed to nuclear radiation: "[Y]ou undergo a life-span reduction of eleven years. Sublethal doses also cause reproduction problems.

⁶⁸ *Salting the Battlefield*, dir. David Hare (Carnival Film & Television, 2014).

There are problems with micro-cephalic offspring. There are abnormal terminations and stillbirths. There's a problem with inferior skeletal maturation of male and female progeny. There is formation of abnormal lens tissue in offspring. There are chromosome breaks. There is sterility, of course" (EZ, 82). The challenge the novel finds in these post-nuclear conditions is that human life has not been annihilated: mutated forms of human life persist. "Of course the humanistic mind crumbles at the idea," the Major says on the subject of a nuclear world picture, "It's the most hideous thing in the world to... people that such ideas even have to be mentioned. But the thing won't go away. The thing is here and you have to face it" (EZ, 76). While the overarching narrative of Cold War culture was mutually assured destruction, in DeLillo the pressure of the real has long demanded seeing a world made different from itself but still going on; "To begin to reword the overflowing world" (EZ, 84), as Gary Harkness thinks in *End Zone*.

The question of the different world's visibility remains as vital now as it was for DeLillo in the early 1970s. Today the world's potential difference from itself stems from not only the effects of nuclear energy - effects risked by governments choosing to invest in and rely on nuclear power as the Earth's fossil fuels run out - but also our knowledge of human-made climate change. The visibility of human-made climate change is put in constant doubt; whenever a natural disaster happens now, the news coverage typically opposes Green organisations declaring it further evidence of climate change with sceptics arguing otherwise. The Earth is being altered by how we live to the

extent that in the near future, areas of the planet that are currently the most densely populated will not be hospitable for human life, and yet despite the world's unprecedented surveillance the alteration is happening quasi-invisibly; general conditions in the world's cities have not altered enough for there to have been a popular decision that the end of our world is *here* and our practices of consumption need to stop. Sarah Nicole Prickett, in her "Reasons Not To Kill Yourself Today, No. 19: Lars Von Trier's Bizarro Optimism" posted on *Thought Catalog*, captures the contemporary unfixed, spectral sensation of a different world: "One day we'll wake up and one thing will have changed and that one thing will be everything and after that our decline will be inexorable. One day we'll wake up on the wrong side of the world. Or we already have."⁶⁹

Filmic visions of a different planet affecting life on Earth have responded to the contemporary cultural uncertainty as to what world we are in and where we are in it. Prickett's post discusses two films from 2011: Mike Cahill's *Another Earth*⁷⁰, in which a second version of the Earth inexplicably appears in the sky, and Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*⁷¹, in which a rogue planet named Melancholia appears from behind the sun and collides with Earth. Both Cahill and von Trier discover pleasure in scenes of everyday life continuing on Earth while a new globe occupies the sky that has irrevocably changed the conditions of reality. These different planets reflect the altered conditions fraying our common sense

⁶⁹ Sarah Nicole Prickett, "Reasons Not To Kill Yourself Today, No. 19: Lars Von Trier's Bizarro Optimism", *Thought Catalog*, 15 November 2011 <<http://thoughtcatalog.com/sarah-nicole-prickett/2011/11/reasons-not-to-kill-yourself-no-19-lars-von-triers-bizarro-optimism/>> [accessed 2 June 2014].

⁷⁰ *Another Earth*, dir. Mike Cahill (Fox Searchlight, 2011).

⁷¹ *Melancholia*, dir. Lars von Trier (Artificial Eye, 2011).

of the world in which we live, as if the astronomic reality of our existence had been pulled in from the distance. The films describe characters' connections to the different planets: the planet Melancholia functions in part as a reciprocation of the character Justine's depression, which is ritually ignored or simplified by the other characters, while in *Another Earth* Earth 2 is both the distraction that precipitates the car accident that alters Rhoda's young life, and the place where a second version of herself is potentially living the life she had intended. The different planets thus reify experiences and possibilities for selves that found no reciprocation within the confines of the common world represented as Earth.

As the thesis chapter "Self-Seeing and the Different World in Don DeLillo" explores, DeLillo similarly opens up possibilities for the self through characters' connection to the different world. In DeLillo the different world is not a different planet, but the common world of fictive representation variously torn open: smeared, distorted, multiplied and constantly changing. The chapter traces an effect of possibility in the language of DeLillo's later writing that reciprocates the unfixed, amorphous possibilities of human life in the nuclear world. On account of the effect, characters' appearances in this language are torn open in the manners listed immediately above; beyond the fixed appearance of character in the common world, his characters open through their distorted appearances to the different world.

We might have a perspective now on what the term "world" means in this thesis. It certainly does not automatically refer to the planetary reality in Richard

Powers' "The Seventh Event" in which we are "changed by everything we look at" and we "scrape off on everything we brush up against." In both DeLillo and Auster there are two worlds on Earth: in DeLillo they are the common world and the different world; in Auster, the "tiny world before my eyes" and the irrevocable "world at large." For both writers, self-seeing through writing is a means of connecting the two worlds: seeing the "tiny world" presents in Auster the possibility of his presence in the "world at large"; DeLillo's location of possibility within paradigms of history and everyday life makes the common world different from itself, deepening it and rupturing its fixed presentation to make our precarious planetary reality visible.

It is the thesis of the character Mia Erdmann in Powers' story that selfhood in the world simplifies the world. "How small the cosmos (a kangaroo's pouch would hold it)," Nabokov wrote, "how paltry and puny in comparison to human consciousness, to a single individual recollection, and its expression in words!" There are implicitly two worlds here, or rather two cosmos: the physical cosmos and the cosmos of the self's imagining and writing. The example recalls George Eliot's comparison of writing and astronomy in *Daniel Deronda*:

Men, like planets, have both a visible and an invisible history. The astronomer threads the darkness with strict deduction, accounting so for every visible arc in the wanderer's orbit; and the narrator of human actions, if he did his work with the same completeness, would have to thread the hidden pathways of feeling and thought which lead up to every moment of action, and to those moments of intense suffering which take the quality of action[.]⁷²

For Eliot, the "hidden pathways of feeling and thought" - the darkness of the self - are as real in the cosmos as the darkness in outer space; the Nabokovian

⁷² George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (London: Penguin, 1995), p.164.

“individual recollection, and its expression in words,” happen *in* the world. This thesis, rather than discarding fictions of the self, witnesses self-seeing in contemporary American literature as an action that can get inside Erdmann’s planetary reality in which we are “changed by everything we look at” and we “scrape off on everything we brush up against,” to *already* be there deeply and really, rather than this perpetuated being-on-the-cusp of the “wrong side of the world.” The technological advances and technological society of the past century have radically reduced our sense of the viability not only of humanism but of the possibility of human being. Walter Benjamin wrote of the generation of people that fought in the First World War, “A generation that had gone to school on horse-drawn streetcars now stood under the open sky in a landscape where nothing remained unchanged but the clouds and, beneath those clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.”⁷³ The continued existence of the real world today - that is, not the planetary reality as such but the altering planet being inhabitable for human life - is as precarious as the human being amid the gunfire and explosions of technological warfare. The real world today, and the self hidden inside the life of the unprecedentedly visible individual, might be seen together.

⁷³ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 3: 1935-1938*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2002), p.144.

ELASTIC CHARACTER AND SELF-SEEING IN PAUL AUSTER

The self is no mystery, the mystery is
That there is something for us to stand on.

George Oppen

I might finally see myself

let go
in the nearly invisible
things

that carry us along with ourselves and all
the unborn children

into the world.

Paul Auster

PART 1

1. Elastic Character

As if spurred by Samuel Beckett's injunction "Fail better,"⁷⁴ Paul Auster has depicted characters travelling to the bottom in his fiction. At times this is a self-condemnation: "God damn me," thinks Nathan Glass in *The Brooklyn Follies* after inadvertently causing a young woman to lose her waitressing job, "Cast my body into hell, and let me burn there for a thousand years."⁷⁵ At others it marks a character's desire to "push myself as far as I could go," such as Marco Stanley Fogg's running the inheritance from his uncle's death down to nothing at the start of *Moon Palace*: "Little by little, I saw my money dwindle to zero; I

⁷⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho, Stirrings Still*, ed. Dirk Van Hulle (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p.81.

⁷⁵ Paul Auster, *The Brooklyn Follies* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p.120.

lost my apartment; I wound up living in the streets... I was both perpetrator and witness, both actor and audience in a theater of one. I could follow the progress of my own dismemberment. Piece by piece, I could watch myself disappear” (MP, 1, 24). This seeing of the self’s erosion towards nothing is modelled on Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist”, a story about a man who publicly performs his starvation but is “bound to be the sole satisfied spectator of his own fast” (CP, 324) since no-one can monitor his fast continuously, without sleeping. In an early essay titled “The Art of Hunger”, Auster saw “(s)omething new..., some new thought about the nature of art” in the hunger artist’s seeing his own passage towards death; saw in fact what he calls “the risk, the danger inherent in any act of art: you must be willing to give your life” (CP, 323-324). The first part of this chapter considers how Auster’s interest in writing self-seen disappearances produces a concept of elastic character in his fiction; he writes characters described in a flung momentum, only seeing themselves in the world when returned to the bottom or beginning of themselves. As Fogg narrates in *Moon Palace*, only when his life became a “palpable, burgeoning emptiness” was it a “thing I could actually see” (MP, 24).

Character ambitions are presented in Auster’s novels in tension with fortune. For example, detailing his friend Benjamin Sachs’ passion for “strange historical connections, yoking together the most far-flung people and events,” *Leviathan’s* narrator Peter Aaron tells his reader:

Only Sachs could have informed you that when the film actress Louise Brooks was growing up in a small town in Kansas at the beginning of the century, her next-door playmate was Vivian Vance, the same woman who later starred in the *I Love Lucy* show. It thrilled him to have discovered this: that the two sides of American womanhood, the vamp and the frump, the libidinous sex-devil and the dowdy housewife, should have started in the same place, on the same dusty street in the middle of America. (L, 23-24)

In tracing the coincident beginning in the same place of a pair of characters later flung to opposite cultural poles - the “two sides of American womanhood” as Sachs has them - this example attributes retrospective wonder to a chance “dusty street in the middle of America” while eliding any psychological complexities to Vivian Vance and Louise Brooks as little girls; in Sachs’ characterisation, these next-door friends are psychological blank slates suggesting both limitless possibilities for character ambitions, and infinite other chance factors that turned these quasi-identical child figures into such different women.

At the sublime, picturesque zenith of *Moon Palace* the interventions of chance in character ambitions are figured by two images of showering matter. These images particularly thematise the *movement* of characters’ “far-flinging” encounters with chance such as those stretching ahead of the young girls in *Leviathan*. Marco Stanley Fogg, yet to discover Thomas Effing is his grandfather, has been working for the man taking dictation of both his autobiography and his obituary. As part of their final project together distributing money to strangers in the streets, Effing, wheelchair-bound, persuades Fogg to take him out in a thunderstorm; he catches pneumonia and dies on May 12th, the date he predicted in his dictation. Following the old man’s instructions Fogg, his girlfriend Kitty Wu, Effing’s housekeeper Mrs Hume and her brother Charlie

Bacon scatter his ashes from the Staten Island ferry, in view of the Statue of Liberty. Fogg narrates:

There was a weirdness to our mission that somehow cancelled out the possibility of dark thoughts, and even Mrs Hume managed to get through the trip without shedding any tears. Most of all, I remember how beautiful Kitty looked in her tiny dress, with the wind blowing through her long black hair and her exquisite little hand in mine. The boat wasn't crowded at that time of day, and there were more seagulls than passengers out on the deck with us. Once we came within sight of the Statue of Liberty, I opened the urn and shook the ashes out into the wind. They were a mixture of white and grey and black, and they disappeared within a matter of seconds. Charlie was standing to my right, and Kitty on my left with her arm around Mrs Hume. We all followed the brief, hectic flight of ashes until there was nothing more to see, and then Charlie turned to his sister and said, 'That's what I want you to do for me, Rita. After I die, I want you to burn me up and toss me into the air. It's a glorious sight, dancing out in all directions at once, it's the most glorious sight in the world. (MP, 219-220)

Following Effing's determining with Fogg's help his life, his obituary and even the date of his own death, the instruction to scatter his ashes before the Statue of Liberty is a final gesture to his freedom from death's mastery over his fate. Yet the image of his ashes' "brief, hectic flight" also communicates a final loss of his fierce control in death. The admiring words of Charlie, a paranoid who believes nuclear bombs are hidden under New York City, emphasise this loss of control: "After I die, ...burn me up and toss me into the air," requests this character terrified in life of being blown up, "dancing out in all directions at once."

The second image of shaken, showering matter immediately follows the scattering of Effing's ashes in the novel. Fogg and Kitty Wu have just left Effing's apartment for the last time when Mrs Hume catches them up, remembering by good fortune "something I was supposed to give you." It is a crumpled brown paper bag that Kitty opens and looks inside:

When she looked up at us again, she paused for a moment in confusion, and then her face broke into a broad, triumphant smile. Without saying a word, she turned the bag upside-down and let its contents fall to the floor. Money came fluttering out, an endless shower of old crumpled bills. We watched in silence as the tens and twenties and fifties landed at our feet. All in all, it came to more than seven thousand dollars. (MP, 221)

Not only does the notes' fluttering fall mimic the scattering of Effing's ashes, but Fogg immediately narrates that this new inheritance rocketed his life "closer to human paradise than at any other time in the years I have spent on this planet," happiness that in its turn he characterises as his inability to think that "any of this could be destroyed, ...to imagine the exile that lay ahead" (MP, 222). These details of further heaving shifts in Fogg's emotional life, narrated in quick sequence immediately after the images of flung ashes and money, emphasise the images' figural function: the money is remembered and given to Fogg by good fortune, while Effing designs his ashes' scattering to symbolise his control over chance, but both images synecdochically figure character's blown-about movement in *Moon Palace*, with ambitions being put in constant tension with unforeseen fortune transferring Fogg from wealth to poverty, happiness to misery and solitude to community without warning. The opposition foregrounds a precariousness to self-invention that this chapter explores in Auster's work; characters in his novels *In the Country of Last Things* and *The Locked Room* instruct themselves to "take nothing for granted" (CLT, 2) and be "ready for anything" (NYT, 301). The elastic movement of character figured in *Moon Palace* echoes the "far-flinging" futures of Vance and Brooks in *Leviathan*; as I will explore, Auster's characters' "readiness" for a world of chance means an elastic readiness to be repeatedly returned to a blank slate like those young girl friends. This elastic flexibility of a self stripped back to its beginning, to the

bottom of itself, is the available means for self-seeing in the world that Auster locates in his writing.

2. Sublime Visibility

There is an implicit totality in the above descriptions of character in flung movement: Fogg's inheritance of bills fluttering to the floor, for example, describes both the specific instance of Kitty Wu tipping the bag out that elevates Fogg's life to a period of unprecedented happiness, *and* the general movement of character in Auster's writing. No single image of flung motion is seen clear of a character's continuing biography. The totality of character's flung motion is therefore something like a sublime effect in Auster's writing; specific instances of chance intervening in characters' self-inventions gesture to an "*unboundedness*"⁷⁶ (following Kant's analytic) of experience where the self is blown about uncontrollably in the world.

The unboundedness of experience is momentarily visible in specific instances such as Fogg's fluttering bills and the young girls playing in the street. However, in Auster's novels this sublime effect is not a supplement to characters accruing a biography and exemplifying "the development of a man... upon which the whole world of the novel is strung and along which it unrolls,"⁷⁷ as in Georg

⁷⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p.98.

⁷⁷ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p.82.

Lukács' reading of the novel's inner form; the sublime effect is Auster's *sole* manner of self-seeing through writing. This is evident in his association of characters with predominant post-Second-World-War American cultural symbols, such as Sachs' birth coinciding with the Hiroshima bombing. Sachs describes himself to the narrator Aaron as "America's first Hiroshima baby," 'the original bomb child,' 'the first white man to draw breath in the nuclear age'" (L, 23):

[I]t was... an attempt to define who he was, a way of implicating himself in the horrors of his own time. Sachs often talked about 'the bomb.' It was a central fact of the world for him, an ultimate demarcation of the spirit, and in his view it separated us from all other generations in history. Once we acquired the power to destroy ourselves, the very notion of human life had been altered; even the air we breathed was contaminated with the stench of death... [T]here's a certain eeriness to the obsession, as if it were a kind of deadly pun, a mixed-up word that took root inside him and proliferated beyond his control. (L, 24)

The coincidence of his birthdate with the bomb offers Sachs a purchase on the world that has been redefined, as he sees it, by nuclear energy. The use of the bomb to form his identity as "the original bomb child" both "defines" him to himself and others and "implicates" him in the contemporary situation; in other words, the symbol is his means of seeing himself in the world. In the course of the novel the determining function of the bomb as Sachs' signifier extends right into his vocation and his death as he becomes a bomb-making terrorist and accidentally blows himself up. The coincidence of the birthdate thus *composes* Sachs in the novel, as opposed to its supplementing a deeper, more integrated self transforming over the novel's duration; the chance fact's communication of the unboundedness of experience also completely identifies the character, who is visible in the novel as a flung motion, a "proliferation beyond control" - random extensions of the fact. "Only Sachs" could have informed you about

Brooks and Vance playing together as young children in the street; he *appears* in the “far-flung” motion of these young girls’ fates, since the motion is equivalent with his character.

Character thus does not accrue or transform over time in Auster, but is visible in sublime instances of a general flung motion. As stated above, this general motion remains invisible as a totality, since it appears in instances in a character’s biography, or in Sachs’ case as a motion that epitomises a particular character. If, following the analogy with Kant’s analytic, in these single instances the single character functions like an object that “prompts us to present... unboundedness,”⁷⁸ Auster achieves this effect of unboundedness in his aesthetics of character by writing characters returned to the bottom or beginning of themselves, to the blank slate that Brooks and Vance are reduced to in *Leviathan*. William G. Little has noted each detective character’s reduction to “nothing” in *The New York Trilogy*, spotlighting lines from each novel: “He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing” (*City of Glass*); “He has learned a thousand facts, but the only thing they have taught him is that he knows nothing” (*Ghosts*); “What I had done so far amounted to a mere fraction of nothing at all” (*The Locked Room*).⁷⁹ The reduction of character to nothing is similarly a theme in *Moon Palace*. Fogg sees his own erosion as he dwindles his money and possessions down to nothing (“Piece by piece, I could watch myself disappear”) in the first part of the novel; his “exile” from Kitty Wu, signalled at the novel’s zenith immediately after the images of flung ashes and

⁷⁸ I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p.98.

⁷⁹ William G. Little, “Nothing to Go On: Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*”, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Spring 1997), 133-163 (p.133).

money, “mutilate[s]” him - “Kitty’s body was a part of my body, and without it there beside me, I did not feel that I was myself anymore” (MP, 275); finally, at the novel’s end, having walked across the desert from Utah to the Californian coast, he identifies with the “emptiness” he sees looking out to sea:

It was four o’clock in the afternoon when I took off my boots and felt the sand against the soles of my feet. I had come to the end of the world, and beyond it there was nothing but air and waves, an emptiness that went clear to the shores of China. This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins. (MP, 297-298)

It is this recurrent emptying of character to nothing that makes its coincidence with a general flung motion possible; by the time Fogg is in the Utah desert he has met his father, discovered Effing was his grandfather, and then suffered his father’s death, yet the narrative disavows this multi-generational, “*David Copperfield*”-esque⁸⁰ biography that Fogg might cohere with to place himself in the world; instead, it is the motion of flung ashes and money that epitomise Fogg’s movement in a world that has revealed his family to him by chance. Fogg, who suffers his repeated reduction to an “emptiness”, is elastically flexible to whatever events befall him; like Sachs he is equivalent with an elastic flung motion, and he sees himself in the emptiness this motion requires of his character: “My life had become a gathering zero,” he narrates of his early self-erosion, “and it was a thing I could actually see: a palpable, burgeoning emptiness” (MP, 24). The novel concludes upon a return to the visible emptiness of character out over the Pacific Ocean; despite the spectacular

⁸⁰ Auster has described *Moon Palace* as a “story about families and generation, a kind of *David Copperfield* novel.” See Joseph Mallia, “Paul Auster by Joseph Mallia”, *BOMB Magazine*, 23 (Spring 1988) <<http://bombmagazine.org/article/1062/paul-auster>> [accessed 26 May 2014].

events Fogg has lived through, “[t]his is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins.”

There is a contradiction in Auster’s fiction between his aesthetics of a sublime emptying-out of character and his generic realist plot structures “full of sneaky turns and surprises and violent irruptions, [that] have what the [*New York Times*] once called “all the suspense and pace of a bestselling thriller.”⁸¹ In *Moon Palace* the ranging plot of a Dickensian bildungsroman is compressed into three hundred pages. Yet whereas for Lukács “the development of a man is... the thread upon which the whole world of the novel is strung and along which it unrolls,”⁸² Auster’s novels feature plot development without character transformation; character is only repeatedly reduced down to nothing. This contradiction produces the concept of elastic character in Auster that adapts flexibly to plot twists without being altered in itself. The manner of self-seeing that stems from this aesthetic situation is particularly interesting. Since characters are depicted repeatedly flung to the bottom of themselves in fast-paced narrative arcs, their sublime appearances where they are reduced to nothing are ephemeral moments in the text succeeded by the next twist, a change in fortunes that continues their general flung motion. Auster registered his sense of the ephemerality of visibility in his writing in *In the Country of Last Things*: “When you live in the city,” Anna Blume narrates in her letter written

⁸¹ James Wood, “Shallow Graves: The novels of Paul Auster”, *The New Yorker*, 30 November 2009 <http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2009/11/30/091130crbo_books_wood> [accessed 26 May 2014].

⁸² G. Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p.82.

within the novel's dystopian setting, "you learn to take nothing for granted.

Close your eyes for a moment, turn around to look at something else and the thing that was before you is suddenly gone. Nothing lasts, you see, not even the thoughts inside you. And you mustn't waste your time looking for them. Once a thing is gone, that is the end of it" (CLT, 1-2). This passage sets out the elastic flexibility of character in Auster in visual terms. A rigorous acceptance of the kinds of repeated loss that I have observed emptying and mutilating Fogg in *Moon Palace* is described here as the acceptance of things' disappearance from before one's eyes.

Alongside an acceptance of the ephemerality of appearance, this aesthetic situation also produces in Auster's work the repeated desire to see the disappearing self: the self that appears as it disappears, as it is reduced to nothing. *Moon Palace* is written as an older Fogg's means of seeing his young self through writing. "I remember those days well," he writes, summarising in the novel's first paragraph the Dickensian events he will repeat at length, "I remember them as the beginning of my life," (MP, 1) and the onus on memory accompanies the images of flung motion in which he sees the general movement of his life, from Mrs. Hume remembering by good fortune the brown paper bag full of money to his testimony of the breathtaking scene on the ferry: "Most of all, I remember how beautiful Kitty looked in her tiny dress, with the wind blowing through her long black hair and her exquisite little hand in mine" (MP, 219). Not only is Fogg the narrator concerned with seeing his younger self, but he attests to that younger self's devotion to "push[ing] myself as far as I

could go, and then *see[ing]* what happened to me when I got there” (MP, 1, my emphasis). The conceit of a narrator seeing a character that is in turn trying to see how far he can push himself into the world is something I will return to in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*. However, as I explore at the end of the thesis’ third chapter, in DeLillo’s novel the protagonist Eric Packer’s seeing “how far he can go” is stylistically constructed as a penetrative vision into the depths of the self, placing the self in transformative connection with the world. In *Moon Palace*, on account of the lack of any accrual of depths of self in Auster, the conceit serves only to reaffirm the unchangeability of elastic character; the older Fogg narrates *Moon Palace* for the same reason the younger Fogg acted out its events: to see himself.

Auster thus constructs in his fiction a concept of elastic character that makes possible the self’s repeated appearances at the bottom of character in sublime instances of a general flung motion. His repetitions of self-seeing in his writing require a rigorous acceptance of the ephemerality of these appearances. What does this consistently glimpsing the self at the point of character’s reduction to nothing amount to? An idea of one’s life attempting to be on both sides of the mirror; to be “perpetrator and witness, both actor and audience in a theater of one” (MP, 24), actor and narrator of your own existence. Auster’s elasticity of character that accrues no depths of self produces an aporetic structure of self-seeing within which the Beckettian injunction to “Fail better” means repeatedly glimpsing the self at the point of character’s disappearance.

The following final section of Part One explores a character opposition in Auster's fiction. I argue that in *The Locked Room* and *Leviathan*, Auster has set conventional characters in opposition to their extreme counterparts as a means of seeing *himself* in his writing. The idea that the self glimpsed in character's reduction to nothing *is* Auster - or, more accurately, who Auster *might be* - allows me to locate the extent to which his fiction mediates Maurice Blanchot's "first simplicity" of being alive in the world through the concept of a promised self; his encryption of his self-realization behind impressions of emptiness and far-flung exploding chaos obscures the simplicity of being in his writing.

3. Self-Seeing in Extreme Character

In his essay "Rousseau" discussed in my Introduction, Maurice Blanchot describes an opposition in the work and life of Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

[C]onstantly we intuit that the revelation of the unmediated and the denaturation of a pondered life make sense only by the opposition, where they are defined in a conflict without outcome.⁸³

I have described the "revelation of the unmediated" as instantiating in writing not the details of a life, but the fact of being alive in the world that Blanchot also calls "the first simplicity"; "the denaturation of a pondered life," meanwhile, describes the writer's ruining himself through his commitment to this instantiation, keeping himself "incessantly before his own eyes"⁸⁴ on the way to

⁸³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.48.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.45.

an affirmation that is “altogether deprived of self.”⁸⁵ Auster certainly puts characters incessantly before his own eyes, and in an arguably ruinous manner since their visibility is ephemeral and demands their reduction to nothing. However, his characters’ ruin is suspended by the elastic capacity in his writing to see the erosions to which they are subjected as repeatable instances of a general flung motion; up until *The Brooklyn Follies* (published in 2005), his fiction celebrates self-seeing as the repetition of a ruinous loss of self. Blanchot terms the interminable opposition in Rousseau “disease”: “I will say that this disease is also literature, all of whose contradictory claims - absurd if one wants to think about them, unbearable if one welcomes them - Rousseau discerned, with firm clairvoyance and strong courage.”⁸⁶ Auster, who read Blanchot and translated some of his stories while living in France with Lydia Davis (herself now one of Blanchot’s principal translators), appears to welcome the “disease” of writing as a romantic pleasure, not an unbearable passion. The second part of this chapter considers Auster’s ease with his idea of writing: characters’ sublime appearances in his work are part of a construction of drama whose subject is the completion of himself; the circular renewability of this subject for Auster’s writing is attributed to a character opposition most apparent in *Leviathan* and *The Locked Room*.

The Red Notebook contains “Why Write?”, a set of five anecdotes addressing, self-evidently, why Auster writes. In the third he recalls the death of a boy named Ralph at summer camp when he was fourteen. A counsellor had led the

⁸⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p.26.

⁸⁶ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.48.

boys on an impromptu hike through the woods, and when a thunderstorm suddenly arrived on top of them, no-one knew the way back out. The group headed for a clearing, a small meadow behind a barbed-wire fence:

One by one, we got down on our bellies and inched our way through. I was in the middle of the line, directly behind Ralph. Just as he went under the barbed wire, there was another flash of lightning. I was two or three feet away, but because of the rain pounding against my eyelids, I had trouble making out what happened. All I knew was that Ralph had stopped moving. I figured that he had been stunned, so I crawled past him under the fence. Once I was on the other side, I took hold of his arm and dragged him through. (CP, 269)

Auster and another boy sat with Ralph for an hour, holding down his tongue and trying to keep him warm. "I was only fourteen years old, after all," he writes, "and what did I know? I had never seen a dead person before" (CP, 269).

Although Auster does not explicitly state why this scene motivates him to write, he echoes Fogg's impetus in *Moon Palace* to remember episodes of his younger life and make them visible through writing: "I had spent an hour looking down at the tips of his teeth. Thirty-four years later, I still remember them. And his half-closed, half-open eyes. I remember those too" (CP, 270). Seeing his younger self, he also remarks on what he didn't think: "Strangely enough, I didn't think about how I had been right next to him when it happened. I didn't think, One or two seconds later, and it would have been me" (CP, 270). Auster retrospectively represents the scene as a near-death experience for himself; by a twist of fortune that fascinates him, he didn't die under a fence electrocuted by lightning. It might've been him; it was nearly him; but it wasn't him.

The question of Auster, the *proximity* of it being him, is not unique to this anecdote but characterises his own visibility in his characters' sublime appearances. Auster writes instances of the general flung motion of being in the world such as the images of flung ashes and money in *Moon Palace* and the "far-flung" futures of the identical girls in *Leviathan* as scenes of who *he* might be, beginning again from the bottom of himself. He consistently plays with the question of the proximity of his identity in his writing; *Invisible's* narrator, a novelist named Jim who edits and commentates on three chapters of a memoir written by an old friend, gestures teasingly to his fictionalisation of the original manuscript: "I don't suppose it is necessary for me to add that my name is not Jim" (I, 260); the quasi-anonymity of "Mr. Blank" in *Travels in the Scriptorium*, a writer who has invented characters that appear in Auster's earlier works, is similarly self-referencing; *Leviathan's* narrator's name, Peter Aaron, repeats Auster's initials; most famously, he coded his name into *City of Glass* ("It was a wrong number that started it, ... "I would like to speak to Mr Paul Auster... Of the Auster Detective Agency") and appeared as a minor character (NYT, 7).

Auster's coded suggestions of his own appearance flag a construction of drama whose subject is the completion of his character. He has described Quinn as the result of trying to "imagine what would have happened me if I hadn't met [Siri Hustvedt, his second wife],"⁸⁷ if he'd remained living alone after the break-up of his first marriage. The opposition of Quinn and Auster in the novel suggest two poles, perhaps even two stages, of his experience of writing. The first is

⁸⁷ Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, 'Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory' in Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook and other writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p.142.

Quinn, the detective novelist with the sensation he is “somehow living a posthumous life” (NYT, 5) who takes on the sleuth’s case intended for Paul Auster and ends up in a bare apartment using every daylight hour he has to write in a red notebook; the days grow shorter and shorter, the notebook runs out of pages. Auster, meanwhile, is depicted as a slightly smug character who has a comfortable life with his wife and child; he tells Quinn about his essay on *Don Quixote* with a “certain ironic pleasure... It seemed to be a kind of soundless laughter, a joke that stopped short of its punchline, a generalized mirth that had no object” (NYT, 100). The apparent contentment and pleasure from writing Auster satirically attributes himself contrasts with Quinn’s narrating his own solitude in detective fiction and anguished, revelatory writing in the red notebook. *City of Glass* narrates the release of the latter figure; if Quinn is who Auster thinks he might have been, the novel reads as a farewell to this once-possible future accented by the unnamed narrator’s final words: “As for me, my thoughts remain with Quinn. He will be with me always. And wherever he may have disappeared to, I wish him luck” (NYT, 133).

It is the first of many such farewells. The resolution of extreme character is a narrative trajectory Auster re-used: in *The Locked Room* an unnamed narrator takes on the life of his childhood friend who disappears, Fanshawe, publishing the latter’s writing and marrying his wife; in *Leviathan* Aaron races to finish his account of Sachs’ life before the FBI identify his friend as a terrorist. In these dramas of visibility Auster is always the subject, but extreme ideas he associates with himself are attributed to another character. *The Locked Room’s*

narrator and Aaron are relatively cautious, conventional characters resembling Auster's depiction of himself in *City of Glass*; yet when these characters attempt to see themselves, they see their extreme counterparts: "It seems to me now that Fanshawe was always there," *The Locked Room* begins, "He is the place where everything begins for me, and without him I would hardly know who I am... He was the one who was with me, the one who shared my thoughts, the one I saw whenever I looked up from myself" (NYT, 201); "Sachs kept me on my toes for fifteen years," Aaron writes, "constantly challenging and provoking me, and as I sit here now trying to make sense of who he was, I can hardly imagine my life without him" (L, 18). The reader thus sees Fanshawe and Sachs in their proximity to Auster and his likenesses; as with Quinn they function as who he might be, or might have been. Neither counterpart, neither extreme nor conventional character, is visible without the other.

There is a muted machoism to Auster's implicating himself in intellectual bombmakers and isolated literary genii, that bears only distant comparison with lion-hunting in Hemingway or disaffected fighter pilots in Norman Mailer. The overall effect of his opposition of conventional character with extreme character has more in common with F. Scott Fitzgerald's dramatisation through Jay Gatsby of the impossibility of accruing one's dream of their own life, that "orgastic future that year by year recedes before us."⁸⁸ Auster's self-seeing suffers this impossibility of self-integration and self-perfection through the chaos and distortions with which extreme characters irrupt into their counterparts'

⁸⁸ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.171.

lives. Seeing himself through writing Sachs' life, Aaron has to begin with his friend's exploded body "burst into dozens of small pieces" (L, 1); as explored above, Sachs' character is not recuperated from such coincidences with "the bomb" but identified by them, visible in instances of flung-apart motion. *The Locked Room's* narrator eventually accepts that Fanshawe "functioned as a trope for death inside me"; to be ready for him is to be "ready for anything... [and] when anything can happen - that is the precise moment when words begin to fail" (NYT, 301). Auster's extreme characters are thus visible as erasing forces antagonising the stable character of their counterparts. Considering that Auster implicates himself on both sides of these character oppositions to write dramas concerning his self-realisation, this attempt to fully see himself through writing catches itself in an aporetic structure returned repeatedly to the *possibility* of character: the blank slate.

The character opposition with which Auster composes his dramas of visibility produces a myth of giftedness comparable to the one propagated in contemporary culture. As I detail in the Introduction, television shows such as *The X Factor* ritualise the discovery of talent so that the performer feels undeserving of his or her recognition, as if the talent is itself awarded *by* the shows. Auster's cautious, conventional characters are depicted as ungifted, impoverished by the tasks they set themselves. As part of his "watching myself disappear," Fogg determines to read all the boxfuls of books his Uncle Victor has left him before selling them. Going hungry, "I dutifully read through the last of... [the] books," he narrates:

The closer I got to the end, however, the more trouble the books gave me. I could feel my eyes making contact with the words on the page, but no meanings rose up to me anymore, no sounds echoed in my head. The black marks seemed wholly bewildering, an arbitrary collection of lines and curves that divulged nothing but their own muteness. Eventually, I did not even pretend to understand what I was reading. I would pull a book from the box, open it to the first page, and then move my finger along the first line. When I came to the end, I would start in on the second line, and then the third line, and so on down to the bottom of the page. That was how I finished the job: like a blind man reading braille. (MP, 29-30)

Though a literature student, an essayist and the supposed writer of *Moon Palace* itself, Fogg's dutiful practice of reading Victor's books devolves into a word-blind ritual. Auster repeatedly demonstrates rigorous, routine work's impoverishing effect to reduce his characters down to nothing; the failures of detective work that William G. Little observes in *The New York Trilogy* (such as "He has learned a thousand facts, but the only thing they have taught him is that he knows nothing"⁸⁹ from *Ghosts*) function in the same manner. Ungifted, impoverished conventional characters are antagonised by extreme characters such as Fanshawe and Sachs, whose work routines are hidden: Sachs begins his project as the "Phantom of Liberty" blowing up miniature Statues of Liberty all over the country while Aaron presumes him dead; Fanshawe disappears and leaves *The Locked Room*'s narrator two suitcases full of his writing. These characters disregard their counterparts' family concerns: Aaron and *The Locked Room*'s narrator each move in with their counterparts' wives; when the latter asks Fanshawe how he could have walked out on his family, Fanshawe replies, "I wasn't meant to live like other people... What I need for myself is very different from what other people need" (NYT, 310-311). Auster's extreme characters, viewed in awe by their counterparts, are ascribed gifts that except them from routines of impoverishing practice and family; that is, from the

⁸⁹ William G. Little, 133-163 (p.133).

conditions that their ungifted counterparts negotiate. In *Mr Vertigo* Walt Rawley, a “piece of human nothingness”⁹⁰ who has “the gift”⁹¹ but must learn to fly in thirty-three gruelling steps, wonders if there were actually “no steps in the process? What if it all came down to one moment - one leap - one lightning instant of transformation?”⁹² In novels that feature Auster’s character opposition, the extremists irrupt into their counterparts’ lives like Walt’s inexplicable “lightning instant” lifting himself into the air, denuding conventional characters’ struggles of significance and touting their own exceptionality. Conventional characters’ binds to these extremists consist in the question Auster asks himself regarding Ralph in “Why Write?”: What if this had been me? What if this *is* me?

The relationship between extreme and conventional character premised in this question of potential identity explains Auster’s elastic capacity to repeatedly write himself in sublime, ephemeral appearances. Anna Blume’s rigorous acceptance that “[o]nce a thing is gone, that is the end of it” and *The Locked Room*’s narrator’s “read[iness] for anything” are positions faced towards an irruptive force that though erasing brings into proximity a promised self in the guise of an extreme character. They are also positions according with the unfixed character separated from impotentiality that Giorgio Agamben sees demanded by today’s job markets; as I discuss in the Introduction, for Agamben today’s individual is “blind not to his capacities but to his incapacities, not to

⁹⁰ Paul Auster, *Mr Vertigo* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.3.

⁹¹ Ibid., p.277.

⁹² Ibid., p.278.

what he can do but to what he cannot, or can not, do.”⁹³ In Auster this lack of impotentiality takes the form of his concept of elastic character flexible with their every flung motion in the world. Auster’s conventional characters’ flexibility derives from their relationship to their counterpart. The shocking freedom of the latter’s elasticity, surviving extreme events (both Fanshawe and Sachs are presumed dead at points and reappear) and unrestricted by convention, forms an ethos of unspoilable existential versatility in Auster’s fiction that helps conventional characters manage the general blown-about movement in which their ambitions clash with chance events. This aid is sensible in an ambivalent relationship. Conventional narrators describe their counterparts in a tone of indebted inspiration; for example, recounting his first meeting with Sachs, Aaron writes:

Now that Sachs is dead, I find it unbearable to think back to what he was like then, to remember all the generosity and humor and intelligence that poured out of him that first time we met. In spite of the facts, it’s difficult for me to imagine that the person who sat with me in the bar that day was the same person who wound up destroying himself last week. The journey must have been so long for him, so horrible, so fraught with suffering, I can scarcely think about it without wanting to cry. (L, 13)

This affection for mesmerizing characters headed for extremes is balanced by a fear of their erasing function, which serves to figure the unknowable future in conventional characters’ lives. *The Locked Room*’s narrator, for example, is as we have seen “ready for anything” in readiness for Fanshawe. Extreme characters thus figure through their intimate, unspecified distance from conventional characters’ lives the imminent arrival of unforeseeable changes in fortune. The importance of this distance in conventional and extreme

⁹³ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, p.44.

characters' relationships to each other is emphasised in *In the Country of Last Things*. Anna Blume's letter is addressed to a childhood lover who still lives in the place where Anna grew up, outside the country of last things; she insists to him at the novel's end, "The important thing is that you stay where you are, that you continue to be there for me in my mind. I am here, and you are there. That is the only consolation I have, and you mustn't do anything to destroy it" (CLT, 183-184). The extreme position of Anna's addressee in this novel functions differently to that of Sachs or Fanshawe; his extremity is only his silent exemption from the novel's dystopian setting, and one might argue that the thought of someone beyond the city stabilises Anna's character. Nevertheless, her fear that her lover might close that distance between them reflects the chaotic effects Sachs and Fanshawe have when they irrupt into their counterparts' lives. Concomitant with pathos, admiration and identification with an extreme character is an insistence on their extremity; that they *keep their distance*. This "distance" behind which Auster's fiction constructs extreme character is different to the distance Philip Roth's character-writing travels in his *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy that I explore in this thesis' second chapter. Roth works to make the invisible distances felt in loss and the inexorable passage of time *visible* by writing distorted self-seeings. The existential versatility that extreme characters epitomise in Auster's novels is not *lost* over a distance in Roth's sense; indeed, character's elasticity is not at a distance at all in Auster, but it requires the construction of a "distance" in order to be seen. Aaron and *The Locked Room's* narrator are themselves elastic characters bending every which way with a general flung motion, but they are made visible through the

appearance of their extreme counterpart, “the one I saw whenever I looked up from myself”; the extreme character is on the mirror.

The difficulty with writing figures of giftedness as a manner of seeing yourself is that they erase character back to its shell; if Auster writes to see himself, what he sees is the bare possibility of a self in characters reduced to an emptiness. Fanshawe and Sachs pop up in *The Locked Room* and *Leviathan* speaking books, blowing themselves up, travelling the world and spending months stalking their counterpart, but all of this action is constructed as extreme, happening behind the impression of a distance. These characters’ labours are hidden, and their irruptive appearances do not function to identify a visible self but to reduce their counterparts to a blank, elastic possibility of character and thus reveal the *possibility* of a self. Beyond this irruption of blank potential, everything of Auster’s extreme characters is hidden behind the impression of a distance. Blanchot described Rousseau’s distance from the world as a form of work; in his “nomad passion”⁹⁴ he leaves “to say everything [in his writing]... At the same time he is aware that to say everything is not to exhaust his story, or his character, in an impossible integral narrative, but just as well to seek in his being or in language the moment of the first simplicity, where everything is already given, ahead of time, where all is possible.”⁹⁵ The world that Rousseau left will not have him back because it will not admit the “first simplicity”’s speech. The world thus imposes a distance between Rousseau and his saying everything, and this distance is a task that demands so much of him that

⁹⁴ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.43.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.45.

Blanchot notes “perpetual captivity” as the “last wish of this man so tempted to be free”⁹⁶ by writing. Auster’s use of extreme character imitates the terrible freedom of Blanchot’s writer in order to code it unreadable; his impression of a distance hides not only Fanshawe and Sachs’ work routines, but their writing. The “book inside the book” is in absentia: Sachs gives up the novel he is working on (titled *Leviathan*) to become a terrorist, while each sentence of the red notebook Fanshawe gives the narrator at the end of *The Locked Room* “erased the sentence before it... [E]ach paragraph made the next paragraph impossible... I lost my way after the first word, and from then on I could only grope ahead, faltering in the darkness, blinded by the book that had been written for me” (NYT, 313). The attempt to draw anything from the gifted character withers in the conventional narrator’s reading practice, affirming the gift’s encryption in Auster. The Blanchotian distance between the self and the first simplicity becomes the distance between conventional and extreme character, and these latter promised selves that conventional characters *might have been* or *might yet be* remain hidden behind the blank potentiality of their appearances in instantiations of “darkness,” “blindness” and erasure.

Insofar as Auster attempts to render in his fiction a general flung motion of being in the world, we can witness a semblance of a Blanchotian attenuation to writing “the moment of the first simplicity,” to instantiating the very fact of being alive in the world. However, as the first part of this chapter has sought to elucidate, from Fogg’s eroding himself towards an emptiness “that I could

⁹⁶ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.44.

actually see” to conventional characters seeing themselves in their extreme counterparts that reduce them to nothing, Auster employs an aesthetics of erasure of character to see the *possibility* of the self in the world. As the impression of a distance between conventional and extreme character particularly makes clear, Auster *mediates* the first simplicity of being alive through the concept of a promised self consistently encrypted behind impressions of emptiness, impenetrable solitude and far-flung exploding chaos. Is it possible to deny in Auster’s work any instantiation of being alive in the world “where everything is already given, ahead of time, where all is possible”? Auster readily and repeatedly affirms that on certain subjects “words begin to fail” (NYT, 301); attempting to classify the presence or not in a book of that which is always here, as Blanchot writes “elusive and almost hidden by what reveals it,”⁹⁷ might be one of these subjects. It is possible however to intuit that in presenting being alive in the world’s *possibility for a self*, he precludes writing its actuality. By encrypting the writing of the “first simplicity” as a blank potentiality illegible in the experimental writing of Fanshawe and Sachs, Auster has arranged for himself a version of the “captivity” Rousseau craved. Rather than writing the first simplicity, he positions himself in elastic relation to an inevitable blankness that *represents* it, and writes towards his own encounters with this blankness in sublime, ephemeral appearances that shed character down to the bare possibility of who he might be in the world.

⁹⁷ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.110.

At the end of *Mr Vertigo* Walt describes his “lightning instant” lifting himself into the air as a shedding of self; the description interlaces levitation with writing:

You must learn to stop being yourself... You shut your eyes; you spread your arms; you let yourself evaporate. And then, little by little, you lift yourself off the ground. Like so.⁹⁸

The two words singled out on the book’s last line effect a thrilling levitation, but in eliding writing with a magical letting go of self they also suggests how little danger of change Auster’s writing allows his self to suffer. Auster’s character opposition is an armchair, or rather a chair in one of those ascetic chambers - “just enough room for a desk, a chair, and a miniature bookcase with four narrow shelves”⁹⁹ – that his protagonists sit and write in; Auster writes at his desk and *disappears*, like Sidney Orr in *Oracle Night* who tells his partner Grace, “I’ve been sitting in my [writing] room,” only for her to reply, “I opened the door and peeked inside. But you weren’t there.”¹⁰⁰ His characters will bend every which way because in writing he doesn’t have to give a thing; he needn’t change ever, only disappear and come back. Auster’s is a literature that takes expeditions, bravery, achievements, beauty, everything away from its reader in its recycling of individuals who only appear in their reduction to nothing; there is no consolation beyond the frisson of a hoped-for ephemeral subjection in self-regarding spectacles. Whatever else it or *he* might have done, Fanshawe’s red notebook might not have done that.

⁹⁸ P. Auster, *Mr Vertigo*, p.278.

⁹⁹ Paul Auster, *Oracle Night* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p.9.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.23.

PART 2

4. The Continuing Present and Self-Seeing From the Poetry To the**Fiction**

The inventory of your scars, in particular the ones on your face, which are visible to you each morning when you look into the bathroom mirror to shave or comb your hair. You seldom think about them, but whenever you do, you understand that they are marks of life, that the assorted jagged lines etched into the skin of your face are letters from the secret alphabet that tells the story of who you are, for each scar is the trace of a healed wound, and each wound was caused by an unexpected collision with the world - that is to say, an accident, or something that need not have happened, since by definition an accident is something that need not happen.¹⁰¹

Paul Auster, Winter Journal

In Auster's fiction, the collision of character ambitions with fortune *makes characters visible*, as we have seen; the scars of other people and things compose character. "[W]ithout [Fanshawe] I would hardly know who I am," writes *The Locked Room's* narrator (NYT, 201), while in *Leviathan* Aaron informs us that Sachs referred to himself as "the original bomb child" in an "attempt to define who he was" (L, 23-24). For the narrative voice representing character, the childhood friend and the bomb are fixed identifiers; if it is talking about Fanshawe then it is talking about *The Locked Room's* narrator, if it is talking about bombs then it is talking about Sachs, etc. However, in the imagined present moment of these characters' experiences, the scars are invisible: *The Locked Room's* narrator travels to Paris on a desperate, debauched search for Fanshawe, "struggling to imagine him, to see him... - but my mind... always conjured a blank" (NYT, 292); in *Leviathan* Aaron suggests

¹⁰¹ Paul Auster, *Winter Journal*, p.5.

Sachs blew himself up because his self-implication with ‘the bomb’ ran away from him, “as if it were a deadly pun, a mixed-up word that took root inside him and proliferated beyond his control” (L, 24). In the imagined present moment both signifiers have gone invisible to the character they represent, taken “root inside” him, and the extent of their influence on him is thus unbounded, dragging him towards destruction. The manner in which signifiers slip beneath visibility (i.e. beneath their very representative function) is figured by the tropes of erasure and blank character slates we have seen in Auster’s fiction; when the childhood friend and the bomb, meant to implicate character in the world, *appear*, they reduce character to the bare possibility of a self. There is thus a blank potentiality in the determining signifiers, or “scars,” that make character visible.

In the above passage from his memoir *Winter Journal* Auster describes his own identifying marks, “the secret [or, as in *Leviathan*, “mixed-up”] alphabet that tells the story of who you are,” as the results of accidents; each “unexpected collision with the world” is “something that need not happen,” as if the world itself were an unnecessary imposition on the self. Auster is not claiming here the possibility of a hermetically sealed self that could live untouched by external contingencies; indeed, the *Journal* is concerned with such a self’s *impossibility*, spelled out in its first line: “You think it will never happen to you, that it cannot happen to you, that you are the only person in the world to whom none of these things will ever happen, and then, one by one, they all begin to happen to you,

in the same way they happen to everyone else.”¹⁰² The fantasy lingers here, however, of this “only person in the world” untouched by the world, to whom none of these things happen, unmarked by accidents and thus in Auster’s constellation of character-writing *invisible*. Auster voices in his *Journal* a naïve self, addressed as “You,” struck by the world that causes it to appear; the polarity between self and world implicit in this attendance to the latter recalls the following lines of George Oppen’s poem “World, World”:

The self is no mystery, the mystery is
That there is something for us to stand on.¹⁰³

Auster, a great admirer of Oppen who shares the poet’s concern with the “mystery” of the world to the self, describes Adam Walker copying out the first three lines of Oppen’s poem “Parousia”, from “Five Poems About Poetry”, into his notebook in *Invisible*; their subject is again the exterior world, more specifically its visibility:

Impossible to doubt the world: it can be seen
And because it is irrevocable

It cannot be understood, and I believe that fact is lethal. (I, 182)

The challenge in these lines is to think the world’s *irrevocability*. The world is irrevocable because “it can be seen,” suggesting the unalterable scars that compose Auster’s characters. However, the word “irrevocable” also suggests Auster’s repeated whiting-out of these scars, since it signifies that the world *cannot be taken back*; the idea resonates with the rigour of Anna Blume’s

¹⁰² P. Auster, *Winter Journal*, p.1.

¹⁰³ George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (New York: New Directions, 2008), p.159.

seeing in *In the Country of Last Things*: “[T]urn around to look at something else and the thing that was before you is suddenly gone,” she writes; “Once a thing is gone, that is the end of it,” (CLT, 2) attesting that the world’s visibility does not guarantee the fixity of things in it, which pass out of sight and are lost.

Encounters with the irrevocable world present Auster’s characters with the possibility of seeing themselves in visible phenomena that disappear in the continuing present of their own experience; characters’ renewed attempts at seeing themselves in sublime instances spring from this continuing loss of visibility in the present.

The aporetic structure of the above means of self-seeing has been discussed earlier in this chapter; here we see its circularity results from what Oppen terms the fact of the world’s irrevocability. The lines of “Parousia” that Auster does not quote in *Invisible* critique man’s attempts to fix, identify and explain the smallest phenomena: “air moving, / a stone on a stone, / something balanced momentarily”; in these, man finds his “Millennium of obsession.”¹⁰⁴ Auster’s attempts to fix, hold and fully see *himself* through writing belong to this manner of seeing. “[I]n time might the lion / Lie down in the forest, less fierce / And solitary / Than the world,”¹⁰⁵ Oppen writes, both contrasting this animal with the human’s lonely obsession with seeing the world, and describing the lion acting differently to the paradigmatic image of it “fierce,” roaring, in man’s enworlding gaze; the lion’s action “L[y]ing down in the forest” is steered off the world that man obsessively fixes for his eyes. The fact of the world’s irrevocability is

¹⁰⁴ G. Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, p.103.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

“lethal” in this poem perhaps because the relief of the lion’s steering off is never afforded man, who sees obsessively unto death and denies himself the present moment - what Martin Heidegger described as the “freedom to... let... whatever “is” at the moment *be* what it is.”¹⁰⁶

If a preoccupation with visibility of character consistently lost to the continuing present in Auster’s fiction enacts the enworlding gaze “Parousia” cautions, Auster expressed in much of his early work, particularly his poetry from the late 1970s, a desire to cast his words *into the present moment itself*. He wrote in his prose poem “White Spaces”:

I want these words to vanish, so to speak, into the silence they came from, and for nothing to remain but a memory of their presence, a token of the fact that they were once here and are here no longer and that during their brief life they seemed not so much to be saying any particular thing as to be the thing that was happening at the same time a certain body was moving in a certain space, that they moved along with everything else that moved. (GW, 81)

The desire to participate in the continuing present signified in these words recalls Blanchot’s “revelation of the unmediated”¹⁰⁷: the writing of a gift encountered without a medium. Auster explicitly speaks against fixedly seeing what his words describe, asking “whoever is listening to this voice to forget the words it is speaking” (GW, 81) in order that his voice coming from his body remains unfixed, “mov(ing) along with everything else that moved”; what is imagined is Blanchot’s “first simplicity”¹⁰⁸ of the writer’s being alive. Auster is glimpsed in this text: his speaking voice and moving body are described without

¹⁰⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, ed. and introd. Werner Brock (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1949), p.333.

¹⁰⁷ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.48.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.45.

being fixedly seen. He both connects and distinguishes this manner of seeing from that Oppen saw incited by the lethally unknowable visible world:

To say the simplest thing possible. To go no farther than whatever it is I happen to find before me. To begin with this landscape, for example. Or even to note the things that are most near, as if in the tiny world before my eyes I might find an image of the life that exists beyond me, as if in a way I do not fully understand each thing in my life were connected to every other thing, which in turn connected me to the world at large, the endless world that looms up in the mind, as lethal and unknowable as desire itself. (GW, 83)

In this stanza the lethally unknowable “world at large... looms up in the mind” as an unmanageable sublime shock, “endless” as in man’s “Millennium of obsession” to fix it in “Parousia”. Auster distinguishes imagining “the world at large” from seeing “the tiny world before my eyes” made up of “the things that are most near,” “whatever it is I happen to find before me”; seeing this tiny world opens Auster to his connection with the world at large. In another poem contemporary with “White Spaces” titled “Search for a Definition (*On Seeing a Painting by Bradley Walker Tomlin*)”, he writes of this same determination to see what is directly in front of him, “the thing that passes / almost unseen,” here the gesture of a “small wind / disturbing a bonfire”:

...And yet
it is not here
and to my eyes will never become
a question
of trying to simplify

the world, but a way of looking for a place
to enter the world, a way of being
present
among the things that do not want us - but which we need
to the same measure that we need
ourselves. (GW, 93-94)

The tiny world of “things that are most near” is thus described not reducing the world at large, but offering an entrance into it. “Search for a Definition”’s

emphasis on our needing these small, “almost unseen” things “to the same measure that we need / ourselves” echoes from Oppen’s “World, World” both its distinction between the self and a mysterious world, and its directing its reader to the importance of attending to the latter.

In very precise, didactic lines of poetry Auster thus set out an approach to writing that took as its aim the Blanchotian “revelation of the unmediated”; his poetry asks that its own words be let go of so that they might be present among small things that pass almost unseen before our eyes in the world’s continuing present, invisible to a gaze that seeks to fix and know classifiable representations of things. The influences of both Blanchot and Oppen are sensible in this project, as is that “new thought about the nature of art” (CP, 323) Auster observed in Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist” in his essay “The Art of Hunger”. The essay elaborates on this “new thought” as one of an “art that is the direct expression of the effort to express itself,” where “form gives way to process” (CP, 323). “White Spaces” and “Search for a Definition” are very literal “direct expression[s] of the effort to express [themselves]”; they describe their words disappearing *as* the reader leaves the words behind moving on to the next line, the next stanza, the next page. Something that remains to the reader from these poems is the *instruction* to allow them to disappear.

As observed in Part One of this chapter, Auster takes Kafka’s hunger artist’s seeing his own passage towards death as a model for his attempts to see himself in his fiction’s instances of a general flung motion where character is

reduced to nothing, or the bare possibility of a self. There is a contradiction in this structure of self-seeing in the world that I have critiqued at the end of Part One: the promised self that Auster *might be* is hidden behind the blank potentiality of its appearances in the reduction of literary character to an emptiness; this shell of character that promises his own self-realisation blocks the unmediated revelation of being alive in the world in his writing. The beginnings of Auster's seeing himself in a blank character shell are perceptible in his poetry. In formulating his poetry's "direct expression[s] of the effort to express itself," Auster writes against words' representative function so explicitly that this blocks the instantiation of the simplicity of being: the stated desire that his words not "say[] any particular thing" premises the possibility of representation, while the desire that the reader see him as only "a certain body... moving in a certain space" forms a character shell. In the last stanza of "White Spaces" the "certain space" in which the poem describes its own words being spoken appears as Auster's writing room: "A few scraps of paper. A last cigarette before turning in. The snow falling endlessly in the winter night" (GW, 88). Auster describes writing in this space as "the immense journey through space that continues" into the present, to which his words are lost; this continuing present is happening "(e)verywhere, as if each place were here," connecting the writing room to the rest of the world. In the same manner, the "certain body... in a certain space" attends the poem's words "happening"; the event of their speech suggests several images of the concomitant "body": a person stood reading (at a poetry event, for example); a person sat writing; a person sat *reading*, since Auster's words are "happening" in a certain space in

the present moment in which the reader reads them. However, these descriptions of an anonymity of person and place in the encounter with poetry in the present nevertheless premise in whited-out form a polarity between self and world. The polarity is particularly apparent in “Search for a Definition”, not only in the distinction between “things” and “ourselves” noted above but in its final sentence:

...To the very end
I want to be equal
to whatever it is
my eye will bring me, as if
I might finally see myself

let go
in the nearly invisible
things

that carry us along with ourselves and all
the unborn children

into the world. (GW, 94-95)

Auster’s projected equality with “whatever it is / my eye will bring me,” otherwise referred to in his poetry as “the things that are most near,” “the thing that passes / almost unseen” and “whatever it is I happen to find before me,” takes the form of a vision in which “I might finally see myself / let go” in these things; Auster wants to see himself “let go” in the continuing present to which he instructs his reader to abandon his words. The vision marks an overlap between a poetry that aphoristically recommends its own passage into the continuing present and a fiction that suffers the present, to which it loses its author’s visibility: Auster’s imagined dissolution of the polarity between self and world where he whites out his character in order to write as anybody, as everybody, *in the world*, is made impossible by his desire to see it, to fix its image as it disappears. This desire to

fix his own appearance produces the aporetic structure of self-seeing in his fiction: the appearances of Fogg's emptiness "that I could actually see" (MP, 24) and Sachs and Fanshawe's far-flung and illegible chaos seize upon the bare possibility of a self in the very manner Oppen characterised as "lethal" in "Parousia"; the possibility is fixed so as to signify the first simplicity of being in the world, and this denies the self-seer actual experience of the world's continuing present.

Auster's self-seeing through fiction, in which a blank shell of character possibility facilitates the pursuit of fixing himself in ephemeral appearances, thus emerges from an early preoccupation with the Blanchotian "moment of the first simplicity"¹⁰⁹ in his poetry. His novels of the 1990s contain his most seductive, quasi-epic character portraits: Marco Stanley Fogg and his journey from being orphaned and nearly dying of starvation to discovering his family and walking across the American desert; Benjamin Sachs and his evolution from writer to terrorist; Walt the Wonder Boy and the apprenticeship that teaches him to fly. His two most recent novels, however, *Invisible* and *Sunset Park*, have returned to the aesthetic preoccupations of his poems: the near-invisibility of the things that are "most near," and the irrevocable world-at-large. Auster's explicit reintroduction of these concerns in his contemporary fiction are related to a shift in his understanding of the world-at-large; as I will explore, it has become traumatically visible to him - impossible to look at. The consequences of this

¹⁰⁹ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.45.

shift for Auster's character-writing disclose the limits of his self-seeing in the world through writing.

5. The World's Traumatic Visibility In the Contemporary Fiction

Things are seen in *Sunset Park* in that contradictory manner from "Search for a Definition", captured at the threshold of their disappearance. Miles Heller's work is "trashing out" - emptying, cleaning and repairing homes repossessed by banks after the Global Financial Crisis in 2007-2008 - and he photographs "the forgotten possessions, *the abandoned things*":

He understands that it is an empty pursuit, of no possible benefit to anyone, and yet each time he walks into a house, he senses that the things are calling out to him, speaking to him in the voices of the people who are no longer there, asking him to be looked at one last time before they are carted away. The other members of the crew make fun of him for his obsessive picture taking, but he pays them no heed... The law says that all salvageable objects above a certain value must be handed over to the bank, which is obliged to return them to their owners, but his co-workers grab whatever they please and never give it a second thought. They consider him a fool for turning his back on these spoils - the bottles of whiskey, the radios, the CD players, the archery equipment, the dirty magazines - but all he wants are his pictures - not things, but the pictures of things. (SP, 5-6)

Amongst things that are on the cusp of disappearing into the continuing present, taken and either rehabilitated or stolen in the work of trashing out, Miles holds on to images of them, "the pictures of things", much like "Search for a Definition"'s speaker's fixing an image of himself or herself let go in the present. Miles' attention to the things' visibility is prompted by their "calling out to him", a sense that they need him quite unlike the things in the present that "do not want us" in "Search for a Definition"; they "speak... to him in the voices of the people

who are no longer there,” attached to the evicted and dispossessed people to whom they belonged.

The connection between things and people in this novel marks a predominant cultural disappearance of interest in seeing “the things most near,” the things to which Auster so concertedly attended in his poetry. For Miles’ friend Bing Nathan, a sense of “*Tangibility*” has been lost; in his shop The Hospital for Broken Things he fixes “manual typewriters, fountain pens, mechanical watches, vacuum-tube radios, record players, wind-up toys, gumball machines, and rotary telephones... with the willfulness and passion of a general fighting a war” (SP, 73). Bing limits his idea of the world to “the small, circumscribed sphere of his own life, and not to the world-at-large, which is too large and too broken for him to have any effect on it. He therefore concentrates on the local, the particular, the nearly invisible details of quotidian affairs” (SP, 71).

References in this sentence to the “world-at-large” and “nearly invisible” things echo the vocabulary with which Auster designated his poetry’s thematic elements; yet here these elements are connected to characters that are represented far beyond a speaking “I” whited out to a “certain body... moving in a certain space.” Bing’s culturally anachronous passion for the small, tangible world around him informs his decision to squat in a house in Sunset Park: “a crumbling wooden house standing empty in a neighborhood as ragged as this one is nothing if not an open invitation to vandals and arsonists... By occupying that house, he and his friends are protecting the safety of the street, making life more livable for everyone around them” (SP, 77). When Miles moves to the

house, he describes the area as “a small world apart from the world where time moves so slowly that few people bother to wear a watch” (SP, 132); the invisibility of this small world shelters his relationship with an underage girl, as well as the completion of another character’s PhD dissertation and another’s rediscovery of her art and her sexual confidence. Miles describes the cemetery across the street from their house as a “vast necropolis” where you can “enclose yourself in the absolute quiet of the dead” (SP, 135), and he photographs the graves: “There were the abandoned things down in Florida, and now he has stumbled upon the abandoned people of Brooklyn” (SP, 133). Miles and his housemates count along with the dead among this “abandoned people”; in Sunset Park they live in ways that were impossible for them in the world-at-large, passing into the continuing present under that world’s radar.

Several other groups are allied to this disappearing collective: the men who fought in World War II that Alice Bergstrom writes about in her dissertation, “the silent men, the old men, the ones who are nearly gone now” (SP, 104); Miles’ father Morris Heller, struggling to keep his publishing house in business after the Financial Crisis, determined to find a way even if it is as mystical as the “ghost dance of the Oglala Sioux - and the conviction that the white man’s bullets would evaporate into thin air before they ever touched them” (SP, 173); the baseball players whose “tragic destinies” cut their careers short, that Miles, Morris and Morris’ father all admire (SP, 41). As exceptions to the predominant cultural current, all these figures are described by Auster at the same threshold

of disappearance where his poems see nearly invisible things passing into the present.

The connection between things most near and characters in *Sunset Park* is markedly different from characters' relation to the world in Auster's fiction of the 1990s. As discussed earlier, in Auster's fiction from *The New York Trilogy* to *Oracle Night* the scars of other people and things compose character; the scar is a signifier that has an unbounded extent of influence on the character it represents and determines their visibility to the reader. Characters' signifiers are also tools for their own self-definition and self-implication in the world-at-large; thus Benjamin Sachs in *Leviathan* uses the coincidence of his birth date with the Hiroshima bombing "to define who he was, as a way of implicating himself in the horrors of his own time" (L, 24). By contrast, the characters in *Sunset Park* are disconnected from the world-at-large but participate in the nearly invisible world in front of them, immersing themselves in the present through their attention to tangible things. The world-at-large is not discounted from the novel, however; Miles and his housemates know they cannot remain unseen indefinitely, and its irrevocability resurges when they are forcibly evicted from the house by police. Miles punches an officer in the face and flees the scene, and the novel closes on him in a taxi on the way to his father's apartment, comparing himself to a World War II veteran in a film that features in Alice's dissertation:

He presses the ice against his swollen hand, and as he looks at the hand, he thinks about the soldier with the missing hands in the movie he saw with Alice and Pilar [his underage fiancée] last winter, the young soldier home from the war, unable to dress himself and go to bed without his father's help, and he feels he has become that boy now, who can do nothing without his father's help, a boy without hands, a boy who should be without hands, a boy whose hands have brought him nothing but trouble in his life, his angry punching hands, his angry pushing hands..., and as the car travels across the Brooklyn Bridge and he looks at the immense buildings on the other side of the East River, he thinks about the missing buildings, the collapsed and burning buildings that no longer exist, the missing buildings and the missing hands, and he wonders if it is worth hoping for a future when there is no future, and from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever. (SP, 306-308)

The intrusion of the world-at-large into the continuing present that had temporarily shrouded Miles prompts his seeing himself as a World War II soldier, one of the men Alice describes as “nearly gone now.” Sprung both from his invisibility in Sunset Park and that of his previous wandering life (before coming to the squat in New York Miles had been out of contact with his family for seven years, following a fatal accident in which he pushed his stepbrother Bobby into the path of a car - the “pushing hands” in the above passage refer to the accident), he thinks that his actions have “brought him nothing but trouble in his life.” Miles’ attachment of his own character to a powerful symbol in the world-at-large imitates Sachs’ implicating the nuclear bomb in his own self-definition, but the missing Twin Towers symbolise Miles’ incapacity to see himself in the world-at-large other than as a boy “who can do nothing.” The irrevocable visibility of the “collapsed and burning buildings that no longer exist” in the continuing present but that nevertheless scar the world-at-large to this day is elided with the visibility of Miles’ unthought actions of split-second duration with his punching, pushing hands; their irrevocability denies him any future in the world, leaving him only “this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever.”

Auster's dovetailing of the September 11th terrorist attacks on New York with Miles' acts of violence does not, of course, assert that the latter's gravity is commensurate with the former. Implausible comparisons dot the author's recent fiction - in *The Brooklyn Follies*, for example, the news that it might have been locals in Vermont who vandalised Nathan Glass' car on account of its New York numberplate prompts him to think "about the horrors of Sarajevo and Kosovo, about the thousands of slaughtered innocents who died for no other reason than that they were supposedly different from the people who killed them"¹¹⁰ - yet such connections appear symptomatic of a shift in Auster's perception of the world's irrevocability that has affected his writing of character. In *Sunset Park* it is as if, following 9/11, the world-at-large were now too traumatic for Miles to see himself in it whatsoever. Hence his retreat into the tiny world of the present: there is a split between what can be known tangibly and locally, and what is known irrevocably, and the one is pursued for fear of the other.

Auster's manner of writing character is traumatised by the world-at-large again in *Invisible*. There is an explicit opposition between conventional and extreme character in this novel, such as we have seen in *The Locked Room* and *Leviathan*. Adam Walker, a young poet whose lines occasionally echo the sparse aphorisms of Auster's poems, as in "*never nothing but the dream of nothing / never anything but the dream of all*" (I, 225), is seduced by money and sophistication into a relationship with Rudolf Born, a Swiss professor of international affairs at his university. In several respects Born is an extreme

¹¹⁰ P. Auster, *The Brooklyn Follies*, p.189.

character like Fanshawe or Benjamin Sachs. He is worldly, “the hybrid product of a German-speaking mother and a French-speaking father” (I, 7) who lies in accounts of his own life, for example telling Adam he spent his childhood in Guatemala, because he enjoys “[f]ooling people” (I, 207); the novel’s events all but confirm he works for the French secret service, and he even suggests to another character that he is a double agent for Russia, and that he killed the character’s father because he found him out. As Adam’s antagonist, Born also elicits behaviour from his counterpart comparable to *The Locked Room’s* narrator’s self-destructive search for Fanshawe in Paris: Born flees to Paris after stabbing to death a boy who tries to rob Adam and himself, and Adam follows him, determined once there to see “Born rejected. Born humiliated. Born crumpled up in misery” (I, 191).

Despite *The Locked Room’s* narrator’s breakdown in Paris, his relationship to Fanshawe in the novel is not summarily destructive. As explored earlier, in Auster’s character opposition conventional characters manage their counterparts’ irruptions into their lives on account of an elasticity Auster models in the distant, irruptive character; the latter exemplifies the renewable attempt to see oneself in the world-at-large. It is also remarked upon earlier that extreme characters’ irruptions facilitate a *blank* potentiality for character ambitions; in other words, they are visible as erasing forces that *disappear into the world-at-large* (hence the effect of their gifted worklessness). Fanshawe tells *The Locked Room’s* narrator at the end of the novel that for a time “I followed you everywhere you went. Once or twice, I even bumped into you on the street,

looked you straight in the eye. But you never noticed... I think I'm unrecognizable" (NYT, 309); Sachs similarly disappears from his friends' lives, passing underneath their very eyes in the guise of the "*Phantom of Liberty*" (L, 216, my emphasis) they read about in the papers. In *Invisible*, Born does not present this potentiality for self-seeing to Adam. As a dying man in his sixties, the latter writes that his hesitation in reporting the stabbing to the police, caused by Born threatening him to stay silent, "had the insidious effect of forcing me to confront my own moral weakness":

...to recognize that I had never been the person I thought I was, that I was less good, less strong, less brave than I had imagined myself to be. Horrid, implacable truths. My cowardice sickened me, and yet how not to be afraid of that knife? ...Born had defeated me. He had shown me something about myself that filled me with revulsion, and for the first time in my life I understood what it was to hate someone. I could never forgive him - and I could never forgive myself. (I, 68-71)

Adam sees that, despite the firm moral and political stances he has earlier espoused to Born, he is not "the person... I had imagined myself to be" in the world-at-large - "I was less good, less strong, less brave"; what he sees of himself in *Invisible* horrifies him, exactly like Miles in *Sunset Park*. Unlike in that novel, however, an extreme character is held responsible for Adam's horror at seeing himself in the world.

In order that Born show Adam the world's horror, Auster characterises this extreme character with the world's irrevocable visibility. This is the purpose of the novel's quotation of the lines of Oppen's poem "Parousia", "Impossible to doubt the world: it can be seen / And because it is irrevocable / It cannot be understood, and I believe that fact is lethal"; Adam copies these lines into his

notebook at an outdoor café in Paris, and is “about to jot down some comments on this passage”:

...but before he can proceed a shadow falls across the page of the notebook. He glances up, and there, standing directly in front of him, is Rudolf Born. Before Walker can say or do anything, ...(he) sits down in the empty chair beside him. Walker's pulse begins to race. He is breathless, speechless. It wasn't supposed to happen this way, he tells himself. If and when they crossed paths, he was the one who was going to spot Born, not the other way around. He was going to be walking down a crowded street, in a position to avert his eyes and escape unnoticed. That was how he always saw it in his head, and now here he is out in the open, defenseless, sitting on his dumb, sorry ass, unable to pretend Born isn't there, trapped. (I, 182-183)

Born's appearance is dramatised as irrevocable in this scene. The words of Oppen that his shadow falls across announce him; in a deliberate echo of those lines, all Adam's plans for seeing Born at a distance, “in a position to avert his eyes and escape unnoticed,” are immediately sundered by the fact that Born has seen him and is “standing directly in front of him”; Born can be seen, is irrevocably present before Adam, and that fact is potentially lethal to him given the pair's history and Born's previous act of violence. Born's characterisation departs from that of Auster's earlier extreme characters here: whereas Fanshawe and Sachs are constructed behind the impression of a distance from their counterparts, Born's appearance denies Adam the comfort of that distance; whereas Fanshawe and Sachs pass invisibly before their counterparts' eyes, Born is unmistakably, irrevocably visible to Adam. His visibility is repeatedly accentuated in the novel: “I was there,” Adam says when asked to prove his story about the stabbing, “The proof is in my eyes, in what I saw” (I, 238); “The only thing I can talk about is what I saw with my own eyes” (I, 175), Born's ex-lover Margot says in reference to his sexuality, mentioning a threesome that prompts Adam to “see... Born watching [another man] push his

hardened cock into Margot, and there is Born, naked in his chunky, odious flesh, swept up in the throes of arousal, jerking off as he watches his girlfriend do it with another man..." (I, 195). Such images, attested to as "proof" of Born's character, do not belong to the tiny world of things that can be known tangibly and locally; Adam sees Born vividly in events from the past that, like the Twin Towers in *Sunset Park*, "no longer exist," including events he never saw with his own eyes. To give another example, Adam traces the direction of his life as a lawyer representing "the spat-upon and the invisible" to "that night in 1967 when I saw Born stab Cedric Williams in the belly - and then, after I had run off to call for an ambulance, carry him into the park and murder him" (I, 83-84). It does not matter that in the present moment of the event, Adam had run off to call for an ambulance, nor that Born denies stabbing the boy more than once; Adam *sees* him carry his victim into the park and murder him, and in this action sees the irrevocable injustice of the world-at-large, into which his life's work has made little or no dent. "It would be impossible to overstate how terribly this grieved me, has continued to grieve me. Justice betrayed," he writes in a letter to his old friend Jim, to whom he also entrusts the manuscript narrating his encounters with Born; "Twenty-seven years of legal aid work... In the long run, I don't think I've accomplished much. A number of satisfying victories, yes, but this country is no less cruel now than it was then, perhaps more cruel than ever, and yet to have done nothing would have been impossible for me" (I, 84-85).

Born's appearances in *Invisible* are thus described having the irrevocable visibility of the world itself. Auster's delivery of the world-at-large to a

conventional character's perception by means of an extreme one draws attention to the relative invisibility of the world in his earlier fiction. Since earlier extreme characters disappear from their counterparts' perception into the world-at-large, that world is only visible in sublime images that compose character through the use of symbols; as described earlier, these images do not produce any accrual of character in the world but erase character to a blank potentiality, resulting in an aporetic structure of self-seeing. Rather than make the world visible in its disappearance, Born marks its direct visibility, and yet it is written in violent and lustful images that Adam finds unbearable - as if, as in *Sunset Park*, the world were now too traumatic to look at. If 9/11 thematises the world's traumatic visibility in that novel, narratives of the end of the world perform the same function in *Invisible*. The apotheosis of Born's appetite for violence is his passion for the impending climate changes that will result from humans' pollution and alteration of the Earth's atmosphere:

The polar ice caps are melting, he said [to Cécile Juin, whose father he possibly murdered]. Fifteen years from now, twenty years from now, the floods will come. Drowned cities, obliterated continents, the end of everything. You'll still be alive, Cécile. You'll get to see it happen, and then you'll drown. You'll drown with all the others, all the billions of others, and that will be the end. How I envy you, Cécile. You'll be there to see the end of everything. (I, 300)

Born's distressing image of apocalypse, "[d]rowned cities, obliterated continents", is described in the same manner as Adam's images of him: as an irrevocable certainty, despite not being known tangibly, locally - "the floods will come... You'll be there to see the end of everything." Apocalypse is also the context in which Adam, writing as an old man, is able to see his involvement with Born in Paris in 1967. Describing his own exit after being unexpectedly confronted with Born standing over him at the cafe, he writes, "As Walker

leaves, the sun shoots across the sky and explodes into a hundred thousand splinters of molten light. The Eiffel Tower falls down. Every building in Paris bursts into flame. End of Act I. Curtain” (I, 187). Similar images accompany the description of his realisation that Cécile, only a young girl in 1967 whom he grimly intends to make use of in his plan to sabotage Born, is in love with him: “Innocence has turned into guilt, and hope is a word that rhymes with despair. In every part of Paris, people are jumping out of windows. The metro is flooded with human excrement. The dead are crawling from their graves. End of Act II. Curtain” (I, 222). The novel’s action has the traumatic visibility of the world’s destruction, like Miles Heller’s actions with his punching, pushing hands in *Sunset Park*. The novel form, with which Auster has been disposed in the project of seeing himself since *City of Glass*, witnesses in these texts the impossibility of self-seeing on account of the irrevocable world becoming impossible to look at - these novels “see the end of everything,” as Born tells Cécile she will. A therapeutic resolution of Auster’s character opposition is resultedly absent from *Invisible*: at the end of *The Locked Room*, the narrator discards Fanshawe’s red notebook; at the end of *Leviathan*, Peter Aaron breaks down in sympathy for Sachs and with relief that he has finished the manuscript of his friend’s life in time to show the FBI agent investigating his death; in *Invisible*, however, Adam struggles right until death to finish in rushed note form “a final reckoning” (I, 87) of the events he never let go of and the antagonist who escaped judgment. Like Miles Heller, Adam is written with no hope for a future in the world of the novel.

6. The Impossibility of Writing Character In the Contemporary Fiction

The function of the sublime in Auster's fiction has been to make character visible to the reader. The implicit totality in his fiction's images is the effect of blown-about movement between ambitions and fortune that composes character, and I have a sense reading Auster that the elastic movement of seeing oneself in instances of a totality that accrues no character has been worth more than anything else to him in his career writing novels; worth the ephemerality of each vision that is crucial to their sweetness; worth the work of beginning again, of concluding character portraits with such words as, "This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins" (MP, 298). His elastic self-seeing has depended on the fantasy of an "only person in the world" untouched by the world with which he begins his *Winter Journal*; though characters are made visible in his sublime images through a scar from the world that becomes a symbol, the invisible totality in each image is unmarked so as to figure a blank potentiality for character.

This untouched character potentiality is absent from *Sunset Park* and *Invisible*. Miles Heller and Adam Walker see themselves in the world in ruinous acts of stupidity and cowardice: Miles sees his hands, for all the trouble they have caused him, missing along with the missing Twin Towers; Adam sees the world explode as he plots to sabotage Born. Apocalypse is the implicit totality in these images, its irrevocable certainty separated from the continuing present by means of the sublime: in *Sunset Park* the Twin Towers remain "collapsed and

burning” in Auster’s description even though they “no longer exist”, while in *Invisible* environmental disasters that “will come” already dictate Adam’s images of himself in the world-at-large. Self-seeing is presented in both novels at thresholds of obliteration in a world that is visibly ending; Miles’ and Adam’s actions are touched with the horror of its destruction, precluding the possibility of the elastic movement towards sublime visibility that composed previous Auster characters.

The world’s increased visibility in these novels is related to Auster’s return to the thematic elements of his poetry, in particular the distinction between the “world-at-large” and the “tiny world” of the continuing present in which things pass “almost unseen.” Auster’s quasi-epic character portraits of the late 1980s and 1990s took a fluidity between the two worlds for granted. In *Leviathan*, for example, Sachs’ birth date’s coincidence with the Hiroshima bombing is a scar from the world-at-large that opens up possibilities for the character in the imagined present of his experience; it becomes a means of “defin[ing] who he was, a way of implicating himself in the horrors of his own time” (L, 24).

Furthermore, the scar facilitates the character’s appearances in images of far-flung chaos that present the possibility of a promised self in the novel. Auster’s loss of confidence in the present in *Sunset Park* and *Invisible*, however, results in scars from the world-at-large pulling Miles and Adam out of the world of the continuing present and into the irrevocable world-at-large where possibility is shut off from them. In *The Invention of Solitude*, the memoir Auster published in

1982 that he has described as “the foundation of all my work,”¹¹¹ he draws a distinction between inherent meaning in a work of art and inherent meaninglessness in the world: “One says: Don Quixote is consciousness gone haywire in a realm of the imaginary. One looks at a mad person in the world (A. [the initial he uses to refer to himself in this text] at his schizophrenic sister, for example), and says nothing. This is the sadness of a wasted life, perhaps - but no more” (CP, 125). Two poles are established here: character in art and personhood in the world, with only the former having a symbolic function. The grand symbolism of Don Quixote’s “mad” character resembles Sachs’ grand signification through the symbol of the nuclear bomb that both implicates him in the world-at-large and opens up possibilities for him in his imagined present experience; the literality of Auster’s sister’s “mad” personhood resembles Adam Walker and Miles Heller’s traumatic visibility in actions without implicit potentiality. A shift within Auster’s fiction from, in his terms, writing characters to writing people is co-terminous with the world’s increased visibility, as if the world has intruded on his capacity to write character.

In *The Invention of Solitude* Auster not only made the above distinction between art and the world but committed himself to the latter and its continuing present, just as he did in his poetry:

At his bravest moments [he writes of himself in the third-person], he embraces meaninglessness as the first principle, and then he understands that his obligation is to see what is in front of him (even though it is also inside him) and to say what he sees. (CP, 125)

¹¹¹ Michael Wood, “Paul Auster, The Art of Fiction No. 178”, *The Paris Review*, No. 167 (Fall 2003) <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/121/the-art-of-fiction-no-178-paul-auster>> [accessed 26 May 2014].

Premised in this founding pledge to the tiny world before his eyes, from which emerges the aporetic structure of his self-seeing in the world-at-large, is the untouched character whom nothing is inside, the only person in the world untouched by the world; seeing through writing necessitates a separation between an empty seer and “what is in front of him” - the denial that it is “also inside him.” That the world’s increased visibility has impeded on Auster’s untouched character in his recent fiction is evidenced by the absence of a blank character potentiality in *Sunset Park* and *Invisible*; however, it is in *Man in the Dark* that Auster has - in language echoing *The Invention of Solitude* passage above - most directly admitted that he can no longer deny that the world is inside him. August Brill lies awake at night telling himself stories to distract himself from the images of the filmed execution of his granddaughter’s boyfriend Titus by kidnappers in Iraq. The film is described at the novel’s end:

We all knew it would go on haunting us for the rest of our lives, and yet somehow we felt we had to be there with Titus, to keep our eyes open to the horror for his sake, to breathe him into us and hold him there - in us, that lonely, miserable death, in us, the cruelty that was visited on him in those last moments, in us and no one else, so as not to abandon him to the pitiless dark that swallowed him up.¹¹²

Auster’s elastic concept of character requires the freedom of the continuing present; this is a freedom that “we all,” meaning August Brill and his family and, implicitly, all of us living now in the West, no longer have. Time was the world was so *easy*; you could light on a cultural symbol and use it to code your life all from a white space untouched by the world, that wasn’t limited to that code. Yet Auster’s attempts to write character have since *The Brooklyn Follies* been hampered by the world’s “lonely, miserable death” inside him, leading to the

¹¹² Paul Auster, *Man in the Dark* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p.175.

writing of persons with the same inside them; variations on “the sadness of a wasted life.” The world is no longer his instrument for seeing himself; it is all he can see.

REALITY AND THE FICTIVE GLASS IN PHILIP ROTH

How difficult not to go making 'reality' this and that, whereas it is one thing.

Virginia Woolf

I just didn't see, as he so clearly could, why or how it should have turned out differently.

Philip Roth in The Facts

PART 1

1. Nothing but a Burrowing Mouth

Of the three writers considered in this study, Philip Roth's writing is the least visually concerned. In Paul Auster characters' sublime appearances constellate a potential for self-seeing through writing, and in Don DeLillo characters' gauzy appearances open up a world of active possibilities; by contrast Roth's images emerge from a narrative voice that hardly requires them, itself holding the narrative together. For example, there are intense and elegiac images in *The Anatomy Lesson*, Roth's novel concerning the writer Nathan Zuckerman suffering with chronic pain in his neck and shoulder: after an attempt at catharsis by haranguing a damning literary critic of his work, the reader sees Zuckerman "[s]tanding atop the paper-strewn bed, his hands clutched into fists and raised to the ceiling of that dark tiny room, he cried out, he screamed, to find that from phoning [Milton] Appel and venting his rage, he was only worse" (ZB, 416); in Chicago to enroll in medical school and heal himself morally and

physically, he takes an old friend's father out to see his wife's grave before the weather makes the trip impossible: "Big white snowflakes swept lightly across the hood of the limousine as they headed back onto the Drive. The distant sky looked just about ready to bring on in from the northern plains the season's first big show" (ZB, 465). However, these images, whether farcical or drawing attention to a gravity that has emerged from the farce, are exerted by a narrative voice that is capable both of underpinning their variety and of moving from third-person narration to first-person quotation of Zuckerman's thoughts without breaking the continuous reality it constructs. This reality, which is the drama of a writer who on account of his pain cannot write, imitates through Roth's "vice exister"¹¹³ the loss of the novel's own compelling voice; when Zuckerman begins to rediscover it for himself while impersonating Appel to his limo driver in Chicago, his thoughts are narrated, "He couldn't have stopped if he'd wanted to. *Let him speak*" (ZB, 457). In the cemetery on the outskirts of Chicago, delirious from self-medicating, Zuckerman smashes his chin on a gravestone and ends up in hospital, "nothing but a broken mouth" (ZB, 495); Donald M. Kartiganer describes this eventuality as the zenith of the obsession with the primal importance of the voice to the Rothian writer in this novel: "The site of sound, of language, Zuckerman's mouth is wired shut - total silence - as the difficulty of being a writer now comes down to its crudest bodily manifestation short of death itself."¹¹⁴ The threat of silence and the struggle for a voice in *The Anatomy Lesson*, a novel itself held together by its narrative

¹¹³ "Vice exister" is Samuel Beckett's term for his protagonist in *The Unnamable*. See Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (London: Calder, 1959), p.317.

¹¹⁴ Donald M. Kartiganer, "Zuckerman Bound: the celebrant of silence" in Timothy Parrish (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Philip Roth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), p.48.

voice, thematize the work of Roth's writing. In 2011, twenty-eight years after that book's publication, when asked in an interview about John Updike's range Roth found it sufficient to say in superlative praise, "He could write any kind of sentence imaginable"¹¹⁵ - as if all variety of character and subject matter issues first and foremost from rhetorical freedom.

Roth, not a primarily visual writer, has also repeatedly suggested that it is not his talent to see the world in his writing. In his essay "Writing American Fiction", which appeared in *Commentary* after the publication of his novella and story collection *Goodbye, Columbus* and while he was writing his first full-length novel, *Letting Go*, he famously stated:

[T]he American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. (RMO, 167-168)

For Roth there was a perversity to this envy he himself felt; since the "insane" phenomena of American mass culture, from the perverse shallowness of Presidential TV debates to radio competitions with cash prizes for the "three best television plays of five minutes' duration written by children"¹¹⁶ (RMO, 169), opposed serious fictive possibilities as much as they defied ordinary credibility. The essay argued that great contemporary American novelists, from J.D. Salinger sending his saintly heroes to the sanitarium or death, to Saul

¹¹⁵ Benjamin Taylor, "Philip Roth: I'm not caged in by reality", *The Telegraph*, 20 May 2011 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/8523311/Philip-Roth-Im-not-caged-in-by-reality.html>> [accessed 27 May 2014].

¹¹⁶ Such talent contests aimed at children echo contemporary ascriptions of talent outside the depths of a singular self discussed in this thesis' Introduction.

Bellow crafting denouements where previously alienated selves are simply glad to be alive, did not and could not write characters living authentically in the American culture of the early 1960s, but instead imagined the self as “the only seemingly real thing in an unreal-seeming environment” (RMO, 181).

After formally calling into question early in his career the possibility of credibly writing the world-at-large at all, Roth shifted his stance twenty-one years later to single himself out from his contemporaries in conversation with the writer David Plante: “[John] Updike and Bellow hold their flashlights out into the world, reveal the real world as it is *now*,” he said. “I dig a hole and shine my flashlight into the hole.”¹¹⁷ In 1982 it is Roth, as opposed to the American writer, that the world eludes; the metaphor of digging a hole for writing recalls Franz Kafka’s “The Burrow”, a story about an unspecified creature’s anxious construction of a sanctuary from the outside world that Roth has called an “unromantic and hardheaded fable about how and why art is made” (RMO, 290). In *The Ghost Writer*, the first novel of the *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy published in 1979, he writes his character, here a young man publishing his first stories, echoing his own youthful sentiment about the real: “Oh, if only I could have imagined the scene I’d overheard!” Nathan thinks after eavesdropping on his literary father-figure E.I. Lonoff with the young devotee Amy Bellette, “If only I could invent as presumptuously as real life! If one day I could just *approach* the originality and excitement of what actually goes on!” (ZB, 87). However, what astounds the young Zuckerman is not the unreal-seeming environment of American mass

¹¹⁷ David Plante, “Conversations With Philip”, *The New York Times*, 1 January 1984
<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/11/specials/roth-conversations.html> [accessed 15 April 2014].

culture circa 1960 but the threshold of infidelity and impiety visited by Lonoff, a “literary ascetic” author to “visions of terminal restraint,” an “out-of-step folklorist pathetically oblivious of the major currents of literature and society” (ZB, 7, 10, 8) whose characterisation resembles Roth’s assessments of Bernard Malamud, one of those great American writers discussed in “Writing American Fiction” without access to the real world as it is now.¹¹⁸ Rather than disorienting and exiling the inner life, *what actually goes on* furnishes *The Ghost Writer’s* protagonist with ammunition against a father who considers his latest story (which fictionalises an embarrassing episode in the Zuckermans’ family history) anti-Semitic - for the most stoical Jewish writer is touched with unhallowed existence, meriting its literary consideration morally authentic.

Roth, having recorded the discomfort of flashing blindly on the world’s temerity in 1961, employed it in the beginning novel of *Zuckerman Bound* to shine a flashlight inwards and help frame the emotional and creative arguments that forged him as a writer. The tactic is an apparent inversion of Auster’s commitment in *The Invention of Solitude*, published a year after *The Ghost Writer*, to “embrace... meaninglessness as the first principle, and then... understand... that his obligation is to see what is in front of him (even though it is also inside him) and to say what he sees” (CP, 125). Auster separates himself from the world in order to look out and see it, whereas Roth makes use

¹¹⁸ Roth described Bernard Malamud as “[t]he sorrowing chronicler of human need clashing with human need, of need mercilessly resisted - and abated glancingly if at all - of blockaded lives racked with need for the light, the lift, of a little hope.” See Philip Roth, “Pictures of Malamud”, *The New York Times*, 20 April 1986
<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/09/28/reviews/malamud-rothpictures.html> [accessed 15 April 2014].

of being touched by the world in order to look inside himself. The contrast is compounded by Zuckerman's letter to "Philip Roth" at the end of *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* reproaching the author for purporting to discard a fictive covering in his narration of himself and his world:

Your gift is not to personalize your experience but to personify it, to embody it in the representation of a person who is *not* yourself. You are not an autobiographer, you're a personificator. You have the reverse experience of most of your American contemporaries. Your acquaintance with the facts, your sense of the facts, is much less developed than your understanding, your intuitive weighing and balancing of fiction. You make a fictional world that is far more exciting than the world it comes out of. (F, 162)

Roth repeats here through Zuckerman his distinction between his contemporaries' illuminations of the real world and his own burrowing writing; it is fiction, and not the world, that comes easily to him. The moral imperative in Auster to see the world and say what he sees holds no force with Zuckerman. If a setting out of the facts, presented by the "Roth" in this autobiography as a convalescent activity to "recover what I had lost" and "repossess life" after a "prolonged physical ordeal that led to an extreme depression" (F, 5), makes at least a nominal commitment to writing the world without disguise, Zuckerman critiques its construction of transparency - "You try to pass off here as frankness what looks to me like the dance of the seven veils," (F 162) he writes - and argues the author gets much closer to authenticity writing a "fictional world that is far more exciting than the world it comes out of." This last sentence again directly opposes Auster's aesthetic position in *The Invention of Solitude*. In the same passage in which he pledges to describe what he sees in front of him, Auster writes:

Like everyone else, his life is so fragmented that each time he sees a connection between two fragments [or, in one sense, *facts*] he is tempted to look for a meaning in that connection. The connection exists. But to give it a meaning, to look beyond the bare fact of its existence, would be to build an imaginary world inside the real world, and he knows it would not stand. (CP, 125)

Auster imagines building a world inside the world in which facts are connected by a unifying meaning; yet the imaginary structure cannot be made to stand inside the inherent meaninglessness or “bare fact” of the things in front of his eyes. Roth’s Zuckerman, by contrast, argues that Roth’s fiction makes a world *outside* the world that successfully metamorphoses the facts into a more authentic fictional reality. That Roth is not imaginatively obstructed and arrested by the bare facts - what Auster also terms in his poetry “the nearly invisible / things”, “the things that do not want us” in the small world of the present moment - is in itself unsurprising. In “Writing American Fiction”, discussing the saving role of mysticism in Salinger (one of those writers who exalted selves dislocated from a world), Roth wrote, “If you contemplate a potato long enough, it stops being a potato in the usual sense; unfortunately, however, it is the usual sense that we have to deal with from day to day” (RMO, 173-174). In this essay, he writes that hearing radio competitions announced for the best teleplays written by children makes it difficult “to find one’s way around the kitchen” (RMO, 169); disoriented in his home by the absurdity of everyday American reality playing on the radio, it does not avail him to look at a potato disappearing into the continuing present. What is more significant is the absence in his work of a world-at-large that imposes specifically because, to use George Oppen’s phrase, “it can be seen.”¹¹⁹ The world in the usual sense sickened and embarrassed Roth in 1961 by “toss[ing] up” incredible characters, but it was not

¹¹⁹ George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, p.103.

the world's *irrevocable visibility* that determined its challenge to the writer; indeed "Writing American Fiction" is redolent with examples of fictional selves envisioned outside the world altogether by novelists free of the Austerian obligation to *see what is in front of them*. As for Roth in 1982 shining a flashlight into his burrow, he presents himself in those writers' company, self-mining with his back turned to the real world. This position has not been possible for Auster, beholden as he is to an irrevocable world that "looms up in the mind" (GW, 83) in images that have eventually broken his attempts to see character through writing. The lines of Oppen's "World, World" that describe Auster's transfixion - "The self is no mystery, the mystery is / That there is something for us to stand on"¹²⁰ - are anathema to Roth's corpus, which arguably *stands on* the mysteries of subjectivity. A Roth novel is not first and foremost the work of the production of images, because in Roth images are not the site of an irrevocable imperative upon the self to see the world.

The above distinctions separating Roth from Auster take the former's assessments of himself at face value. The effect of the author's criticism of his own writing through the fictional Zuckerman in the epilogue to an autobiography (his "hav[ing] it both ways", as Zuckerman writes (F, 192)), for example, has necessarily gone unremarked upon here. This entire introduction is intended to explicate that Roth's manner of connecting character to the "real world,"¹²¹ or as he also terms it the "unwritten world" (RMO, xiii) involves a more complex negotiation of the visible and the invisible in self-seeing than Auster's tactic of

¹²⁰ G. Oppen, p.159.

¹²¹ D. Plante, 1 January 1984.

seeing himself let go and disappearing in the field of his own world-facing gaze. In Roth, character's visibility in the world is not enough to establish a connection between the world and the self; as this chapter will explore, his depictions of characters struggling to see inside themselves alert us to a darkness inside the self that remains concealed in character's appearance.

2. Roth's Characters On the Fictive Glass

One "muggy, low-skied" night in *Goodbye, Columbus*, Neil Klugman and Brenda Patimkin go swimming at the country club of which she and her family are members (GC, 34). The evening is full of tricks played on Neil's vision: Brenda "wore a blue suit that looked purple in the lights and down beneath the water it flashed sometimes green, sometimes black"; when the barman puts the pool lights out, "it took a while for me to see, once again, the diving board a shade lighter than the night, and to distinguish the water from the chairs that surrounded the far side of the pool" (GC, 34-35). The couple wrapped up on two chairs pushed together, Brenda hatches a game: "Why don't you go in the water, and I'll wait for you and close my eyes, and when you come back you'll surprise me with the wet. Go ahead." "[H]eaded blindly down" into the pool Neil feels a "touch of panic" (GC, 37):

I threw my head back for air and above me saw the sky, low like a hand pushing down, and I began to swim as though to move out from under its pressure. I wanted to get back to Brenda, for I worried once again - and there was no evidence, was there? - that if I stayed away too long she would not be there when I returned. I wished that I had carried her glasses away with me, so she would have to wait for me to lead her back home. I was having crazy thoughts, I knew, and yet they did not seem uncalled for in the darkness and strangeness of that place. (GC, 37-38)

The dark of the water and the “starless” (GC, 35) sky “pushing down” figure an oppressive blindness affecting Neil in this scene as to whether Brenda is waiting for him; a blindness he would rather, in his anxiety to control what Brenda can see, she suffered by his taking her glasses. In the “darkness and strangeness” of the country club at night his “crazy” fear that she will leave him seems plausible, almost as if the dark were facilitating an Austerian *looming up in the mind* of an irrevocable reality.

However, the tension within the two characters’ relationship played out by Neil’s anxiety over what each of them can see is *also* plainly identified in the scene’s dialogue. Entwined on the chairs before Brenda’s idea of the game, Neil pushes the straps of her bathing suit down and she inches back and asks him about his parents and his career ambitions (questions she has been told to ask by *her* parents); the conversation develops into an argument over its portents, with Neil willingly considering himself negatively judged and marking in his narration Brenda’s potential “obtuseness” to the direct implications of her own questioning:

“I want you to [love me].”

“What about the library?” [Neil’s presumably unsatisfactory place of work.]

“What about it?” she said. (GC, 37)

Throughout the novella Neil's narration consistently flags his social inferiority to the Patimkins *as he sees it*. Driving from his aunt and uncle's house up to Short Hills, where Brenda lives, to see her after her tennis game, "[i]t was, in fact, as though the hundred and eighty feet that the suburbs rose in altitude above Newark brought one closer to heaven" (GC, 6); playing Brenda's little sister Julie at five and two on the basketball court in the Patimkins' back garden, he lets her take her shot again only to have the same courtesy denied him, "No!", "(s)o I learned how the game was played. Over the years Mr. Patimkin had taught his daughters that free throws were theirs for the asking; he could afford to" (GC, 20). However, what Neil cannot decisively know is how Brenda sees their difference. He pursues a confirmation of his separateness as decisive as in Alexander Portnoy's teenage fantasy of pretending to be Gentile to the girls he skates with on the lake in winter in *Portnoy's Complaint*: "I can lie about my name, I can lie about my school, but how am I going to lie about this fucking nose? ...Screw off, Jewboy! Get off the ice and leave these girls alone!" (PC, 149-150). Yet in response to his "What about the library?" Brenda says, "When you love me, there'll be nothing to worry about" (GC, 37), dismissing the implicit concern about his suitability in her earlier questions. His suspicions of her "obtuseness" (GC, 37) are symptomatic of his not knowing whether she can't see his unsuitability for her, or whether she doesn't care about it and he really can count on her to "carry me up those lousy hundred and eighty feet that make summer nights so much cooler in Short Hills than they are in Newark" (GC, 10).

At the story's climax the couple break up in an argument over each other's self-seeing. Brenda, back at university in Boston, receives letters from her parents telling her they have found the diaphragm hidden at the bottom of her drawer, and Neil, having just arrived to visit, immediately concludes that the awkward social dynamic between them is the reason she left the thing behind to be discovered:

"You act as though I wanted her to find it."

I didn't answer.

"Do you believe *that*?" she said, after neither of us had spoken for a full minute.

"I don't know."

..."Neil, what are you talking about! You're the one who doesn't understand. You're the one who from the very beginning was accusing me of things? Remember? Isn't it so? Why don't you have your eyes fixed? Why don't you have this fixed, that fixed? As if it were my fault that I *could* have them fixed. You kept acting as if I was going to run away from you every minute. And now you're doing it again, telling me I planted that thing on purpose. (GC, 94-96)

The suggestion that Brenda is being obtuse again about her own motivation, which is thus *outside* what she can see but visible through Neil's perspective, is countered in this passage by her accusation that it is *him* being obtuse by insisting on seeing their entire relationship in terms of his social envy and anxiety, interpreting signs "every minute" that she is going to leave him.

Brenda's parents' letters, her father's expressing his "every faith" that she will give Neil up, occasion the final argument, but the two characters do not break up because the letters make traumatically visible a reality in which they cannot finally live together; they break up because to each, the other is in the dark about themselves. Neil leaves the hotel room he and Brenda were to stay in, walks into the Harvard Yard, and *Goodbye, Columbus* closes on an image of him standing in front of one of the university libraries, considering his ability to see himself:

From the light of the lamp on the path behind me I could see my reflection in the glass front of the building. Inside, it was dark and there were no students to be seen, no librarians. Suddenly, I wanted to set down my suitcase and pick up a rock and heave it right through the glass, but of course I didn't. I simply looked at myself in the mirror the light made of the window. I was only that substance, I thought, those limbs, that face that I saw in front of me. I looked, but the outside of me gave up little information about the inside of me. I wished I could scoot around to the other side of the window, faster than light or sound or Herb Clark on Homecoming Day, to get behind that image and catch whatever it was that looked through those eyes. What was it inside me that had turned pursuit and clutching into love, and then turned it inside out again? What was it that had turned winning into losing, and losing - who knows - into winning? I was sure I had loved Brenda, though standing there, I knew I couldn't any longer. And I knew it would be a long while before I made love to anyone the way I had made love to her. With anyone else, could I summon up such a passion? Whatever spawned my love for her, had that spawned such lust too? If she had only been slightly *not* Brenda... but then would I have loved her? I looked hard at the image of me, at that darkening of the glass, and then my gaze pushed through it, over the cool floor, to a broken wall of books, imperfectly shelved. (GC, 96-97)

Alone and single in this scene, Neil turns his scrutiny of the tension in his relationship with Brenda, previously focused on the Patimkins, on himself. When he speculates, "What was it inside me" that turned his love for Brenda inside out and turned "losing - who knows - into winning," he posits in all seriousness Brenda's accusation that he has pushed for the discarding he feared from her throughout their relationship, and become martyr to the prejudice he suspected. Though now willing to consider that he himself is responsible for how the affair turned out, it is no part of himself that he can see; "whatever it was that looked through those eyes" is responsible, *what it was inside him*, and looking at himself in the library glass yields no knowledge of this "it": "the outside of me gave up little information about the inside of me."

This passage exerts in a sober mode what would become Roth's great comic talent for "having it both ways" (F, 192) in his character-writing. Chris Rock, describing the comedian's talents to Jerry Seinfeld on the latter's *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* internet show, asserts, "We're professional arguers. Not

only can we argue about anything, we can argue *either side*.”¹²² Roth shares this talent for writing both sides of an argument: at the end of a novella that has ridden between Brenda’s sense of social superiority to Neil and Neil’s sensitivity to the possibility of the same, the reader is left to the conclusion that both are to an unknown extent true. The relationship of character to concealment in this text recalls Henry James’ novel *What Maisie Knew*, in which a child is passed between two parents who manipulate her to get at each other. Through her parents’ selfishness, Maisie is exposed to things far beyond her comprehension and given no help in understanding them. As a result, to her “concealment had never necessarily seemed deception” but rather a condition of knowing things; “Everything had something behind it: life was like a long, long corridor with rows of closed doors.”¹²³ Concealment similarly functions as a condition of Neil and Brenda’s relationship in *Goodbye, Columbus*. Brenda’s leaving her diaphragm to be found in her parents’ house never definitively emerges as a deception; instead, such incidents provoke arguments as to who is deceiving whom, and who is deceiving *themselves*, between two characters that are as blind to their own motivations as they are to each other’s. If in Auster’s fiction characters face a world that is traumatically visible, Roth’s first novella by contrast presents a darkness in which its characters try to see each other; as with the outside of Neil reflected on the library glass, Neil and Brenda appear in the text, but in these appearances what it is inside them that motivates their actions and causes their relationship to turn out the way it does remains concealed.

¹²² Jerry Seinfeld, “Kids Need Bullying”, *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, Season 2, Episode 6 <<http://comediansincarsgettingcoffee.com/chris-rock-kids-need-bullying>> [accessed 24th September 2013].

¹²³ Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (London: Penguin, 1985), p.54.

Roth developed more comic and more powerful means of his “having it both ways” in his later writing by interiorising oppositions such as those between Neil’s and Brenda’s perspectives in *Goodbye, Columbus* within a single character. To a certain extent the two potential causes of Neil and Brenda’s break-up are mutually accepted within the former character’s perspective, though as the setting of his self-seeing before the library glass emphasises, he is only written turning his critical gaze upon himself once he has nobody else to look at. Roth’s writing of the character Alexander Portnoy in *Portnoy’s Complaint* is more fully embedded in a set of ambivalences that occasion the very text of that novel, a long comic monologue addressed to a psychoanalyst. Alex’s grievances with his parents, “the outstanding producers and packagers of guilt in our time!” (PC, 36), war with his childhood memories of being with his mother in the kitchen at dusk, and with his father in the woods at dawn while on vacation: “I might be remembering his sperm nosing into her ovum, so piercing is my gratitude - yes, *my* gratitude! - so sweeping and unqualified is my love” (PC, 27). His desire for a “full and wonderful life of utter degradation” with a fantasy partner called “Thereal McCoy,” who “sits on my cock while I take a shit, plunging into my mouth a nipple the size of a tollhouse cookie, and all the while whispering every filthy word she knows viciously into my ear,” leads to his relationship with a sexually adventurous woman he calls “the Monkey” whom he leaves while she threatens to jump off the balcony of their hotel room in Athens; frightened for his “good name” (PC, 199), he pictures her committing a “photographable” suicide “in her underpants... and they’ll publish the note they find, more than likely in a bottle stuffed up her snatch. “Alexander Portnoy is

responsible. He forced me to sleep with a whore and then wouldn't make me an honest woman"" (PC, 249). Finally, he is an analysand who reads Freud and insists on the plain visibility of psychoanalytical explanations for his own behaviour: his mother, he says, belongs to a class of Jewish-American women who "wear the old unconscious on their *sleeves!*" and ask their sons over the phone, "Well, how's my lover?" (PC, 97); "With me it all happens in broad daylight!" he tells his doctor, "I have a life *without* latent content. The dream thing *happens!*" (PC, 257).

Roth's characterisation of Alex Portnoy is a more melodramatic, extensive and deeply worked depiction of Neil Klugman's dilemma as to what is going on inside him. It is also a fantasy of articulacy - show me the man or woman who speaks in Alex's page-long sentences with bracketed asides and dashes - that dovetails with its narrator's belief that his life is "in broad daylight"; gone is *Goodbye, Columbus'* Jamesian relationship of character to concealment - in the "long, long corridor" of Alex's waking life all the doors are open and the phantasmic dramas of both the Oedipus complex and the Freudian disunity of tender and erotic "currents of feeling" (PC, 185) are actually happening therein. Yet Alex's ostensible seeing into his own unconscious, perceiving the causes of the conflicts he believes characterise him, does not stem his suffering. "Doctor Spielvogel," he says to his analyst, "it alleviates nothing fixing the blame - blaming is still ailing, of course, of course" (PC, 119); "Doctor," he entreats him concerning his parents, "what should I rid myself of, tell me, the hatred... or the

love?" (PC, 27). Alex sees more of himself than Neil but is no freer for it; he is only trapped in more visible contradictions.

The crises of self-seeing in *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint* exhibit an interest in what writing can make visible that is quite distinct from Auster's. For the latter, writing's fascination is its glimpsing of the self beginning from nothing on a fictive glass; the narration of character produces a form of self-seeing as "perpetrator and witness, both actor and audience in a theater of one" (MP, 24). Both Neil Klugman's work with his own reflection and Alex Portnoy's unremitting self-psychoanalysis conform to this interplay of perpetrator and witness, yet their images *figure the crisis* of their characters as opposed to achieving the sublime visibility that, however brief, is character's end in Auster. Furthermore, the idea of a self beginning from nothing holds no glamour for Roth's characters; it is not nothing, but *something* that turned Neil's social aspirations inside out, and Alex's origins are so elaborately interlaced with his piousness as well as his masochistic and exhibitionistic mores that the idea of their simply never-having-been doesn't cross his mind.

Roth's interplay of the inside and outside of character thus departs significantly from its sense in Auster. Written face to face with themselves, what is inside Roth's characters is outside what they can see; for Auster, seeing the world through writing begins with the opposite condition, that what is in front of him *isn't* also inside him. As we have seen, Auster's writing thus premises an empty seer untouched by the world, made visible to itself by its association with

prevalent cultural symbols that figure the world's "scarring" the self. Interior crises of self are depicted, but these are coded by the suffering character's symbol and resolved in the same; when the word "bomb" gets mixed up inside *Leviathan's* Benjamin Sachs, he is already "let go" (GW, 95) in the world of the novel, visible on its glass. By contrast Roth's character-writing delineates a self that is not fully elided with the world by its visibility in it. The crises of self-seeing in *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint* recall the traditional demands of realist novel-writing exemplified in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*:

Men, like planets, have both a visible and an invisible history. The astronomer threads the darkness with strict deduction, accounting so for every visible arc in the wanderer's orbit; and the narrator of human actions, if he did his work with the same completeness, would have to thread the hidden pathways of feeling and thought which lead up to every moment of action, and to those moments of intense suffering which take the quality of action[.]¹²⁴

Echoing Eliot's terms, Roth's early fiction presents characters struggling to "thread the hidden pathways" of their feelings and thoughts. For threading this darkness, one's appearance is not enough; for both Neil and Alex there is something within themselves that remains invisible on the fictive glass. Roth's Eliotian fictive exploration of the self's "invisible history" requires his narrative negotiation of depths of self absent from Auster's work. In the Introduction to his monograph *The Major Phases of Philip Roth*, David Gooblar employs an "inward/outward, or inside/outside" distinction to focalise both Roth's oeuvre and the predominant concerns of existing literary criticism on Roth:

Roth's intense and durable self-consciousness has ensured a focus [by both the author himself and his critics] on the formation of identity, both in the ways in which the self is constructed and understood and in the ways in which the self is affected by the world "out there," by culture, but also by history, by other people.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.164.

¹²⁵ David Gooblar, *The Major Phases of Philip Roth* (London: Continuum, 2011), p.6.

The concept of self that Gooblar précises here - at one and the same time constructed *in* itself and in mutual relation with the outside world, affecting and affected by the latter - makes possible in Roth, I will argue, the work of constellating the inner darkness within characters that are visible on the fictive glass. As I contend in this thesis' first chapter, Auster's writing conceals the Blanchotian "moment of the first simplicity" in his being "where everything is already given, ahead of time, where all is possible"¹²⁶ by reducing character to an aesthetic blank that *represents* this possibility for his self. In Roth's writing, the first simplicity in his being is also hidden in character's appearance; Neil and Alex are self-seeing characters denied a situation where "all is possible"; they deprive themselves of what they think they want, chained to "hidden pathways" inside themselves that invisibly dictate their actions and obsessions. Neil wants Brenda but pushes her away; Alex wants freedom from his parents but cannot let go of his obsession with them. However, despite the self's darkness in Roth, the dynamics of visibility and invisibility in his self-seeing work beneath the fictive glass to locate that moment of the first simplicity in his being, where all is possible; as I will explore, he locates it at an invisible point where the self's inner universe is remade through character's transformative connection with the world.

¹²⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.45.

3. Invisible Reality

In “Document Dated July 27, 1969”, a response to Diana Trilling’s critique of *Portnoy’s Complaint* in the August edition of *Harper’s Magazine* that year, Roth parodies in personal mode Trilling’s invention in her review of the authorial character “Mr. Roth,” a writer with a “grimly deterministic... view of life” that he is “fortifying” as a “position” in *Portnoy* (RMO, 22). The amusing disjunction drawn in Roth’s letter between himself and this “Mr. Roth” is qualified towards its end:

Obviously I am not looking to be acquitted, as a person, of having some sort of view of things, nor would I hold that my fiction aspires to be a slice of life and nothing more. I am saying only that, as with any novelist, the presentation and the “position” are inseparable, and I don’t think a reader would be doing me (or even himself) justice if, for tendentious or polemical purposes, he were to divide the one into two, as you do with “Mr. Roth”. (RMO, 26)

For Roth, Trilling’s distinction of author from work, or “position” from “presentation,” only prefaces their elision in her review so that he is Portnoy, and the novel’s “view” is his own. He closes his letter with the suggestion of an alternative to her route to discerning “Mr. Roth’s” character:

You state at one conclusive point in your review, “Perhaps the unconscious... is... more hidden from us than the author of *Portnoy’s Complaint* realizes.” May I suggest that perhaps “Mr. Roth’s” view of life is more hidden from certain readers in his wide audience than they imagine, more imbedded in parody, burlesque, slapstick, ridicule, insult, invective, lampoon, wisecrack, in nonsense, in levity, in *play* - in, that is, the methods and devices of Comedy, than their own view of life may enable them to realize. (RMO, 28)

In this paragraph Roth no longer limits the name “Mr. Roth” to the character Trilling invented but uses it as a moniker for himself in the third-person, a parodic and playful authorial self invisible to the careless reader of *Portnoy’s Complaint*. The paragraph is itself “imbedded... in *play*,” since its comparison of the “hidden” unconscious with the “hidden” author might imply the very

presumption about the former of which Trilling accuses Roth. He might be a more subtle writer than Trilling can see but Roth's concerns, his humour and his style - the pleasure he takes in the "methods and devices of Comedy" - are all visible within *Portnoy's Complaint*; if the hidden author can be overt then following the equivalence through, so can the unconscious.

Trilling's accusation that Roth presumes to see into the unconscious, and Roth's dangled equivalence in his letter between the unconscious and himself, might be furnished by Alex Portnoy's insistence in the novel on his unconscious' visibility: "With me it all happens in broad daylight! ...I have a life *without* latent content. The dream thing *happens!*" (PC, 257). Roth has elsewhere discussed the "psychological custom" in American culture at the time of *Portnoy's Complaint*'s publication of "passion for spontaneity and candor that colored even the drabest lives and expressed itself in the pop rhetoric of phrases like "Tell it like it is," "Let it all hang out," etc." (RMO, 254). Yet Alex's claims about his unconscious exceed this convention for confessional writing; they echoed the ideas of more radical contemporary American countercultures associated with methods for accessing the unconscious and transforming consciousness. In his essay "The White Negro", for example, published in 1957, Norman Mailer considers the hipster - a figure associated with jazz, black culture and an existentialist emphasis on living in the present moment - a "philosophical psychopath, a man interested not only in the dangerous imperatives of his psychopathy but in codifying, at least for himself, the suppositions on which his

inner universe is constructed.”¹²⁷ Alex Portnoy, talking on his analyst’s couch, is similarly interested in identifying the suppositions at bottom of his character; however, Mailer distinguishes psychopathy from psychoanalytic treatment, appreciating the former’s emphasis on transforming consciousness through extreme actions in the world:

[T]he psychopath exploring backward along the road of the homosexual, the orgiast, the drug-addict, the rapist, the robber and the murderer seeks to find those violent parallels to the violent and often hopeless contradictions he knew as an infant and as a child. For if he has the courage to meet the parallel situation at the moment when he is ready, then he has a chance to act as he has never acted before, and in satisfying the frustration - if he can succeed - he may then pass by symbolic substitute through the locks of incest. In thus giving expression to the buried infant in himself, he can lessen the tension of those infantile desires and so free himself to remake a bit of his nervous system.¹²⁸

The hipster-as-psychopath works back into the unconscious or “buried infant” and “remake(s)” his inner universe; this rendering of new constellations within is achieved through transgressions in the world-at-large, in “parallel situation(s)” to the instillment of taboos in infancy when the infant lost - lost some of his freedom. Hunter S. Thompson suggests the same connection between the inside of the self and the outside world in *Hell’s Angels*, his book on the outlaw motorcycle gangs published in 1967. Thompson describes the myth among the gangs of riding at “the Edge”:

...and that’s when the strange music starts, when you stretch your luck so far that fear becomes exhilaration and vibrates along your arms. You can barely see at a hundred; the tears blow back so fast that they vaporize before they get to your ears. The only sounds are wind and a dull roar floating back from the mufflers. You watch the white line and try to lean with it... howling through a turn to the right, then to the left and down the long hill to Pacifica... letting off now, watching for cops, but only until the next dark stretch and another few seconds on the edge... The Edge.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.343.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.346.

¹²⁹ Hunter S. Thompson, *Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), p.345.

“The Edge,” whose name connotes an outward limit, is reached by “howling” outwards near-blind in the dark over long distances yet Thompson notes a significant inward movement in its pursuit; “the edge is still Out there,” he concludes, “Or maybe it’s In. The association of motorcycles with LSD is no accident of publicity. They are both a means to an end, to the place of definitions.”¹³⁰ Thompson’s comparison of motorcycling to taking LSD, a drug thought to effect access to the unconscious mind, repeats Mailer’s connection of extreme action in the world with the root suppositions of character; this vanishing point at which the self can be remade is here called the “place of definitions.”

The vanishing point has a different name in Roth: *reality*. The word and its variants appear prominently in his later work: “There’s no remaking reality,” *Everyman*’s protagonist tells his daughter as she sobs over the “inexplicable turn of events,” her parents’ divorce¹³¹; *Operation Shylock* includes a reference to Carl Jung’s phrase “The uncontrollability of real things”¹³²; in *The Facts* Roth writes that his father is “trying to die. He doesn’t say that, nor, probably, does he think of it in those words, but that’s his job now and, fight as he will to survive, he understands, as he always has, what the real work is” (F, 17). The assignment of “real work,” or the work of reality, in *The Facts* is inexplicable; it is uncontrollable. “Trying to die isn’t like trying to commit suicide - it may actually be harder,” Roth writes, “because what you are trying to do is what you least want to have happen; you dread it but there it is and it must be done, and by no

¹³⁰ H.S. Thompson, p.345.

¹³¹ Philip Roth, *Everyman* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), p.78-79.

¹³² Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock* (London: Vintage, 2000), p.79.

one but you” (F, 17). There is no choice of reality here; its perception demands the rigour Virginia Woolf encouraged in herself when writing: “How difficult not to go making ‘reality’ this and that, whereas it is one thing.”¹³³ Reality takes Roth’s father to that place of (re)definitions reached by the psychopath encouraged in the hipster, and the motorcycle gang member pushing out to the Edge; it demands in him the extreme action of remaking himself into a dead man - a transformative action that, as with the other cases, “may actually be harder” than self-destruction. “Reality” thus describes in Roth’s writing a connection between the world and the formative suppositions in character. The connection offers a different perspective on Blanchot’s “moment of the first simplicity” of being alive in the world from Auster’s, who represents this simplicity as a blank possibility of *who I might be*. If extreme actions in the world - from Mailer’s psychopathic transgressions that unlock the taboos of infancy to Thompson’s near-death motorcycling that transforms consciousness - remake the self’s inner darkness in Roth, this remaking does not begin from a blank possibility but confronts the inexplicable, uncontrollable reality of the self’s position in the world; the self’s transformation meets the work demanded of it by its singular position - what “must be done, and by no one but you.” Nevertheless, this reality of connection with the world is the Blanchotian “moment of the first simplicity” of being, “where everything is given, ahead of time”¹³⁴ for a Rothian self that feels itself alive and transforming in the world.

¹³³ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p.130.

¹³⁴ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.45.

Roth's father's knowledge of his position in the world in *The Facts* is depicted as a visual connection; he is written *seeing* the reality of his dying, "viewing the end of life as a thing as near to his face as the mirror he shaves in (except that this mirror is there day and night, directly in front of him all the time)" (F, 8-9). The manner of self-seeing written here is markedly different from Auster's viewing his facial scars in his shaving mirror in *Winter Journal*. Not only do the marks of Auster's "collision[s] with the world" set a symbolic pattern or "secret alphabet" for his visibility in it, but they are called "accidents" - things that "need not have happened." The mirror before Roth's father's face on the contrary shows him what "must be done, and by no one but you"; furthermore, its reflective glass does not symbolically centre him in the world but demands the transformation of his inner universe through work in the world that he has never done before. In this metaphorical image of a father seeing the "real work" in a mirror, reality is invisible; the place of (re)definitions, the "inside of me" in Neil Klugman's words, is a vanishing point on the fictive glass that presents his face. "Everything is given, ahead of time" to Roth's father in his invisible perception of the fact of his approaching death.

In *Portnoy's Complaint*, despite Alex's insistence on the visibility of the causes of the conflicts that form his self, it is the invisibility of reality that torments him. The comedy of his life "in broad daylight" is its inane reproduction of the meaningful struggles of Ancient human drama. Alex marvels at how his mother and her friends call their sons "lover" and commend one being "in love with his mother": "I swear to you," he emphasises in disbelief, "this is not bullshit or a

screen memory, these are the very words these women use. The great operatic themes of human suffering and passion come rolling out of those mouths like the prices of Oxydol and Del Monte canned corn!" (PC, 97). The "final downfall and humiliation" (PC, 258) that Alex narrates in the novel is his attempt to pin down and rape a young Israeli woman resembling his mother's high school yearbook photo; he wants to give her the VD he fears he has contracted from threesomes with the Monkey and an Italian sex worker, and imagines it spreading amongst the Zionist enclave where she lives in the Syrian mountains. The plain Oedipal structure of the scenario is too much for Alex:

This then is the culmination of the Oedipal drama, Doctor? More farce, my friend! Too much to swallow, I'm afraid! *Oedipus Rex* is a famous tragedy, schmuck, not another joke! You're a sadist, you're a quack and a lousy comedian! I mean this is maybe going too far for a laugh, Doctor Spielvogel, Doctor Freud, Doctor Kronkite! How about a little homage, you bastards, to The Dignity of Man! *Oedipus Rex* is the most horrendous and *serious* play in the history of literature - it is not a gag! (PC, 266-267)

Between the psychoanalytic understanding of the self and the personal culture of his upbringing, nothing in Alex's life achieves uncontested seriousness for him. The women say too much, the Freudian narrative sees too much, attaching his life to themes of tragic grandeur that pull it out of all human proportion and turn it into a farce. People are *unreal* to Alex. In Israel, "everything I saw, I found I could assimilate and understand. It was history, it was nature, it was art. Even the Negev, that hallucination, I experienced as real and of this world"; everything is real save for one "incredible and strange, ...implausible fact: I am in a Jewish country. In this country, everybody is Jewish" (PC, 252-253). Alex's incredulity at people rather than places, which reverses the Oppenian aphorism that the world, not the self, is a mystery, holds for his relationships throughout

the novel. Sarah Abbott Maulsby, "The Pilgrim," "won't go down on me. Isn't that odd? And yet - go understand people - it is her pleasure while being boffed to have one or the other of my forefingers lodged snugly up her anus" (PC, 232, 103); Mary Jane Reed, "The Monkey", wants Alex to transport her into a new life in "Saint Laurent pajamas..., dipping thoughtfully into a novel by Samuel Beckett," but isn't capable of buying him a pair of Italian loafers without "getting [herself] hooked by the pussy on the salesman's nose" (PC, 162-163, 214). Each of these women is as implausible to Alex as "the most unforgettable character I've every met," his mother, who as a boy he believes is all of his teachers in disguise, and fears "catch[ing] sight of her flying in from school through the bedroom window, or making herself emerge, limb from limb, out of an invisible state and into her apron" (PC 3-4).

To Alex, both his upbringing and the psychoanalytic viewpoint expect too much of his relationships with these women: the resolution of the Oedipus complex and his passion for the "banquet walking the streets"; a family, and concomitant stable, comfortable place in the world that "[e]very *shtunk* with a picture window has" (PC, 271, 263). It is in the rendering of women's inexplicability to Alex that Roth writes his sense of a stupefying "American reality" of the kind he saw challenging character-writing in "Writing American Fiction". Were Diana Trilling's criticism that "the unconscious... is... more hidden from us than the author of *Portnoy's Complaint* realizes" addressed to Alex (and, at least in Roth's view, it is), one imagines *his* reply: "*I* see too much? Please, these people think they see everything, there's not a second of my life they haven't a photographic

sense of!” If over the novel’s duration this character does not remake his inner universe in the manner of the hipster, the motorcycle gang member or Roth’s father in *The Facts*, if he does not invisibly see “what the real work is,” it is because he feels inadequately connected to a world in which the formative suppositions of his character are purported to be in plain sight; the connection seems *unreal*. In Blanchot’s terms everything is *not* given, all is *not* possible, for Alex because the ostensible plain sight of his character does not establish a real, singular connection between his self and the world, one that would locate real work for him to do within it. *Portnoy’s Complaint* thus critiques a psychoanalytic culture concerned with the visibility of what is “hidden from us.” The concern produces Alex’s terror of the unseen - his fear in his relationships with women of his mother’s appearance “out of [her] invisible state and into her apron” with the kitchen knife. So too does he scrutinise his penis following sex with the Italian prostitute:

I find the organ to be unblemished and without any apparent signs of disease, and yet I am not relieved. It may be that in certain cases (perhaps those that are actually most severe) there is never any outward manifestation of infection. Rather, the debilitating effects take place within the body, unseen and unchecked, until at last the progress of the disorder is irreversible, and the patient is doomed. (PC, 255)

“What was it inside me...” VD, thinks Portnoy, or cancer of the penis, or a mutinous testicle he fears appearing on his tongue when he opens his mouth to speak in class (PC, 248, 19, 38). Reality goes unseen and unchecked in *Portnoy’s Complaint* and so has this sense, in his fear of exposure to his mother or exposure by medical eventualities, of surely spreading doom.

Goodbye, Columbus and *Portnoy's Complaint* consider what character can show; their rendering of character on the fictive glass expresses the difficulty not of seeing character in itself, but of seeing character in transformative connection with the world; that is, seeing character in reality. The literary reality of these earlier Roth works is malevolently invisible, their atmospheres fraught with unseen threats coming from inside and outside the self. As his description of his father knowing "what the real work is" makes clear, Roth's sense of reality has changed in *The Facts*, published nineteen years after *Portnoy*. In his letter to Zuckerman that opens the book, Roth himself suggests reasons for this change, or rather for a summary change from writing fiction "fired by someone like you or Portnoy or Tarnopol or Kepesh" to writing autobiography: his mother's death, growing closer to his aged father, and his own "prolonged physical ordeal that led to an extreme depression that carried me right to the edge of emotional and mental dissolution" (F, 10, 5). "Until now," Roth writes, "I have always used the past as the basis for transformation, for, among other things, a kind of intricate explanation to myself of my world... I came to believe that I just could not make myself over yet again. Far from feeling capable of remaking myself, I felt myself coming undone" (F, 4, 5). The work of "remaking," "transformation" and "reality" characterises Roth's later writing, in particular the American trilogy, in which the "great operative themes of human suffering and passion" are unironically rendered; yet the centering force of such a vocabulary is unimaginable in *Portnoy's Complaint* - as a younger writer Roth may have transformed himself into Portnoy, but Portnoy is unable to remake himself. The literary reality of Roth's later works emerges, the rest of this chapter will

contend, from the dynamics of self-seeing explored in *Zuckerman Bound*, the trilogy and epilogue that, together with *The Counterlife*, preceded *The Facts*. *Zuckerman Bound* responds to a culture that purports to see everything of the self; specifically, to a literary culture that purports to see everything of the writer in the work. Trilling's review is one instance of the culture that saw Roth in broad daylight upon *Portnoy's* publication, and in addressing through writing Zuckerman what an authentic picturing of a writer involves (and, perhaps more importantly, *doesn't* involve), Roth created a dynamic with which to render character in reality in his work. It is in *Zuckerman Bound* that the invisible seeing of reality at a vanishing point on the fictive glass becomes imaginable in Roth.

PART 2

4. Impostor Scenarios

Neil Klugman, in *Goodbye, Columbus*, and Philip Roth's father, in *The Facts*, both look in a glass, and yet one sees something that the other doesn't. What is it that Roth's father sees? The reader is presented with the image of his seeing his death in a mirror much like the one he shaves in; in other words, presented with an image of somebody self-seeing, with the added understanding that the seer is seeing the "inside of me" that eludes Neil Klugman's gaze. The reader does not see what Roth's father sees, but is only shown the man looking in the mirror and *invisibly* seeing something further in what is presented - his own face; perhaps, who knows, a premonition of Death "stepp[ing] miraculously through the glass and [coming] in after you,"¹³⁵ as in a J.D. Salinger story.

There is something of the Gorgon, "that horrid female head covered with serpents, whose gaze produces death," to the invisible reality that we cannot see, but can picture somebody else seeing. In Roth, the predicament also figures the strangeness of what it is to "*look at*", to "*picture*" a writer.¹³⁶ The opening story of Bernard Malamud's Künstlerroman *Pictures of Fidelman* sets up a dynamic of invisible self-seeing that Roth would imitate in his Künstlerroman *Zuckerman Bound*. The story, "Last Mohican", begins with Arthur

¹³⁵ J.D. Salinger, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters, and Seymour: An Introduction* (London: Penguin, 1974), p.29.

¹³⁶ Roth's essays "'I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting': Looking at Kafka" and "Pictures of Malamud" make use of this lexicon of visibility for considering the writer's life. Both essays are cited in this chapter. See RMO, 281-302, and P. Roth, 20 April 1986.

Fidelman freshly off the train and arrived in Rome to research and write a critical study of the painter Giotto:

In the midst of his imagining, Fidelman experienced the sensation of suddenly seeing himself as he was, to the pin-point, outside and in, not without bittersweet pleasure; and as the well-known image of his face rose before him he was taken by the depth of pure feeling in his eyes, slightly magnified by glasses, and the sensitivity of his elongated nostrils and often tremulous lips, nose divided from lips by a moustache of recent vintage that looked, Fidelman thought, as if it had been sculptured there, adding to his dignified appearance although he was a little on the short side. Almost at the same moment, this unexpectedly intense sense of his being - it was more than appearance - faded, exaltation having gone where exaltation goes, and Fidelman became aware that there was an exterior source to the strange, almost tri-dimensional reflection of himself he had felt as well as seen. Behind him, a short distance to the right, he had noticed a stranger - give a skeleton a couple of pounds - loitering near a bronze statue on a stone pedestal of the heavy-dugged Etruscan wolf suckling the infant Romulus and Remus, the man contemplating Fidelman already acquisitively so as to suggest to the traveller that he had been mirrored (lock, stock, barrel) in the other's gaze for some time, perhaps since he had stepped off the train. Casually studying him though pretending no, Fidelman beheld a person of about his own height, oddly dressed in brown knickerbockers and black knee-length woollen socks drawn up over slightly bowed, broomstick legs, these grounded in small porous pointed shoes. His yellowed shirt was open at the gaunt throat, both sleeves rolled up over skinny, hairy arms. The stranger's high forehead was bronzed, his black hair thick behind small ears, the dark close-shaven beard tight on the face; his experienced nose was weighted at the tip, and the soft brown eyes, above all, wanted. Though his expression suggested humility he all but licked his lips as he approached the ex-painter.¹³⁷

There is an invisible dimension to Fidelman's self-seeing in this passage, to "this unexpectedly intense sense of his being" that "was more than appearance." His sensation of "seeing himself as he was, to the pin-point, outside and in" yields a self-description of his own image: "elongated nostrils and often tremulous lips," "moustache," with only the "depth of pure feeling in his eyes" suggesting a window to the inside of himself. However, the insistence that he had "felt as well as seen" his reflection confers an intimacy on his exterior aspects that one feels is already under another gaze: Malamud's. Fidelman's insecurity that "he was a little on the short side" has the effect of a bathetic quip; his inflated pride in his "sculptured" moustache "of recent vintage"

¹³⁷ Bernard Malamud, *Pictures of Fidelman* (London: Penguin, 1988), p.11-12.

amusingly suggests that he is unserious - summarily, Malamud's introduction of Fidelman suggests a slightly unknowing character.

Fidelman's unknowingness is compounded by the "exterior source" of his intimacy with himself: the watching stranger with soft brown eyes that "above all, wanted," the Jewish refugee Shimon Susskind. Fidelman's "lock, stock, barrel" mirroring in Susskind's gaze is threatening to him, as the shooting metaphor emphasises. There is an uncomfortable self-exposure to his being watched unawares at the very moment of his invisible perception of his being; still more to the moment's having been invisibly prompted by an exterior gaze. The exposure of what Fidelman makes, in private bittersweet pleasure, of himself to Susskind leaves him vulnerable to the refugee; to the reader, it redoubles the character's vulnerability first communicated by Malamud's gaze earlier in the passage. Fidelman's deliberately "casual" beholding of the aspects of his observer - crescendoing from his "odd[] dress," to "slightly bowed, broomstick legs," to wanting eyes and the licking of his lips - suggests with mounting certainty the danger of this onlooker perceiving his intimate sense of himself outside and in, beyond appearance.

The element of exposure that there is to self-seeing thematises Fidelman's relationship to Susskind in "Last Mohican". Fidelman, new to Rome and attempting to research his book on Giotto, runs into the refugee at every turn asking for his second suit and a business loan; Susskind even finds him when he moves hotel. The refugee claims to be Fidelman's responsibility because

they are both Jewish: “[Y]ou are responsible. Because you are a man. Because you are a Jew, aren’t you?”¹³⁸ Yet when the first chapter of Fidelman’s book is stolen, Susskind disappears. Stopping his research and delaying his travelling to Florence, Fidelman finally finds him and discovers he has burnt the manuscript, using the flames for reading light: “‘You bastard, you burned my chapter!’ ‘Have mercy,’ cried Susskind, ‘I did you a favour... The words were there but the spirit was missing.’”¹³⁹ The refugee’s final critique at the humorous denouement plays out Fidelman’s anxiety from the outset at this man’s watching him - that to others what he, Fidelman, sees as his own “sculptured” seriousness is naive and inadequate; that despite the best efforts of this self-confessed failed painter turned critic, he lacks the spirit and it is missing from his work.

Alvin Pepler, the antagonist of *Zuckerman Unbound*, the second novel in Roth’s *Zuckerman Bound* trilogy and epilogue, resembles Susskind in his attack upon Zuckerman. The novel is in the shadow of the Malamud-esque E.I. Lonoff’s warning in *The Ghost Writer*, the trilogy’s first novel, made the epigraph of this one: “Let Nathan see what it is to be lifted from obscurity. Let him not come hammering at our door to tell us that he wasn’t warned” (ZB, 133). Zuckerman has just published *Carnovsky*, a novel with a content and public reception echoing that of Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*, and is exhausted with being recognised in public:

¹³⁸ B. Malamud, *Pictures of Fidelman*, p.19.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.32.

'It's Carnovsky!' 'Hey, careful, Carnovsky, they arrest people for that!' 'Hey, want to see my underwear, Gil?' ...They had mistaken impersonation for confession and were calling out to a character who lived in a book. Zuckerman tried taking it as praise - he had made real people believe [Gilbert] Carnovsky real too - but in the end he pretended he was only himself, and with his quick, small steps hurried on. (ZB, 140)

Roth introduces Alvin Pepler in a sandwich shop where Zuckerman thinks he has found a "haven" from the mob, "a man in a dark raincoat who was standing beside [Zuckerman's] table. The dozen or so other tables were empty. The stranger was carrying a hat in his hands in a way that restored to that expression its original metaphorical luster" (ZB, 140). The pathetic presentation of this latest pesterer is not the only reminiscence of Susskind. The refugee's wanting eyes are matched by Pepler's "syrupy brown eyes [that] went mournful and angry, filling up not with tears, but what was worse, with *truth*" (ZB, 145); like Susskind Pepler's grievance is racial, though with the more local context of he and Zuckerman having both grown up as Jewish boys in Newark, New Jersey, with a distant connection between their families; finally, like Susskind what Pepler wants from his target is opportunity - a publisher for the true story of his life he has spent ten years writing, and advice on his writing style:

I want the truth. I have been fighting and suffering for the truth all my life. Please, no sweet talk and no crapola either. What's wrong? So I can learn, so I can improve myself and recover my rightful place! (ZB, 240)

Pepler's "rightful place" as he sees it is as "Pepler the Man of the People," (ZB, 144) his nickname in the newspapers during his three weeks of fame ten years previously as a contestant on the television quiz show 'Smart Money'; until the show's producers, who had the whole thing rigged, decided he was to lose to Hewlett Lincoln, the wholesome, protestant son of the Republican governor of

Maine. Since the public revelation about the rig, Pepler has been, to his mind, a “marked man” and a “dirty name throughout the American broadcasting industry” (ZB, 145); in actual fact, he has only slipped back into anonymity.

Like all the other contestants, Pepler memorised the answers given to him in advance by the producers. However, as he tells Zuckerman, “I was the only one who didn't want their answers to begin with... [A]ll I wanted was for them to give me the subject, to let me study and memorize, and then to fight it out fair and square!” (ZB, 146). Pepler insists that in a fair fight he would have wiped the floor with Lincoln, but the producers “couldn't afford to let a Jew be a big winner too long on “Smart Money”. Especially a Jew who made no bones about it. They were afraid about the ratings. They were terrified they would rub the country the wrong way” (ZB, 156-157). Pepler’s fury at the ventriloquistic rig of the quiz show sets up his accusation at Zuckerman later in the novel. His “rightful place” was never the truth - it was a hoax; but his belief that he could have fared well without scripted answers excuses him, in his eyes, from the show’s deception. The “truth” he wants out in his memoir can be expressed, “When I was speaking, I was speaking in my own words, but the rig robbed me, the rig that meant I was never speaking in my own words.”

The pathos of Pepler’s desire to speak in his own voice, absurd though his argument is, radically diminishes in the novel as it becomes clear how addicted to unoriginality the character is. His first performance as a dummy quiz contestant is followed by impressions of a blackmailer with “the speech,

supposedly, of the thickheaded” threatening over the phone to make Zuckerman’s mother “disappear” (“What is it you’re supposed to be,” Zuckerman asks, “some punch-drunk palooka or Marlon Brando?”), a celebrity (“...were the dark glasses to make him look like a celebrity to himself?”), and finally a Nathan Zuckerman character (“...those hang-ups you wrote about happen to be mine, and... you knew it - ...you stole it!”) (ZB, 175-6, 227, 243). Pepler needs these impostor scenarios that are designed to allow him to speak the secret that he *is* the man behind the funny voice, behind the dark glasses, even behind Zuckerman’s incendiary character Gilbert Carnovsky; the secret that he is himself.

This last unmasking, of the fictional Carnovsky, depends on an understanding that the life coincides with the fictional work. Roth’s most extensive attack on this manner of reading is in *Exit Ghost*, his apparently final Zuckerman novel, where the “vice exister”¹⁴⁰ attempts to stop young literary hopeful Richard Kliman publishing a biography of E.I. Lonoff that sources that writer’s ascetic “visions of terminal restraint” (ZB, 11) in an incestuous affair with his half-sister when they were teenagers. Zuckerman foresees the literary cultural reduction of Lonoff’s achievement by Kliman’s evidence to, as he cynically puts it, “the great secret from his early years that explains everything” (EG, 48). Kliman presents Zuckerman with the manuscript of an unfinished novel that Lonoff struggled with for the last four years of his life about an incestuous relationship: “This is a tormented confession disguised as a novel!” he insists, “...a great writer’s

¹⁴⁰ My reference to Zuckerman as Roth’s “vice exister” follows Beckett’s description of his protagonist in *The Unnamable*, as footnoted in Part One of this chapter. See footnote 113.

reckoning with the crime that intimidated him every day of his life" (EG, 267, 272). Zuckerman's conjecture recalls his own response in ...*Unbound* to being called Carnovsky in the street, and furthermore Roth's own response to Trilling's accusations concerning *Portnoy*: "Unless it's a novel disguised as a tormented confession" (EG, 267).

Pepler, like Kliman in *Exit Ghost*, is portrayed as an impostor of literary seriousness who understands the life "explain(ing) everything" in the fictional work. "[A]ll fiction, I am convinced, is in some sense rooted in autobiography... We are, after all, the total of our experiences" (ZB, 239), he writes in an amateur review of *Carnovsky* he thrusts on Zuckerman in the street. Pepler has been writing his true story, of course, "worked at nothing else every night *for ten years*" (ZB, 147), with the goal of wresting his essentiality, his "rightful place", from the quiz show rig. And now someone else has beaten him to it. He reads *Carnovsky*, the novel that has made its author a million dollars, and finds written there the very truth he has been suffering for all this time. "[T]he truth *unbiased*, that's what I want!", he screams at Zuckerman as his motive for stalking him finally becomes clear:

'...Unbiased by the fact that you only wrote that book because you could! Because of having every break in life there is! While the ones who didn't obviously couldn't! Unbiased by the fact that those hang-ups you wrote about happen to be mine, and that you knew it - that you stole it! 'I did what? Stole what?'
'From what my Aunt Lottie told your cousin Essie that she told to your mother that she told to you. About me. About my past.' (ZB, 243)

Susskind's racial grievance with Fidelman and his second suit in "Last Mohican" are extended here to Pepler's fantasy that Zuckerman stole the character of

Carnovsky from details of his own adolescence passed on through their family connection. The “truth *unbiased*” Pepler wants from Zuckerman would not only be “unbiased by the fact that, though *I* am Carnovsky, everybody thinks he’s you,” but “unbiased by the fact that *you* could write my truth and I couldn’t, that you had every break in life there is while I was the dummy of every rig going, that you are you and I am me!” On account of some unfathomable yet outrageous bias, Alvin Pepler was not born Nathan Zuckerman. Had he been, he could have turned his secrets and hang-ups into the novel *Carnovsky*; instead, there’s someone else’s name on the cover and someone else’s million dollars in the bank, while his ten-years-in-the-making true story remains unpublished.

Zuckerman’s reaction to Pepler’s accusation marks a different manner of reading in the novel, one that doesn’t exhaust the fictional work in the writer’s life; against his antagonist’s claim, he doesn’t repossess Gilbert Carnovsky as his own. In “*Zuckerman Bound: the celebrant of silence*”, Donald M. Kartiganer contrasts Pepler’s inability to perceive the life that “the action of art has fully revealed... to him” as any other but his own with “Zuckerman’s ability to see and recreate their relationship as impersonation that maintains its dual identity. Zuckerman knows that *for the writing* he must be Pepler *and* himself.”¹⁴¹

Kartiganer draws this difference from a scene in which Zuckerman, hiding out in a packed funeral parlour from Pepler and his “truth *unbiased*”, begins furiously

¹⁴¹ D.M. Kartiganer, “*Zuckerman Bound: the celebrant of silence*”, p.41-42.

making notes "theoriz[ing] the dynamic of their secret-sharing,"¹⁴² the start of a new novel. Zuckerman does not simply dismiss here the insane charge of ventriloquism; instead he asks:

This Peplerian barrage is what? Zeitgeist overspill? Newark poltergeist? Tribal retribution? Secret sharer? P. as my pop self? Not far from how P. sees it. He who's made fantasy of others now fantasy of others. *The Vrai's Revenge* - the forms their fascination takes, the counterspell cast over me. (ZB, 245)

Why should Zuckerman feel he shares a secret with Pepler, a man he's known less than twenty-four hours? A secret, moreover, to do with the work *Carnovsky*, and all the paranoia about "overspill" and "retribution" its instant infamy has unleashed in him (in ...*Unbound's* opening pages, he fears one of his pesterers, an elderly woman running after him and undoing her purse, is about to assassinate him)? What the two characters share is the reality disclosed in the fictional work; that is, the reality of the work of "fictional amplification" that, as Zuckerman narrates in *Exit Ghost*, "giv[es] things an intensity that is ephemeral in life and sometimes even unseen" (EG 147). Pepler and his secret-stealer share not Carnovsky's hang-ups, but the invisible intensity of those hang-ups; not Carnovsky's burden of growing up as a Jewish boy in Newark, but the invisible intensities *shaping* that burden, intensities that may well have gone unseen in Zuckerman's and Pepler's lives before the one wrote them, and the other read them. Zuckerman receives Pepler's attacks as instances of manic fandom; he thinks of the come-sodden handkerchief Pepler leaves in his mailbox - "[e]vidence, if evidence there need be, of the 'hang-up' that Pepler shared with Gilbert Carnovsky" - as "the last of his enraged and

¹⁴² D.M. Kartiganer, p.41-42.

hate-filled adoration" (ZB, 258, 273). He and his antagonist share in *Carnovsky's* recognition of amplified desire.

The invisible perception of being in the world that Fidelman fears Susskind has shared in, Pepler has seen as a reader of *Carnovsky*; it was "more than appearance" in this novel, the details of the pictures on its fictive glass of a Jewish-American adolescence and adult sexual frustration, that provoked the mania Zuckerman feels so intimate with. Pepler himself does not miss the fictional work's magic, its shadows, its hesitancies; if anything he lifts them off the page into the "living fiction" (ZB, 273) of himself as the novel's protagonist, a "fantasy of others." Yet his desire to repossess the work for himself prompts the elision of fiction with autobiography that *does* occlude the former's invisible disclosures. The work's power is explained through the *secret* (as if this were any secret) that it uses material from someone's life, an informative identification that is all too easily decisive for the contemporary cultural journalist, as Lonoff's surviving lover Amy Bellette writes in her letter to *The New York Times* in *Exit Ghost*:

As soon as one enters into the ideological simplifications and biographical reductivism of cultural journalism, the essence of the artifact is lost. Your cultural journalism is tabloid gossip disguised as an interest in "the arts", and everything that it touches is contracted into what it is not. (EG, 182)

Fidelman's fear of exposure to Susskind in "Last Mohican" is a fear of his own contraction in this other's gaze into a deluded writer from whose work "the spirit [is] missing." Zuckerman's freedom from this fear in ...*Unbound* might be put down to the independent, published existence of *Carnovsky* (as opposed to

Fidelman's unfinished study of Giotto), as well as to his writer's instinct for "impersonation" that Kartiganer observes: "Zuckerman knows that *for the writing* he must be Pepler *and* himself." Zuckerman is willing to share his fictional character, to compare others' mistaking him for Carnovsky with Pepler's unmasking Carnovsky as himself, and thus writes notes for a new fiction comprehending the dynamic of their fracas, *The Vrai's Revenge*, work that ironically does *steal* from, or impersonate, Pepler's character. *For the writing* he must be other people too, while in the street, addressed as Carnovsky by members of the public, "he pretended he was only himself, and with his quick, small steps hurried on"; while the joke here is that he is not only himself but also, in others' eyes, his "pop self" made flesh, it is further implicit in the remark that as the writer of a fiction of amplified desire, he doesn't exist independently of that fiction, as if he had never written it. It is the "amplification, evolving uncertainly out of nothing, ...the unlived, ...whose meaning comes to matter most" to Zuckerman, as he narrates in *Exit Ghost* (EG, 147). In *...Unbound* he would just as soon be contracted by the eyes of the public into what he considers his unremarkable appearance, "tall, but not as tall as Wilt Chamberlain... thin, but not as thin as Mahatma Gandhi. In his customary getup of tan corduroy coat, gray turtleneck sweater, and cotton khaki trousers he was neatly attired, but hardly Rubirosa [the Dominican diplomat, racing car driver, polo player and playboy]" (ZB, 139-140); nevertheless, his pesterers' distortions of his character have no bearing on the reality that he invisibly sees in his work through wearing masks, and writing versions of himself and others. Zuckerman comes off in this novel something like Hermes in a picture considered by Robert

Graves in his modern rendering of the Greek myths. Graves argues that the myth of Perseus and the Gorgon came from a misreading of this image; "the confusion between [Hermes] and Perseus," he notes, "may have arisen because Hermes, as the messenger of Death, had also earned the title of *Pterseus*, 'the destroyer'."¹⁴³ The picture shows Hermes, having been given an eye that bestows "mystic sight"¹⁴⁴ by the Three Fates, "flying through the sky to Tartessus, where the Gorgons had a sacred grove, escorted, not pursued, by a triad of goddesses wearing Gorgon-masks. On the earth below, the goddess is shown again, holding up a mirror which reflects a Gorgon's face, to emphasize the secrecy of his lesson."¹⁴⁵ Like Hermes in this image, Zuckerman is not engaged in Perseus' feud with the Gorgon. The Gorgon-masks and reflection of a Gorgon's face represent a secret disclosure, or "mystic sight," rather than the imposture Pepler sees on *Carnovsky's* fictive glass. In the myth of Hermes mystic sight is a manner of looking on the Gorgon's face without dying; in Zuckerman's case it is the invisible seeing of a deeper reality through fictive impersonation and amplification. Comes off like Graves' Hermes, Roth's Zuckerman, because when he looks into the mirror of fiction he isn't looking for himself.

¹⁴³ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: Volume One* (Aylesbury: Penguin, 1982), p.245.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.206.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.245.

5. Zuckerman's Transformations

Zuckerman's playfulness with masks is a gift of his connection to the popular world through *Carnovsky*. The public uproar and manic fandom in response to his book connect him to the world of American cultural concern with what is "hidden from us" (RMO, 28) in the spring of 1969, when ...*Unbound* is set; the disorienting world of reputation and unearthed secrets to which Alex Portnoy feels inadequately connected in *Portnoy's Complaint*, and of "living fiction[s]" like Alvin Pepler that Roth had previously termed "stupef[ying]" and the "envy of any novelist" (RMO, 167-168) in his essay "Writing American Fiction". The morning after the blackmailer calls threatening to kidnap his mother, Zuckerman records the caller's words in his composition book:

In spite of his worries, he was smiling to himself as he saw on paper what he'd heard the night before on the phone. He was reminded of a story about Flaubert coming out of his study one day and seeing a cousin of his, a young married woman, tending to her children, and Flaubert saying, ruefully, *Ils sont dans le vrai*. (ZB, 226)

"*Le vrai*," the true, the everyday, is what Zuckerman is opened to by

Carnovsky's publication; in the spring of 1969 the everyday is Pepler hounding the robbing impostures hidden from us that conceal his "rightful place."

"Priceless. The *vrai*. You can't beat it," Zuckerman thinks, listening to his antagonist reel off American popular song titles in the street to prove his quiz show credentials:

No stopping him now. But why should anyone want to? No, you don't run away from phenomena like Alvin Pepler, not if you're a novelist with any brains you don't. Think how far Hemingway went to look for a lion. Whereas Zuckerman had just stepped out the door. Yes, sir, box up the books! Out of the study and into the streets! At one with the decade at last! (ZB, 231-232)

The connection to the decade is not narrowly accorded to the book's making Zuckerman famous. His passage in the novel "[o]ut of the study and into the streets" is part of his unbinding from the attachments to his family plumbed in *Carnovsky*, Roth's vice-work for *Portnoy's Complaint*. The inward work of separating from these ties through writing is matched in ...*Unbound* by a set of amplified consequences in its final section, "Look Homeward, Angel".

Carnovsky literally kills Zuckerman's dying father, whose last word, looking into his son's eyes, is "Bastard." (ZB, 270). "(Y)ou killed him, Nathan," Zuckerman's brother Henry tells him, "With that book. *Of course* he said 'Bastard'. He'd seen it! He'd seen what you had done to him and Mother in that book!" (ZB, 287). His father's and his brother's responses to *Carnovsky* are perhaps even more enlarged than the "Peplerian barrage," so disproportionate that one recalls Portnoy's perceptions of the cruel farce made of his life - the publication of a comic novel turned by Zuckerman's family into a shattering classical human tragedy culminating in the paternal condemnation. Yet whatever Zuckerman's incredulity at the form of his judgment by his family, "he knew" it was coming, he thinks even as he argues with Henry, "he knew, he knew, he'd known it all along... He'd known when he was writing the book. But he'd written it anyway" (ZB, 287). Returning to New York after the funeral, Zuckerman revisits the area of Newark in which he lived as a young boy to see that the family's old apartment building has turned into a slum, and their local "little thoroughfare of shop and shopkeepers was dead":

Just what he wanted to see. 'Over,' he thought. All his lyrical feeling for the neighborhood had gone into *Carnovsky*. It had to - there was no other place for it. 'Over. Over. Over. Over. Over. I've served my time.' (ZB, 291)

Zuckerman wants to see the Newark of his childhood “gone,” just as the family from whom writing *Carnovsky* detached him emotionally have now gone with its publication. The sight of its disappearance into a more impoverished locale populated by a predominantly black community is visible evidence of the reality of the disappearance of the past, the reality to which his writing *Carnovsky* has been party.

The very un-Peplerian detachment that allows the writer to share in secrets with his lion in the streets results from his being, after unbinding himself by means of his novel, “no longer any man’s son, ...no longer your brother’s brother, and you don’t come from anywhere anymore, either” (ZB, 292). Freed from the ascetic chamber of his study that, in *The Ghost Writer* admiring Lonoff’s monumentally restrained example, he hopes might demonstrate to his father the moral worth of his work, he scribbles notes about the Peplerian fascination with secrets of fame amid the funeral party of a gangland figure, looking like, to borrow the literary critic James Wood’s phrase, another “brilliance on the move.”¹⁴⁶ The popular world offers Zuckerman a culture of incredulous seeing to support his endurance of the amplified destruction of his past. “Yes, he should see it,” he thinks when the limo driver taking him through Newark offers to show him his gun, “Seeing is believing and believing is knowing and knowing beats unknowing and the unknown” (ZB, 290). The gun speaks to him of the political and celebrity assassinations that have marked a decade that has suddenly

¹⁴⁶ In his article “Tell me how does it feel?” referenced in the Introduction, Wood attacks the idea that the novelist’s task is to “go on to the street and figure out social reality.” “Nowadays anyone in possession of a laptop is thought to be a brilliance on the move,” he writes, “filling his or her novel with essaylets and great displays of knowledge.” See James Wood, 6 October 2001.

become real to him in phenomena like Pepler; the impersonations of a famous writer, the writer's literary creation and the writer's fan with which he endeavours to see and believe Pepler in his notes constitute a celebrity and writerly life at a distance from which to see and believe the rift from his family and the disappearance of his home. On Halloween of 2013 *McSweeney's* published Frank Lesser's comic letter "I Think We Should Be Other People", in which the speaker's objections to his and his girlfriend's joint costumes - "It's not you; it's Edward and Bella," referring to the *Twilight* couple - shift subtly but unmistakably into his breaking up with her: "Hey, based on the rockiness of our relationship, maybe we should have dressed up as the real R-Pattz and K-Stew, right? ...This may be painful for you to hear, but you should know this so you can avoid making the same mistake in future Halloweens. Your next theme partner will thank me."¹⁴⁷ Just as here the dress-up of being other people than the characters the addressee has chosen for Halloween slips into the reality of seeing other people, and the temporary role of "theme partner" comes to signify "boyfriend," Zuckerman's new fictive impersonations enact a separation from the past that becomes very real; after donning masks to explore his dynamic with Pepler, he returns homeward a "man apart" from his family. The separate writerly life that he impersonates into existence in New York *is* the protean life of an impersonator - one capable, as Kartiganer notes, of working into fiction his relationship to an antagonist who is obsessed with both their pasts, while

¹⁴⁷ Frank Lesser, "I Think We Should Be Other People", *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, 31 October 2013 <<http://www.mcsweeney.net/articles/i-think-we-should-be-other-people>> [accessed 11 November 2013]. "R-Pattz" and "K-Stew" refer to media abbreviations for the actors Robert Pattinson and Kristen Stewart, who play Edward and Bella in the *Twilight* films; the "rockiness" of their own off-screen relationship has been well-publicised.

maintaining the distinction of his own detachment. By the end of ...*Unbound* Zuckerman is a character who has left everything behind - who is now no-one.

Roth's Prologue to *The Facts* includes a second example of his father invisibly seeing reality, following the image of him "viewing the end of life as a thing as near to his face as the mirror he shaves in" (F, 8-9) in the letter to Zuckerman discussed in Part 1 of this chapter. Roth remembers his father going into the hospital with peritonitis when he was an eleven-year old boy. "'Nothing to it,' he assured us, though we all knew," Roth writes, "that two of his brothers had died back in the 1920s from complications following difficult appendectomies" (F, 11). Six weeks later, after a near-fatal ordeal, he was brought home:

It was December 1944 by then, a cold winter day, but through the windows the sunlight illuminated my parents' bedroom. Sandy [Roth's elder brother] and I came in to talk to him, both of us shy and grateful and, of course, stunned by how helpless he appeared seated weakly in a lone chair in the corner of the room. Seeing his sons together like that, my father could no longer control himself and began to sob. He was alive, the sun was shining, his wife was not widowed nor his boys fatherless - family life would now resume. It was not so complicated that an eleven-year-old couldn't understand his father's tears. I just didn't see, as he so clearly could, why or how it should have turned out differently. (F, 13)

Roth describes his father seeing with relief not only that "[h]e was alive, the sun was shining, his wife was not widowed nor his boys fatherless," but that all these things are the case whereas "it", reality, might or "should have turned out differently." This perception of reality in the *world that might have been otherwise* recalls Woolf's layering of the world with its alternatives in *Mrs Dalloway*. The day at the end of which Clarissa Dalloway throws her party is mingled with the summer in the country at Bourton many years ago when she chose Richard Dalloway over Peter Walsh: "For they might be parted for

hundreds of years,” she thinks in the morning in London, “she and Peter; she never wrote a letter and his were dry sticks; but suddenly it would come over her, If he were with me now what would he say? ...So she would still find herself arguing in St. James’s Park, still making out that she had been right - and she had too - not to marry him.”¹⁴⁸ The narration’s depiction of the world alongside its shadow of what might have been is sustained by Clarissa’s feeling for the immediacy of the day: “In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp and trudge; ...in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June,”¹⁴⁹ and her feeling of herself “slic[ing] like a knife through everything”¹⁵⁰ in the moment prompts her to think: “[S]he would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that.”¹⁵¹ Her connection with the morning depends on not *deciding* on anything, not shutting anything out, so that the world’s reality includes the unlived possibility of its different course. This last line recalls Woolf’s definition of reality quoted in Part One of this chapter, taken from her diaries: “How difficult not to go making ‘reality’ this and that, whereas it is one thing.”¹⁵² Reality, this “one thing,” can also be seen in the thing that “should have turned out differently.”

The subject of *The Anatomy Lesson*, Roth’s sequel to *Zuckerman Unbound*, is seeing reality in this manner. The novel is principally the depiction of Zuckerman’s struggle with undiagnosed pain in his neck, arms and shoulders

¹⁴⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Vintage, 2004), p.4-5.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.5.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁵² V. Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p.130.

that has restricted his mobility and stopped him writing. The pain is accompanied, however, by another struggle:

Zuckerman had lost his subject. His health, his hair, and his subject. Just as well he couldn't find a posture for writing. What he'd made his fiction from was gone - his birthplace the burnt-out landscape of a racial war and the people who'd been giants to him dead...

...Memories of his father's last years, of the strain between them, the bitterness, the bewildering estrangement, gnawed away at him along with Henry's dubious accusation; so did the curse his father had fastened upon him with his dying breath; so did the idea that he had written what he had, as he had, simply to be odious, that his work embodied little more than stubborn defiance toward a respectable chiropodist. Having completed not a page worth keeping since that deathbed rebuke, he had half begun to believe that if it hadn't been for his father's frazzled nerves and rigid principles and narrow understanding he'd never have been a writer at all. A first-generation American father possessed by the Jewish demons, a second-generation American son possessed by their exorcism: that was his whole story. (ZB, 323-324)

Zuckerman's struggle for a voice in this novel, that I have discussed at the beginning of Part 1 of this chapter, to his own mind results as much from the disappearances described in ...*Unbound* as from his physical condition - the Newark of his childhood now the "burnt-out landscape" witnessed at the end of that novel after the 1967 Newark riots, and his mother now dead as well as his father. The unbinding towards being no-one has left him in silence, the last of his subject exorcised in *Carnovsky*, while he has retreated from his connection with the popular world into pain that his psychoanalyst suggests is itself sourced in "my judgement on myself and that book" (ZB, 312).

The situation impels Zuckerman's decision to change career: "The way I found to spring myself from everything that held me captive as a boy, and it's simply extended the imprisonment to my fortieth year," he tells one of his lovers:

'Enough of my writing, enough of their scolding. Rebellion, obedience - discipline, explosion - injunction, resistance - accusation, denial - defiance, shame - no, the whole God damn thing has been a colossal mistake. This is not the position in life that I had hoped to fill. I want to be an obstetrician. Who quarrels with an obstetrician? Even the obstetrician who delivered Bugsy

Siegel goes to bed at night with a clear conscience. He catches what comes out and everybody loves him. When the baby appears they don't start shouting, "You call that a baby? That's not a baby!" No, whatever he hands them, they take it home. They're grateful for his just having been there. Imagine those butter-covered babies, Diana, with their little Chinese eyes, imagine what seeing that does to the spirit, *that* every morning, as opposed to grinding out another two dubious pages.' (ZB, 369)

Zuckerman plans to retrain at the University of Chicago's medical school so as to heal himself of the pain that no specialist has been able to relieve, and furthermore to give up being the pariah facing the "scolding" of his critics in the press, among the public and from his own vanished family; he would ditch his "imprisonment" for a revered life in obstetrics simply "catch[ing] what comes out." The transformation promises to release him not only from his physical pain and his father's condemnation and its lesser ciphers, but from the writerly life apart for which he left the past, a life that only gradually, he thinks in this novel, began to "feel like the evasion of experience, and the means to imaginative release, to the exposure, revelation, and invention of life, like the sternest form of incarceration. He thought he'd chosen the intensification of everything and he'd chosen monasticism and retreat instead" (ZB, 424-425). At forty, some way into a career in which he has found in the ascetic silence of his study a voice to transform himself out of the past, it is the silence and retreat his life feels committed to; his new transformation would thus launch him into the *vrai* once again, at one with the very delivery of new, "butter-covered" lives, only this time undoing the severance from his family enacted in the last shift. His choice of Chicago as the site for the metamorphosis, his alma mater where as an undergraduate more than twenty years earlier "everything was wonderful, as big and exciting a life as could be imagined," and where, much to his later detriment, he *believed* Thomas Mann's speech at Rockefeller Chapel that

writing was the “only attainment, the surpassing experience” (ZB, 424), discloses that he envisions not so much a break with his life as its *rewriting* into the different way it should have turned out; a return to the “lively, gregarious, *outgoing* kid... burning to begin” (ZB, 443-444, my emphasis) that he recalls to his old roommate (now professor of anesthesiology) Bobby Freytag. “Now that his parents were gone he could go ahead and make them happy... Like Macbeth,” he privately thinks with Portnovian knowingness, “after ordering the last innocent carcass to be dumped in a ditch, joining Amnesty International” (ZB, 425).

Zuckerman does not attend medical school in *The Anatomy Lesson*. Arrived in Chicago in the final section of the novel to rejoin the University, he takes Bobby Freytag’s father out to see the grave of Bobby’s mother, who has recently passed away, before a snow storm makes the trip impossible: “Big white snowflakes swept lightly across the hood of the limousine as they headed back onto the Drive. The distant sky looked just about ready to bring on in from the northern plains the season’s first big show” (ZB, 465). At the Jewish burial ground, enraged that his wife’s gravediggers have not levelled off her plot but left “upturned chunks of frozen earth heaped up” over her (ZB, 482), Mr. Freytag delivers a diatribe against Bobby’s eighteen-year-old adopted son Gregory, who lives with him and Bobby, never attends the college he’s enrolled at and tells his father to “eat shit”:

'[W]hat in his roots that we don't know makes him behave this way to Bobby? I have a brilliant son. And all that brilliance locked in his genes! Everything we gave him, trapped like that in Bobby's genes, while everything we are *not*, everything we are *against* - How can all of this end with Gregory? Eat shit? To his *father*? I'll break his neck for what he's done to this family! I'll kill that little bastard! I *will*!' (ZB, 483)

The speech sends a heavily self-medicated Zuckerman into a frenzy against this "last of the fathers demanding to be pleased" (ZB, 484), whom he attempts to strangle:

He would kill - and never again suppose himself better than his crime: an end to denial; of the heaviest judgement guilty as charged. 'Your sacred genes! What do you see inside your head? Genes with JEW sewed on them? Is that all you see in that lunatic mind, the unstained natural virtue of Jews?' (ZB, 483)

In response to the latest "scolding", directed at the "liberties of a repellent mindless little shit who you," he later concedes to himself, "...would loathe on sight" (ZB, 494), liberties he nevertheless elides with his own to write *Carnovsky*, Zuckerman abandons the different life contrived as a way out of his guilt, solitude and physical pain, to "never again suppose himself better than his crime" and stop finally trying to please his father. In a stupor from his intake of painkillers, vodka and marijuana, he goes over on the ice and smashes his chin: "Face forward, straight out, onto my Uncle Paul's footstone," Bobby tells him in the hospital, "My father says it sounded like a rock hitting the pavement" (ZB, 485).

The desperate source of the desire for a transformation that would rewrite his history returns Zuckerman, in his hospital bed with his mouth wired shut to heal his fractured jaw, to his reassurances that the past is gone - "Over. Over. Over. Over. Over. Over. I've served my time," as he thinks at the end of ...*Unbound* - only this time they are self-admonishing: "Chasing that old man around those

tombstones, Mr Zuckerman,” he thinks, “is the dumbest thing you have ever done...; you have been in hiding half your life and a son far too long” (ZB, 494).

The repetition of the theme belies Zuckerman’s deeper transformation in this novel, however, that is spelled out in its final line. During his convalescence he begins shadowing the interns on their rounds, entertaining again the restorative fantasy of becoming a doctor:

For nearly as long as he remained a patient, Zuckerman roamed the busy corridors of the university hospital, patrolling and planning on his own by day, then out on the quiet floor with the interns at night, as though he still believed that he could unchain himself from a future as a man apart and escape the corpus that was his. (ZB, 505)

In this line, Zuckerman’s “future as a man apart” refers to the daily solitude of the writerly life to which his earlier unbinding has delivered him; his “corpus” designates in wonderful combination his own body, the body of his fiction writing, and the past from which both these bodies develop: “the past” meaning the family tree which has its descendants in surgical metaphor “grafted” upon it, as he describes concerning Bobby’s adoption of Gregory (ZB, 494). His writer’s separation - that he has made himself a “man apart,” alone - and his familial past - that he is, despite the reassurances to himself in *...Unbound*, *this* son, *this* brother, of *that* past Newark - are finally presented as dual, intractable conditions of Zuckerman’s life from which there is no “unchain[ing]” or unbinding. He had thought to progress from one condition to the other, but, much like the theories of fault between Neil and Brenda at the end of *Goodbye, Columbus*, *both are to an unknown extent true*. *Zuckerman Bound* sees reality in Roth’s vice exister’s failed attempts to go making his world “this” and “that” by deciding first that his past is over, then that as on Halloween he can be

someone else entirely; the reality is seen through his wishing it had turned out differently.

6. Self-Seeing Over a Distance

In *The Anatomy Lesson* Roth transforms Zuckerman into a character who is seen to be more deeply connected by the end to the facts conditioning his life. The extent to which the character is written seeing this of himself, in the manner that Paul Auster's characters see themselves in the world, is not clearly discernible: both *Zuckerman Unbound* and *The Anatomy Lesson* feature third-person narration locked on Zuckerman's perspective, accessing only his interior thoughts and, particularly in *The Anatomy Lesson*, moving into first-person quotation of those thoughts; while this consistently communicates the character's possible reflexive awareness of his own predicament, he remains the actor of his contradictions and failures in which the reality is disclosed. Zuckerman's appearances on the fictive glass in the later novel, however, are beyond the limits of Auster's manner of self-seeing that structures his characters' appearances. As explored in Chapter I, Auster's characters see themselves in figures of erasure, darkness and blindness that disappear into the continuing present - "Once a thing is gone, that is the end of it" (CLT, 2). The "distance" over which they see themselves in these things is only the impression of a distance which they "travel" without transformation, but into which they disappear repeatedly. In Roth, things are gone without this being "the end of it"; in *The Anatomy Lesson*, Zuckerman's parents are gone without

end. This is what is meant by the writer's having "lost his subject"; he can no longer see himself in the appearance of his parents in his writing because they belong to the past, still visible through the art of depiction but intractably gone. His attempts to get close to them again in the novel thus produce dramatic enlargements of his grief, from his deliriously trying to murder his father's surrogate Mr Freytag in a graveyard to the moment he is seen, in the elevator down from his deceased mother's Florida apartment, lapping at a spot of her milk he finds in the hospital-issue book *Your Baby's Care* that she had kept for forty years:

The elevator stopped, the door opened, but Zuckerman's attention was fixed on a small colorless blot halfway down the page headed 'Feeding'... His mother's milk had stained the page. He had no hard evidence to prove it, but then he was not an archaeologist presenting a paper: he was the son who had learned to live on her body, and that body was now in a box underground... Closing his eyes, he put his tongue to the page, and when he opened them again saw that he was being watched through the elevator door by an emaciated old woman across the lobby, leaning in exhaustion on her aluminum walker. Well, if she knew what she'd just seen she could now tell everyone in the building that she'd seen everything. (ZB, 341-342)

Strangling his dead father on Jewish burial ground; drinking as an adult his dead mother's milk - these enlargements compare with a poem by Roth's American contemporary Russell Edson, "The Optical Prodigal", published in 1977, in which a son crosses a distance to get to his mother and father only to find they don't recognise him:

A man sees a tiny couple in the distance, and thinks they might be his mother and father.
But when he gets to them they're still little.
You're still little, he says, don't you remember?
Who said you were supposed to be here? says the little husband, you're supposed to be in your own distance; you're still in your own foreground, you spendthrift.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Russell Edson, "The Optical Prodigal" in Paul Hoover (ed.), *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* (New York: Norton, 1994), p.324-325.

In this image the man hasn't gone into his "own distance" in getting back to his parents, and so arrives at them enlarged; "don't you remember?" he asks, as if they might have gotten bigger to meet him. Just as Edson employs the metaphor of optical distance for distance into the past, Roth's dramatic enlargements of Zuckerman's attempts to return to the past and "be here" with his parents communicate that same gap between where they are and where he is; as Edson's parents do not resize, so Zuckerman's are not brought back in a fight with his father's surrogate or off the stained page of an old book, like Portnoy's mother "making herself emerge, limb from limb, out of an invisible state and into her apron" (PC, 4), because they are gone. The distance Roth crosses in his writing on to the fictive glass where Zuckerman is seen dramatically without his parents is thus greater than that which Auster "travels" on to the same - the loss communicated in Roth's images is not the Austerian disappearance of character from visibility but a deeper reality of distance in which the character is the inheritor of the corpus of his past *and* a man apart; his is the reality not only of both to an unknown extent but of the distance between the two. As Edson's little husband says to the unrecognised man, "No no, our son lives in the distance."¹⁵⁴

On January 1 1984 *The New York Times* published "Conversations With Philip", a set of excerpts from the American writer David Plante's diary concerning his friendship with Roth. The entries range from June 6, 1981 to October 5, 1983, during which period Roth composed *The Anatomy Lesson*. One later entry

¹⁵⁴ R. Edson, p.325.

describes Roth saying he would like to have “someone write about him, to see what it felt like to be someone else’s subject... He said, “You long to see yourself from without, but the more you look, the more you see yourself from within.””¹⁵⁵ In the “Conversations” last excerpt Plante returns to Roth’s idea of himself self-seeing from within in his writing; after reading a proof copy of *The Anatomy Lesson*, he imagines telling his friend:

You know, you’re *not* Nathan Zuckerman... You think you can’t see outside yourself, but you do, you see this thin dark man whom you, from your distance, describe as incapable of seeing outside himself... Zuckerman isn’t you, but some man who exists in your scrutiny of him. You’re not, with each novel, getting in closer to yourself so that you can’t see yourself, you’re drawing further and further away to see someone else.¹⁵⁶

Plante perceives in the Zuckerman novels Roth drawing “further and further away” from himself to picture his character. This theory of Roth’s distance, from which he sees the reality of his unseeing vice exister, replicates Zuckerman’s own distance from his past through writing *Carnovsky*. With this in mind, the import of Plante’s reading might not only be that with each new novel, Zuckerman is more different from Roth, but that in each novel Roth separates from himself to scrutinise, in the space he leaves, Zuckerman; with every sequel he scrutinises from further away, moving further out into the space of freedom from the past figured by Zuckerman’s writerly life of silence and retreat, and thus communicating more deeply, on account of the greater distance he travels on to the fictive glass, the reality of his subject.

¹⁵⁵ D. Plante, 1 January 1984.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

If Zuckerman is a *version* of the past Roth leaves behind through writing, it follows that new novels introduce a transformed Zuckerman, since the Roth beginning *Zuckerman Unbound* has left the past amplified in *The Ghost Writer*, for example; though the corpus remains, he makes his way out into the distance from a new starting point. Zuckerman thus modulates from the writer freed by his writing in ...*Unbound*, to regretting his work and wanting to rewrite his life in *The Anatomy Lesson*, to, in *The Prague Orgy*, a wryer, more detached appreciation of his bonds to the past: in Soviet-occupied Prague to rescue a Yiddish manuscript, stories written by exiled writer Zdenek Sisovsky's father, he briefly wonders once the mission begins to seem dangerous, "*Why am I forcing the issue? ...Still the son, still the child, in strenuous pursuit of the father's loving response? (Even when the father is Sisovsky's?)*", but to the police who confiscate the stories he describes them as "fiction about a world that no longer even exists. It is no possible threat to anyone" (ZB, 557, 561-562). In *The Counterlife* Roth writes separate transformations of Zuckerman employing contradictory facts within the one novel: in its first chapter, he mourns his dead brother; later, Henry is alive and Zuckerman dead; later again, Zuckerman is revived, "reborn" (F, 6) in London with a new wife. "In many ways it's everything that people don't want in a novel," Roth said in an "Interview on *Zuckerman*" with Asher Z. Milbauer and Donald G. Watson published in 1985, "Primarily what they want is a story in which they can be made to believe; otherwise they don't want to be bothered" (RMO, 161). However, as both *Zuckerman Bound* and *The Counterlife* reveal, reality is not delimited by a decision on the past in a finished story that is "Over. Over. Over. Over. Over." It is a different thing

leaving Zuckerman on the glass at the end of a novel than it is leaving Fanshawe behind his locked door, or Sachs to his explosion, for simply not believing he will be in the same place when I look back. "Why do I bother you like this?" Roth continues:

Because life doesn't necessarily have a course, a simple sequence, a predictable pattern. The bothersome form is intended to dramatize that obvious fact. The narratives are all awry but they have a unity; it is expressed in the title - the idea of a counterlife, of counterlives, counterliving. Life, like the novelist, has a powerful transforming urge. (RMO, 161-162)

Beyond the Austerian pattern of characters' appearances in the world in a repeated symbol, then, Roth's transformations of a character in the amorphous world depicted not in the restriction of the world's features but in the invisible sight of its reality. Plante writes in a diary entry:

The last time we met, Philip talked of real stuff in writing and gave me this, written on a torn sheet of paper, to think about: "You must so change that in broad daylight you could crouch down in the middle of the street and, without embarrassment, undo your trousers." I forget now where the quotation is from, some 19th-century German author, I think. Philip added: "The emphasis is on the word *could*. Not that you would, because you wouldn't. But you should be *capable* of doing it."¹⁵⁷

The relationship to the world through writing appreciated here is not one's departure from every inhibition in the world nurtured in one's past, but a dynamic with the world in which one is freer in it, not freed of it. In his letter to Roth at the end of *The Facts*, Zuckerman asks regarding himself and his English wife, "Who are we, anyway? And why? Your autobiography doesn't tell us anything of what has happened, in your life, that has brought *us* out of you" (F, 194). In Roth's narrative of himself in the main body of *The Facts* stretching from childhood to his signing his publishing contract for *Portnoy's Complaint*,

¹⁵⁷ D. Plante, 1 January 1984.

there is, in Zuckerman's own reckoning, an "enormous silence" (F, 194) about *his* origins. However, where Nathan Zuckerman comes from in Philip Roth is the invisible *subject* of the Zuckerman books; the different freedom to which Roth travels shadows the chains in which Zuckerman is eventually freer, too. In *Zuckerman Bound*, Roth thus developed a form of self-seeing that connects the trilogy's protagonist with the world that read unreal in his early fiction.

Zuckerman is a character whose changes reflect life's "powerful transforming urge" in an amorphous world. As Part 2 of this chapter has explored, Roth's writing does not directly reify this amorphous world's appearance, but perceives this world's reality in the distances disclosed by the distortions in which Zuckerman appears. The distortions mediate where Zuckerman *is* through where he can no longer be; the exact point of his connection with the world in the present - the moment of the first simplicity in his being where real work in the world is possible for him - remains invisible on the fictive glass. This thesis' last chapter witnesses in Don DeLillo's writing an aesthetics of character that reciprocates an amorphous, *different* world. DeLillo's aesthetics move beyond Roth's invisible reality of *where I am* seen through *where I used to be*, to a prose that directly instantiates Blanchot's moment of the first simplicity, and to a manner of self-seeing that opens up the unmediated world.

SELF-SEEING AND THE DIFFERENT WORLD IN DON DELILLO

...All one could do was to glimpse, amid the haze and the chimeras, something real ahead, just as persons endowed with an unusual persistence of diurnal cerebration are able to perceive in their deepest sleep, somewhere beyond the throes of an entangled and inept nightmare, the ordered reality of the waking hour.

Vladimir Nabokov

He closed his eyes again, briefly. He could feel himself contained in the dark but also just beyond it, on the lighted outer surface, the other side, belonged to both, feeling both, being himself and seeing himself.

Cosmopolis

PART 1

1. Getting The World Right

What does it mean to see the world in writing? How is one supposed to do it? Perhaps one condition is that other people in the world recognise the world in the writing. David Simon, the creator of the social realist television series *The Wire*, told Margaret Talbot in a profile for *The New Yorker*, “I’m the kind of person who, when I’m writing, cares above all about whether the people I’m writing about will recognize themselves. I’m not thinking about the general reader. My greatest fear is that the people in the world I’m writing about will read it and say, ‘Nah, there’s nothing there.’”¹⁵⁸ The idea of getting the world and the people within it right has not featured in the previous chapters of this

¹⁵⁸ Margaret Talbot, “Profiles: Stealing Life: The crusader behind “The Wire””, *The New Yorker*, 22 October 2007 <http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa_fact_talbot> [accessed 30 May 2014].

thesis on seeing the world through contemporary American fiction. Paul Auster attests to knowing nothing about himself, let alone anybody else; the “scars”¹⁵⁹ with which he sees himself also figure character’s erasure in the world, precluding his understanding himself within it. In Philip Roth, meanwhile, Alexander Portnoy and Nathan Zuckerman enter the world through people *misreading* them, turning their lives into caricatures typical of the unreal, implausible predominant culture surrounding them; Zuckerman connects to the world through a deeper perception of the reality of these distortions that separate him from others. In *American Pastoral* Zuckerman writes, “The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It’s getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That’s how we know we’re alive: we’re wrong.”¹⁶⁰ Don DeLillo, however, is routinely implicated in the cultural myth of getting people and the world right in writing. Tom Junod, writing in *Esquire* magazine, described 9/11 as an event in which “life catches up with [DeLillo’s] fiction... It was a day he himself might have authored, “DeLilloesque” not only as the end-point of a conspiracy but as a mass-event witnessed by billions, and who could see the Falling Men and the Falling Women... without conceding that DeLillo had gotten it right?”¹⁶¹ DeLillo is seen getting the world right in advance in his writing; Junod called *Underworld*’s cover photograph of the “looming” Twin Towers “prescient”¹⁶², while Blake Morrison wrote in his *Guardian* review of *Cosmopolis*, “DeLillo has always been good at telling us

¹⁵⁹ Paul Auster, *Winter Journal*, p.5.

¹⁶⁰ Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (London: Vintage, 2011), p.35.

¹⁶¹ Tom Junod, “The Man Who Invented 9/11”, *Esquire*, 7 May 2007

<<http://www.esquire.com/fiction/book-review/delillo>> [accessed 30 May 2014].

¹⁶² Ibid.

where we're heading."¹⁶³ Like Eric Packer, the multi-billionaire asset manager protagonist of *Cosmopolis* who predicts shifts in currency markets, DeLillo appears in cultural media with the quasi-mystic authority of a "seer" (C, 46).

The ascription of prescience to DeLillo is in part fuelled by his fiction's uses of the word "history". In his story "Midnight in Dostoevsky" the narrator and his friend decide there is "a history, a faded drama" (AE, 139), to the old man they occasionally see in the small town near their university campus; in *Libra* the character Lee Harvey Oswald imagines Leon Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin "in exile or prison, feeling history in the room, waiting for the moment when it would surge through the walls, taking them with it" (LB, 34); in *Cosmopolis* Eric tells the man who wants to assassinate him, "The crime you want to commit is cheap imitation. It's a stale fantasy... It's another syndrome, a thing you caught from others. It has no history" (C, 193). The implications in these references that a person can possess "a history" or otherwise, can act historically or otherwise, can *join* with history and *be in* history or otherwise, inform the popular myth that DeLillo's writing predicts the future of American society and culture; they incite the inference that DeLillo himself is quasi-magically in the world "feeling history" and seeing the future.

This chapter moves beyond the simple myth of DeLillo's quasi-mystical "seeing" to examine a stylistic effect of possibility and a smeary, unfixed construction of character in the writer's prose that open up the world through impressions,

¹⁶³ Blake Morrison, "Future tense", *The Guardian*, 17 May 2003
 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/may/17/fiction.dondelillo>> [accessed 30 May 2014].

distortions and hallucinations. If these distorted, unfixed appearances communicate, in Vladimir Nabokov's phrase, "something real ahead,"¹⁶⁴ this "something real" is not 'the world in the future' but the world made *different* from the common world that this thesis' previous two chapters have witnessed on the fictive glass of Roth and Auster's writing. DeLillo's literary instantiation of this different world reciprocates the contemporary sense of the world's precarity on account of the dangers of nuclear energy and human-made climate change, and furthermore creates the sensation of his fiction being in the world "ahead of time."¹⁶⁵

2. The Different World

The end of the world in Auster's late fiction means the impossibility of writing character. Auster's two worlds - that of the continuing present and that of the irrevocable world-at-large - split, so that symbols taken from the world, by which Auster sees himself in his earlier fiction, no longer disappear and reappear but mark characters with insistent symbols of the world's end, touching them with its destruction whenever they emerge from their small retreats of silent attachments to abandoned, disappearing things. As explored in the thesis' first chapter, apocalypse enters Auster's work after 9/11. DeLillo's writing, by contrast, has consistently been concerned with the idea. His depictions of Cold War America have included the impending possibility of nuclear destruction as a condition of their world picture. In *Underworld* the commentator Russ Hodges'

¹⁶⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p.21.

¹⁶⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.45.

description of being in a booth at the Polo Grounds in New York covering the baseball game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers on 3 October 1951 as “real baseball... The thing that happens in the sun” (U, 25), is inflected by J. Edgar Hoover’s thoughts on receiving news, whilst at the game, that the Soviet Union have conducted a test explosion of an atomic bomb: “Now this, he thinks. The sun’s own heat that swallows cities” (U, 24). The figure of the sun in the description of both events illuminates each in the light of the other. While the sunlight appreciated in Russ’ quasi-pastoral adoration of the outdoor American game in New York is dovetailed with nuclear heat that might incinerate the city, nuclear technology is reciprocally rooted in properties of the sun, a celestial body intrinsic to poetries depicting the natural world; the further description of the bomb’s spouting a “great white cloud like some thunder god of ancient Eurasia” (U, 23) additionally emphasises its antecedents in ancient myths. This section of *Underworld*, “The Triumph of Death”, references Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s painting of the same name, which depicts the dance of Death invading the earth, a medieval theme that moralized on the ephemerality of earthly life and things. In DeLillo’s Cold War scene, the technology for global death changes and newly illuminates the natural world *within* the world’s own pastoral terms; the “thing that happens in the sun”, “[t]he crowd, the constant noise, the breath and hum, a basso rumble building now and then” (U, 19), is seen differently but it is still going on, not arrested in the manner of Auster’s recent character-writing.

The necessity of *seeing the world differently* in the nuclear age is the subject of *End Zone*, DeLillo's second novel. Gary Harkness, the narrator, pushed into playing American football from a young age by his father, goes to play for Logos College in west Texas after either dropping out or being thrown out of four universities. He left the third because of a "simple and terrible" problem: assigned a book on the possibilities of nuclear war for course reading, he finds "I liked reading about the deaths of tens of millions of people" (EZ, 20):

I liked dwelling on the destruction of great cities. Five to twenty million dead. Fifty to a hundred million dead... I became fascinated by words and phrases like thermal hurricane, overkill, circular error probability, post-attack environment, stark deterrence, dose-rate contours, kill-ratio, spasm war. Pleasure in these words. They were extremely effective, I thought, whispering shyly of cycles of destruction so great that the language of past world wars became laughable, the wars themselves somewhat naive. A thrill almost sensual accompanied the reading of this book. What was wrong with me? Had I gone mad? Did others feel as I did? I became seriously depressed. (EZ, 20-21)

In his fear and depression at the pleasure he took in descriptions of nuclear catastrophe, Gary narrates that he returned home to his parents' house: "I was passing through one of those odd periods of youth in which significance is seen only on the blankest of walls, found only in dull places, and so I thought I'd turn my back on the world... and try to achieve, indeed establish, some lowly form of American sainthood" (EZ, 19). An ascetic preoccupation with emptiness becomes his means of purifying himself of his thrill for nuclear war, a tactic he continues at Logos College. The College football coach Emmett Creed instructs his squad, "Write home on a regular basis. Dress neatly. Be courteous. Articulate your problems. Do not drag-ass. Anything I have no use for, it's a football player who consistently drag-asses. Move swiftly from place to place, both on the field and in the corridors of buildings. Don't ever get too proud to

pray" (EZ, 10-11). Gary finds comfort in the simple strictness of these rules, "pleasure in the daily punishment on the field. I felt that I was better for it, reduced in complexity, a warrior" (EZ, 30); "The sense of living an inner life right up against the external or tangible life," he says to his teammate and fellow ascetic Taft Robinson, "Of living close to your own skin. You know what I mean. Everything. The pattern. The morality" (EZ, 223). Having described himself earlier in the novel in "exile" in Texas, "the state of being separated from whatever is left at the center of one's own history" (EZ, 29), Gary's purification by football brings him "right up against" the world outside his skin. If this "tangible" world suggests, in the warrior's immediacy of purpose and action, Auster's small world of the "things that are most near," "whatever it is I happen to find before me" (GW, 83), Emmett Creed links the access to this world through work and pain to the world-at-large. After the season's end, in his office with a picture of Saint Teresa of Avila praying in a medieval cell taped to the wall, he tells Gary:

"Our inner life is falling apart. We're losing control of things. We need more self-sacrifice, more discipline. Our inner life is crumbling. We need to renounce everything that turns us from the knowledge of ourselves. We're getting too far away from our own beginnings. We're roaming all over the landscape... The Sioux purified themselves by fasting and solitude. Four days without food in a sweat lodge. Before you went out to lament for your nation, you had to purify yourself. Fasting and solitude... I don't think there's anything makes more sense than self-denial. It's the only way to attain moral perfection. I've wandered here and there. I've made this and that mistake. But now I'm back and I'm back for good. A brave nation needs discipline. Purify the will. Learn humility. Restrict the sense life. Pain is part of the harmony of the nervous system." (EZ, 190-191)

At the beginning of this speech Creed's "our" might refer to the Logos football team, yet it becomes clear that he works towards moral perfection on behalf of his nation; it is the American people that are "losing control of things," "roaming all over the landscape," "getting too far away from our own beginnings." Gary

similarly works to redress the world-at-large from his position of exile. Off the field he spends time in the desert that surrounds the campus, “a stunned earth, unchangingly dull, a land silenced by its own beginnings in the roaring heat, born dead, flat stones burying the memory” (EZ, 30). Like Albert Camus’ commitment in his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” to “see... squarely” the Absurd disjunction between the irrational universe and the human desire to give it a unifying meaning, and to determine “if thought can live in those deserts,”¹⁶⁶ Gary would like to find a way to see and live in the nuclear age. “What we must know must be learned from blanked-out pages,” he thinks in the desert’s stunned landscape, “To begin to reword the overflowing world” (EZ, 84).

However, the nuclear world in *End Zone* is a world changed from the world contended with in “The Myth of Sisyphus”; nuclear fallout *makes different* the world of which Camus still wrote in the early days of the Second World War, “[i]f I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should *be* this world.”¹⁶⁷ In his motel room in the desert two miles from campus, Major Staley, a United States Air Force officer whose courses Gary audits, expounds to his student on the long-term effects on a population exposed to radiation from a nuclear bomb. The following quotations are presented in this sequence in the novel, and each quotation refers to the Major’s speech:

¹⁶⁶ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.26.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.51.

"Ten megatons of fission produce one million curies of strontium-ninety. What does that do to milk calcium levels? There's a factor-four discrimination against strontium in the human body. Newly forming bone attains a level eight times greater than the level that's acceptable. Then there's cerium-one-forty-four, plutonium-two-thirty-nine, barium-one-forty. What else have we got? Zinc-sixty-five in fish. Also radioiodine. That's milk, children, thyroid cancer."

"The average lethal mutation in an autosome persists for twenty-two generations."

"The aging process, the natural aging process means there's a slowdown in cell turnover, cellular turnover. Now you get a cell population exposed to a particular radiation dose and what you have is an aggravation of the slowdown thing, the radiation on top of the natural degenerative body process. The average life span undergoes a decrease. If you're exposed to three-hundred-R whole-body radiation, say within seven days of when the thing hits, and then say another hundred R over the entire first year, you lose about eleven years, you undergo a life-span reduction of eleven years. Sublethal doses also cause reproduction problems. There are problems with micro-cephalic offspring. There are abnormal terminations and stillbirths. There's a problem with inferior skeletal maturation of male and female progeny. There is formation of abnormal lens tissue in offspring. There are chromosome breaks. There is sterility, of course. There is general reduction of body size of male offspring six years of age and under. However, the Japanese data indicates that congenital malformation frequency would not necessarily vary from the norm as far as the first post-bomb generation is concerned."

"The rate is six per thousand per one hundred R. That's twenty-four hundred lethal genetic events per four hundred thousand people exposed to one hundred roentgens. Hiroshima supports this formula." (EZ, 81-82)

The Major's account features a specialist vocabulary for nuclear warfare and its effects, that vocabulary that thrills Gary, "whispering shyly of cycles of destruction so great that the language of past world wars became laughable" (EZ, 21). "Abnormal lens tissue" refers to buggy or otherwise mutated and perhaps otherwise-sighted or blind eyes; "micro-cephalic offspring" to babies born with disproportionately tiny heads. "Major," Gary says during their dialogue, "there's no way to express thirty million dead. No words. So certain men are recruited to reinvent the language... [The words] don't explain, they don't clarify, they don't express. They're painkillers. Everything becomes abstract" (EZ, 79-80). The shy, specialist vocabulary that can express nuclear-level catastrophe produces an abstract picture of the world's mutation at a cellular level: the world made different from itself. The changes to natural conditions by nuclear technology render impossible in DeLillo the form of self-

seeing in the world that Auster imagines in his poem “Search for a Definition”, discussed in this thesis’ first chapter:

...To the very end
I want to be equal
to whatever it is
my eye will bring me, as if
I might finally see myself

let go
in the nearly invisible
things

that carry us along with ourselves and all
the unborn children

into the world. (GW, 94-95)

In this passage, Auster wants to see himself “let go” in the continuing present to which he instructs his reader to abandon his words. Auster’s appearance to himself must be in the manner of everyone’s appearance, of the general “us” addressed both to and beyond the reader to mean the world, this place where Auster might see himself “let go,” in Camus’ phrase “a cat among the animals.” “[A]ll / the unborn children” carried along in this manner of self-seeing premise the futurity, even the eternity of this world; without this premise, “whatever it is / my eye will bring me” might not be from the same world as the last thing, or as the things that others’ eyes bring them, so that the communality of Auster’s appearance with everyone’s appearance in one world is broken. Major Staley describes a world in which its unborn children might yet see differently through abnormal lens tissue and out of tiny heads, have skeletons made different by the excess attainment of certain chemical elements from the environment, and not be born at all on account of sterility, abnormal terminations and stillbirths.

Gary's relation to this destructing world of deaths and mutating differences is, as previously mentioned, one of abstract pleasure in its language for the size and depth of its destruction. He tells Taft Robinson, in the latter's bare, "shadowless room" painted "neutral shades" (EZ, 183):

"I spend a lot of time reading stuff that concerns thermonuclear war and things that pertain to it. Horrible diseases, fires raging in the inner cities, crop failures, genetic chaos, temperatures soaring and dropping, panic, looting, suicides, scorched bodies, arms torn off, millions dead. That kind of thing."

"I like to read about the ovens," Taft said.

"What do you mean, the ovens? Are you serious?"

"Atrocities. I like to read about atrocities. I can't help it. I like to read about the ovens, the showers, the experiments, the teeth, the lampshades, the soap. I've read maybe thirty or forty books on the subject. But I like kids best. Putting the torch to kids and their mamas. Smashing kids in the teeth with your rifle butt. Laying waste to villages full of kids. Firing into ditches full of kids, infants, babies, so forth. That's my particular interest. Atrocities in general with special emphasis of kids."

"I can't bear reading about kids."

"I can't either, Gary."

"The thought of children being tortured and killed."

"It's the worst thing there is. I can't bear it. But I've read maybe eight books on it so far. Thirty or forty on the ovens and eight on the kids. It's horrible. I don't know why I keep reading that stuff."

"There must be something we can do," I said. (EZ, 229-230)

Taft's pleasure in reading about the mass deaths of kids transgresses a limit in Auster's writing. Like Gary's fascination with "nuked" cities and irradiated populaces, the pleasure derives from the unbelievable severity and scale of the horror: innocent beings in their great numbers, "villages full of kids" shot and set on fire. The facts become abstract, as Gary tells the Major, producing awe at world pictures neither Gary nor Taft can comfortably bear for knowing the terrible things being distantly, mathematically named. Notwithstanding philosophico-cultural objections, prevalent since the Holocaust, to identifying

with the sufferers of atrocities¹⁶⁸, the characters' discomfort in this knowledge might be defined as consisting in their distantly imagining the human suffering depicted, in other words *relating* to the atrocity in one common world of experience and pain, the world they live "right up against" playing football. This relation to the world is, as we have seen, Auster's manner of seeing himself; appropriately he writes in *The Invention of Solitude* that he cannot relate, "can go no farther," than the "monstrosity" of a world in which Anne Frank's fate is possible - "it robs the world of its one consolation," of its future in the innocent child (CP, 134). Taft, however, keeps reading about atrocities with "special emphasis on kids" - "It's the worst thing there is. I can't bear it. But I've read maybe eight books on it so far." Similarly, Gary attempts out in the desert to "reword" that common world whose future is promised by the figure of the child, enumerating "The sun. The desert. The sky... The west and the east. The song, the color, the smell of the earth," returning us to, in Creed's words, "our own beginnings" - only to be interrupted by the awful lure of abstracting words: "Blast area. Fire area. Body-burn area" (EZ, 84). If the fact of the Holocaust limits (much as 9/11 would later in his career) what of the world Auster finds himself able to see, DeLillo describes in *End Zone* the impossibility of curtailing a world picture that includes the holocausts and genetic mutations consequent in

¹⁶⁸ In *If This Is a Man* Primo Levi described a class of death camp prisoners termed "*Muselmänner*" who "[o]n their entry into the camp, through basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal incident, ...are overcome before they can adapt themselves; ...nothing can save them from selections [for the gas chambers] or from death by exhaustion." They are "the drowned" who "have no story" and "die or disappear, without leaving a trace in anyone's memory." Giorgio Agamben has written that the *Muselmänner* prove an impossibility of testifying to the Holocaust: "Whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in [the *Muselmann's*] name knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness." See Primo Levi, *If This is a Man; The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Everyman, 2000), p.105-106, and Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2005), p.33-34.

technological warfare to Auster's premise of one common world with a promised future for humanity.

3. The World's Broken Appearance

In his musings on nuclear warfare Major Staley, envisaging "humane wars" in the "not-too-distant future" with agreed limits on the megatonnage of nuclear bombs that can be used by each side, argues: "Of course the humanistic mind crumbles at the whole idea. It's the most hideous thing in the world to these people that such ideas even have to be mentioned. But the thing won't go away. The thing is here and you have to face it" (EZ, 76). Facing the nuclear world necessitates a departure from human identifications in one common world. Yet if the reality is beyond the crumbling of the humanistic mind, and thus beyond Auster's and Roth's forms of fictive self-seeing, how might DeLillo's writing picture it?

In *End Zone* the "thing" to be faced that determines the different world is its technology: "I think we can forget ideology," says the Major, "People invent that problem, at least as far as the U.S. is concerned. It has no real bearing as far as we're concerned. Obviously we can live with Communism; we've been doing it long enough. So people invent that. That's the grotesque sense of patriotism at work in this country" (EZ, 78-79); Zapalac, Gary's lecturer on exobiology, agrees, declaring, "A nation is never more ridiculous than in its patriotic

manifestations” (EZ, 154). The compelling draw of a specialist vocabulary for technological warfare in the novel is thus accounted for by its referencing the *real* world now that “the thing is here”; the scientific words, however horrific their distanced referents, posit a nuclear world-at-large - that is, not the world made new in the manner that industrialisation, for example, changed the world, but the world *altered in itself* by malformations of local climates and species reproduction - natural conditions previously thought to be eternal - and the introduction of the human possibility of global holocaust.

As referenced earlier, the specialist vocabulary in *End Zone* abstracts the reality it describes. The numbing effect of its shy whispering of great “cycles of destruction” emphasises the materiality of the words themselves - “Pleasure in these words” - at an abstracted distance from the atrocities they denote. The effect is the same as that Gary began to observe as a school-age teenager after three years of looking at the sign his father put in his room:

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH
THE TOUGH GET GOING

“[B]eauty flew from the words themselves,” Gary narrates, “the letters, consonants swallowing vowels, aggression and tenderness, a semi-self-recreation from line to line, word to word, letter to letter. All meaning faded. The words became pictures” (EZ, 16-17). DeLillo’s early connection of the doubling effect of scientific terminology - the shy imagination of a world at a distance from the materiality of the words themselves - with a different world visible beyond the limits of the human foreshadows the novelist J.M. Coetzee’s

“fundamental connection between the expiry of the distinction between the human and the animal and the decline of realist fiction over the course of the last century”¹⁶⁹ that Peter Boxall describes in his critical introduction *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*. The title character of Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello* sees Kafka’s short story “Report to an Academy”, in which an ape addresses an “audience of academics”, combining “species indeterminacy with the failure of a certain model of mimesis”¹⁷⁰:

About what is really going on in the lecture hall, your guess is as good as mine: men and men, men and apes, apes and men, apes and apes. The lecture hall itself may well be nothing but a zoo. The words on the page will no longer stand up and be counted, each proclaiming “I mean what I mean!”¹⁷¹

Boxall notes that for Costello, the species indeterminacy of both the speaker and his audience in “Report to an Academy” intervenes in prose fiction’s ability to “reflect and refer to the real world,”¹⁷² since circumstances in the story seem to fold into their opposites: apes into men, men into apes, the lecture hall into a zoo. “We used to believe,” Coetzee writes as Costello, “that when the text said, “On the table stood a glass of water,” there was indeed a table, and a glass of water on it, and we had only to look into the word-mirror of the text to see them. But all that has ended. The word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems.”¹⁷³ In *End Zone* the words “thermal hurricane” and “overkill” do not “reflect and refer to the real world” either, but sensually evoke cataclysms that, though real, seem unreal and unimaginable; what is “really going on,” to parrot Elizabeth Costello,

¹⁶⁹ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), p.111.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (London: Vintage, 2004), p.19.

¹⁷² P. Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p.111.

¹⁷³ J.M. Coetzee, p.19.

in a “spasm war” remains beyond the sight of DeLillo’s novel. If the “word-mirror of the text” is thus broken, and the words do not reflect for the reader what they describe, what are the consequences for seeing the world through writing? The apparently simple concept of Coetzee’s “word-mirror” ought not to be taken for granted; the subject, after all, of the previous chapter on Roth is that reality, “what is really going on” or in Roth’s phrase “what the real work is” (F, 17), is not simply made visible by a reflection on the fictive glass. Both the psychoanalytic model and the Jewish-American personal culture of Alex Portnoy’s upbringing’s manners of *seeing too much*, purporting the visibility of the formative suppositions of his character “in broad daylight!”, render his connection to the world *unreal*; while at the level of a single word, Nathan Zuckerman’s repeated intonation to himself at the end of *Zuckerman Unbound*, “Over. Over. Over. Over. Over” (ZB, 291) describes not the end of his attachment to his past, but his *willing* the attachment to be over. Nevertheless, Roth’s deeper communication of the distance between Zuckerman’s past and his life as a man apart in *The Anatomy Lesson* relies on the basic conventions of words’ representative function; the character’s grief is dramatically enlarged by the farcical appearance of his actions, rather than any warping of the fictive glass itself. The doubling effect of specialist words in DeLillo sunders any communication of the reality of the world that appears on the glass, however, as much as it obfuscates the world’s reflection: if words do not reflect one world in which the self can be seen, the reality of the self’s connection to the world is not testable or communicable in the manner of Roth’s amplifications; nor is the Rothian perception of reality as that which “should have turned out differently”

(F, 13) possible, since the reality and the unlived possibility of a different course are not established and opposed on the glass. There is only the sensual materiality of words become pictures and sounds, abstracted from the unimaginable horror they name. What they name is purportedly the real world, but its “broken” appearance through a specialist vocabulary makes imagining oneself in it impossible.

Great Jones Street, the novel DeLillo wrote after *End Zone*, features an image of a character seeing the different world described by a specialist vocabulary. Menefee, the frenzied character in a gendarme’s cape and long boots who assists the invisible black-market entrepreneur Dr. Pepper, tells the novel’s narrator Bucky Wunderlick: “I’m grateful to him. I had two years of crisis sociology at the University of California at Santa Barbara in Santa Barbara, California. Ruined my head just about. Dr. Pepper took me out of the world of terminology and numbers and classifications and provided access to new kinds of awareness. Centrifugalism and overloads. Brain-patching. Electrode play areas” (GJS, 161). As in *End Zone*, the “new kinds of awareness” posited by a specialist vocabulary are post-human; a neuro-scientific vocabulary saves Menefee from his studies in sociology, a discipline concerned with the functioning of human society. In bypassing the problems, or “crises”, of human society, Menefee’s seeing also bypasses the novel’s fictive glass. Bucky narrates:

I sat at the small table near the sink. Menefee remained by the door, his body yielding to an occasional mild twitch, his face reflecting a mental concentration so intense I thought his eyeballs might suddenly click backward in their sockets in order to peer into the depths of his mind, leaving curdled sludge and pink drippings for my own eyes to gaze upon. (GJS, 161)

In this image, Menefee's self-seeing bypasses the realist novel's difficulties of seeing men's "invisible history" by "thread[ing] the hidden pathways of feeling and thought which lead up to every moment of action"¹⁷⁴; in Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* Neil Klugman "wishe[s] I could scoot around to the other side of the window, ...to get behind that image and catch whatever it was that looked through those eyes" (GC, 97), but in DeLillo's metaphor for neuro-scientific seeing Menefee's eyes simply roll back into his head to see whatever it is that looks through them.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, in "The Triumph of Death" at the beginning of *Underworld* the non-earthly heat of the nuclear bomb is rooted in the pastoral depiction of the Giants and Dodgers' baseball game, producing a world picture that includes nuclear technology. In *Great Jones Street* neuro-scientific technology is similarly emphasised as non-earthly: "There's a craving in my breast for the uncharted spaces and territories of the human mind," says Dr. Pepper, "Energy. I want to tap untapped fields of energy. Dope is okay. Dope is the power of the earth, the use of the earth's products to dig deeper into the earthen parts of the mind. But energy is the power of the universe. I want to tap that power" (GJS, 169-170). Yet in this earlier novel the appearance of a different world that includes alien technology is still "broken"¹⁷⁵, mediated through a character using the technology to see himself somewhere off the novel's glass; "curdled sludge and pink drippings" are what is left on the glass. At the end of the previous chapter I describe leaving Roth's Zuckerman on the

¹⁷⁴ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.164.

¹⁷⁵ J.M. Coetzee, p.19.

glass at the end of one novel and not believing he will be in the same place when I look back; such are Roth's transformations of this character in works that communicate the reality of the distance between where the self is and where it once saw and felt itself to be. In *Great Jones Street* this situation is extended even further by Bucky's watching Menefee and imagining him turning into a humanoid creature that can see inside its own head; beyond looking away then back and seeing a changed Zuckerman in the world, Bucky imagines Menefee's transformation into a different thing belonging to an alien landscape that it can see, but that remains invisible to Bucky. Bucky has neither a body nor a world in common with this self-seeing humanoid.

The second part of this chapter will be concerned with a shift in DeLillo's later writing that makes possible the visibility of a world that includes nuclear possibility. As I will explore, DeLillo makes the different world visible not through the construction of a new common world but through reciprocating in his prose the potential difference of conditions in a nuclear world discussed in *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street*. The reciprocation is achieved by means of a stylistic effect of possibility and a smeary, unfixed construction of character; these elements create a manner of self-seeing in his later work that sees past the common world and opens up the "broken" conditions of the world's appearance.

PART 2

4. Reconstructing the Different World: The Possibility That***This Is How It Is***

She'd been alone for a time, seated on a bench in the middle of the gallery with the paintings set around her, a cycle of fifteen canvases, and this is how it felt to her, that she was sitting as a person does in a mortuary chapel, keeping watch over the body of a relative or a friend. (AE, 105)

The emphatic phrase in this sentence from DeLillo's story "Baader-Meinhof", "this is how it felt to her", is typical of DeLillo's style of description of an impression he wants to single out in his later work. "*This* is what *it* is"; "*this* is how *it* was"; examples are numerous and here are two, from *Underworld* and *Libra*:

He is just a running boy, a half-seen figure from the streets, but the way running reveals some clue to being, the way a runner bares himself to consciousness, *this* is *how* the dark-skinned kid seems to open to the world, how the bloodrush of a dozen strides brings him into eloquence. (U, 13, my emphases)

His gunman would appear behind a strip of scenic gauze. You have to leave them with coincidence, lingering mystery. *This* is what makes *it* real. (LB, 147, my emphases)

The "Baader-Meinhof" sentence is notable, however, for its uncommon positioning of the emphatic phrase; "*this* is how *it* felt to her" comes before the referent of "*this*" so that the phrase, despite its force with which it commonly attests to a demonstration of an earlier assertion (as in, "You know how running reveals some clue to being? *This* is *it*, this is the same thing as what I'm talking about"), expresses a potentiality. That there *is* an impression of how sitting in the gallery felt to the woman – *this* impression, "*this*" - is instantiated before any

description of *what* it felt like to her. The effect compares with that of the instantiation of a *here*, or *now*, that Jean-François Lyotard discusses in Barnett Newman's paintings and sculptures: "That it happens 'precedes', so to speak, the question pertaining to what happens... The event happens as a question mark 'before' happening as a question."¹⁷⁶

Examples of DeLillo's sentences in which the emphatic "*this*" comes before its referent are numerous; here is another, from *Underworld*:

This is what technology [*it*] does. It peels back the shadows and redeems the dazed and rambling past. It makes reality come true. (U, 177, my emphases)

This DeLillian trope of saying that there is *this* impression of things before describing the impression borders on the limit of language's structuring of facts famously expressed at the end of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence."¹⁷⁷ DeLillo's early interest in ascetic spaces and silences in *End Zone* acknowledged the philosopher. In Taft Robinson's room where "[e]verywhere it was possible to perceive varieties of silence, small pauses in corners, ...the spaces between things, the endless silence of surfaces, time swallowed by methodically silent clocks, whispering air and the speechlessness of sentient beings" (EZ, 183), Gary Harkness wonders whether an inch-long remnant of tape on the wall had been for a poster of Wittgenstein: "Maybe that's what he'd had up there, or almost had. Dollar ninety-eight poster of philosopher surrounded by Vienna Circle... It would have

¹⁷⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p.90.

¹⁷⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2010), p.89.

told something. That, I knew, was why he hadn't put it up" (EZ, 222-223, 183). Taft's room's bareness makes the remnant of tape "seem historic" (EZ, 182); it alone tells something, or tells of Taft almost doing something, in the room's spaces and silences. "Two parts to [Wittgenstein's] work," thinks Gary, "What is written. What is not written. The man himself seemed to favor second part. Perhaps Taft was a student of that part" (EZ, 223).

The study of silence in Wittgenstein, of the limit found in "what we cannot speak about," is perceptible in the emphatic phrases in DeLillo's later writing. The variations of the basic phrase "*this* is how *it* is," often coming in the sentence before the referent of "*this*", assert knowledge in potentia of the "*it*"; in not speaking, because of the effect of abstraction, about anything in particular, "*this* is how *it* is" expresses language at a structuring limit speaking about itself. As the character Robby describes in the story "Midnight in Dostoevsky", "Let the words be the facts." In the "Baader-Meinhof" sentence, "this" means the moment of the word's instantiation, of its being read, so that "how it felt to her" means not "how a character felt seated on a bench looking at some Gerhard Richter paintings" but instead, "how being alive at that moment with the paintings set around her felt"; "*this*", *here*, the word's instantiation, is how "*it*" felt - there is a "bloodrush" *here* right into the moment of being there.

Wittgenstein's statement is paraphrased in "Midnight in Dostoevsky". Robby narrates his and his classmates' fascination with their lecturer in Logic, Ilgauskas:

He seemed a man in a trance state. But he wasn't simply absent from his remarks, another drained voice echoing down the tunnel of teaching years. We'd decided, some of us, that he was suffering from a neurological condition. He was not bored but simply unbound, speaking freely and erratically out of a kind of stricken insight. It was a question of neurochemistry. We'd decided that the condition was not understood well enough to have been given a name. And if it did not have a name, we said, paraphrasing a proposition in logic, then it could not be treated. (AE, 123)

If it did not have a name, then it could not be treated; "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." The emphasis on naming in the students' paraphrase of Wittgenstein signals a preoccupation in the story. Robby and his friend Todd take walks off-campus into the nearby small town, "talking about nothing much but making something of it" (AE, 119), competing with each other to offer definitions of the things in the world around them. Robby gestures at two large trees - "'Norway maple," I said" - then informs the reader, "I was pretty sure the trees were maples. Norway was another matter. I could have said red maple or sugar maple but Norway sounded stronger, more informed" (AE, 125-126). Convincing each other with the evocations of a word's sound is as much a consideration in the two young men's project as the accuracy of the term employed. The sound intermingles with the historical and cultural resonances of a word, inflecting its meanings just as the sounds of specialist terminology distance their meanings in *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street*. A sound and its evocations can make it possible to speak about an impression by naming it; Robby and Todd thus accept or reject the *feel* of each others' words - "I don't feel that here" (AE, 129), says Todd at one point - depending on how well the word captures their own impression. To give another example, watching a middle-aged woman transport her shopping up the steps to her house in a baby stroller, Todd asks:

"What's her name?"

"Isabel," I said.

"Be serious. We're serious people. What's her name?"

"Okay, what's her name?"

"Her name is Mary Frances. Listen to me," he whispered. "*Mar-y Fran-ces*. Never just Mary." (AE, 126)

Robby describes this game of finding the right-feeling words for things in the world: "At times abandon meaning to impulse. Let the words be the facts. This was the nature of our walks - to register what was out there, all the scattered rhythms of circumstance and occurrence, and to reconstruct it as human noise" (AE, 122). The young men's sonorous reconstruction of "what was out there" recalls Gary's desire in *End Zone*, haunted by the language of nuclear war, to begin in the desert to "reword the overflowing world... To call something by its name and need no other sound" (EZ, 84). In the language of DeLillo's emphatic phrases, this reconstruction of the world as "human noise" would mean the capacity to say "*this*" and mean "*it*"; the two words would be one sound, for there would be no need to say "*this* is how *x* is", because the sound "*x*" would express whatever "*this*" referred to. Robby and Todd's game involves repeated attempts at such perfect expression of something in language. Every assertion - "Isabel", "Mary Frances" - expresses the potential name of an "*it*", the name intended to sound the impression of the middle-aged woman with the stroller. They do not say "*Isabel* is who *it* is", but simply "Isabel" and look or point, as if to need no other sound for what they see.

The young men's reconstructions of the world are not binding, however. Certain names, like Robby's "Norway maple", go unchallenged, and after Todd asks how many boxcars a passing freight train had, "[w]hen I told him now what my

number was, he did not respond, and I knew what this meant. It meant that he'd arrived at the same number" (AE, 120). Yet their agreement, Robby continues, "was not supposed to happen - it unsettled us, it made the world flat... Even in matters of pure physical reality, we depended on a friction between our basic faculties of sensation, his and mine, and we understood now that the rest of the afternoon would be spent in the marking of differences" (AE, 120-121). This passage pinpoints that the calling of something by its name aspired to in *End Zone* is not the same thing as the verification of a fact. Indeed the determination of a fact such as how many boxcars on the train makes the "world flat," interrupting Robby and Todd's manner of registering "all the scattered rhythms of circumstance and occurrence" in the world around them through the *differences* in their impressions. As they collaborate on creating a history for the old man they have begun to occasionally see in the town, names are granted provisionally, or at first agreed upon as expressing the impression of the shuffling figure in the hooded coat but later discarded:

His daughter-in-law comes in and makes the bed, Irina, although Todd did not concede the binding nature of the name. (AE, 139)

He wears trousers with suspenders, until we decided he didn't; it was too close to stereotype. (AE, 140)

The differences and changes in their perceptions of the old man themselves communicate "scattered rhythms." Robby learns from a girl in his Logic class that Ilgauskas reads "Dostoevsky day and night" (AE, 134); this accident of new knowledge prompts his idea that the old man is Russian and Ilgauskas is his son. Todd's reticence to accept the Russian name Irina stems from his competitive scepticism, out of envy of Robby's Dostoevsky revelation, of the

entire connection of Ilgauskas to the old man. The young men's assertions thus say the *possibility* that *this* is who the hooded figure is, each assertion in part made possible by different accidents of knowledge and the competition between the two characters. Without the effect of possibility disclosed by a sense of multiple impressions, the names - "Irina", "Ilgauskas" - would flatten the man, but with the effect these names open "what was out there" in the man's history by remaining at the border of structuring an impression of him.

5. Seeing the Nuclear World-At-Large

The effect of possibility that *this* is who *it* is in "Midnight in Dostoevsky" recalls Clarissa Dalloway's "she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that"¹⁷⁸ in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Just as Clarissa, as explored in the previous chapter on Roth, does not decide on anything or shut anything out so that the world's reality includes the unlived possibility of its different course, the posited reality of Robby and Todd's definitions keeps open the silent, unworded histories the young men cannot "treat" or speak about. In Roth's elaboration of a Woolfian invisible perception of reality as the thing that "should have turned out differently" (F, 13), fictive amplifications of unlived possibilities render things in the world real to Nathan Zuckerman: specifically, the distance he has put between himself and his parents by writing what he has written, their deaths and the reality of his life as a man apart. This is the real

¹⁷⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p.6.

world Roth's vice exister wishes had turned out differently, but finally accepts. In DeLillo, however, the real is not disclosed in the acceptance of the facts - of what happened over what didn't happen. As outlined earlier, DeLillo's *different* world is not an alternate common world opposite the first world that Auster sees himself in and that Roth deepens in reality, but that first common world *ripped open*: multiplying, changing. This tear in the world's fictive representation is not that caused by the "Great Interruption" of the First World War that for Henry James rendered "the recent past... disconnected and fabulous, fatuous, fantastic, belonging to another life and another planet"¹⁷⁹, and that results in *Mrs Dalloway* in the combination of two separated worlds, the pre-War pastoral summer at Bourton and post-War London resonant with the Shakespeare lines Clarissa reads in a bookshop window: "Fear no more the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages."¹⁸⁰ DeLillo's linguistic reconstruction of the world in his later work includes not two worlds but the world and *its possibility*; that is, not the possibility of another world in another time, but the possibility of there being the world at all. As discussed earlier, in DeLillo's various uses of the emphatic phrase "*this* is how *it* is" language is speaking about itself - about its possibility of reciprocating the world's "scattered rhythms" at the moment of a word's instantiation or its being read. The versions of this phrase, and the names for things in "Midnight in Dostoevsky", register through their effect of possibility things in the world beyond Wittgenstein's border of unspeakability. "*This*" without referent, as in "Baader-Meinhof"'s "this is how it felt to her", and "Isabel," as in "Midnight in Dostoevsky"'s "the possibility that *Isabel* sounds the

¹⁷⁹ Henry James, *The Letters of Henry James: Volume II*, ed. Percy Lubbock (London: Macmillan, 1920), p.416.

¹⁸⁰ V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p.7.

impression of the middle-aged woman with the stroller”, communicate that there is a world we can speak about *and* that some things in this world are beyond what we can say. Like Auster, DeLillo is concerned with articulating in writing the Oppenian “mystery... / That there is something for us to stand on.”¹⁸¹

However, DeLillo’s stylistic reciprocations of things that are beyond what language names in its structuring of the world - in Wittgensteinian terms, his incorporated observation of what the word is silent about *within* the word that makes a sound - communicate possibility *in the world*. By this I mean not seeing the world to be made up of possibilities (and thus in Auster of unforeseeable “coincidences” that repeat a symbol connecting a character to the world), nor seeing the world in the Rothian actuality of one possibility over others that might have been, but seeing possibilities in the world actively vying, amorphously changing reality constantly. DeLillo’s emphasis on the sounds of his prose, whether the sounds of specialist terminology, the instantiating sound of a “*this*”, or the right-*feeling* words for things, is indicative of his writing’s seeing the world’s active possibilities; reading his writing might approximate listening to the “last man” in Maurice Blanchot’s fiction of that name, who speaks in an “all-encompassing murmur, a barely perceptible planetary song”¹⁸² - this, rather than reading the representation and acceptance of the reality that this sound is made to yield at a taken point in time as it pertains to a self-seeing character such as Marco Stanley Fogg or Nathan Zuckerman (i.e. Paul Auster or Philip Roth, who are *doing* the self-seeing through writing), and that in James or Woolf might seem “another life,” “another planet” away from another taken point.

¹⁸¹ George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, p.159.

¹⁸² Maurice Blanchot, *The Last Man*, trans. Lydia Davis (ubu editions), p.4.
 <http://www.ubu.com/ubu/blanchot_last_man.html> [accessed 29 May 2014].

DeLillo surpasses these encounters with reality to come closer to what we have seen Blanchot term, regarding Rousseau, “the unmediated,” “the moment of the first simplicity, ...where all is possible.”¹⁸³ DeLillo writes the unmediated not through abandoning mediation, but through mediations that register mediation.

6. Self-Seeing In the Different World I: *Libra*

DeLillo’s writing of active possibilities in the world constructs fiction that can see the nuclear world-at-large. In *End Zone* and *Great Jones Street* what makes a world with nuclear energy difficult to see within the common world is its world-altering possibilities; energy that warps genes and makes different once-eternal human conditions unsettles a fictive glass underpinned by a futurity of the world within which it becomes possible through writing to see oneself just as anyone, as everyone, might appear. The effect of possibility nurtured in DeLillo’s later prose reflects not the irradiated environments of the nuclear world-at-large whispered shyly in *End Zone*, nor the science of nuclear power fetishised in *Great Jones Street*, but the force of nuclear energy’s assertion of possibilities upon the popular imagination. To reciprocate the world *made different* by nuclear technology, DeLillo constructs prose in which the world’s possibilities are active.

¹⁸³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.48, p.45.

A “planetary song of possibilities” in DeLillo thus does yield a reality: the reality of a world with nuclear power. Yet the effect is not a world defined at a taken point in time, but a world more deeply articulated in scattered, possible impressions of what *is* than in the common world’s fixed appearance. Like the “sputtering black-and-white tones” (U, 157) of the videotape of someone shot by the Texas Highway Killer in *Underworld* that are “truer-to-life than anything around you” and give the common world a “rehearsed and layered and cosmetic look” (U, 157), DeLillo’s posited impressions communicate a deeper reality of seeing the world-at-large; they “make... reality come true” (U, 177).

This depth of seeing into the world-at-large, right into the fact of nuclear power making to tremble our surety of the world’s future existence, is connected to DeLillo’s interest in getting inside history. The readings of didacticism and prophecy into his work discussed at the beginning of this chapter stem in part from his descriptions of acts and characters having and belonging to “history” or otherwise; the word has a near-mystical intonation. In “The Power of History” he writes of fiction unlocking the “vast and uniform Death that history tends to fashion as its most enduring work,”¹⁸⁴ the Death referring to the historiographical and popular cultural definitions of historical events and people within fixed single narratives. “Fiction,” he writes, “slips into the skin of historical figures. It gives them sweaty palms and head colds and urine-stained underwear and lines to speak in private and the terror of restless nights. This is

¹⁸⁴ Don DeLillo, “The Power of History”, 7 September 1997.

how consciousness is extended and truth is seen new.”¹⁸⁵ DeLillo’s extension of consciousness of events, his seeing history new, seeing *more* of history than uniform versions of the past allow, is part of the project of “making reality come true” in his writing. I will now explore how in *Libra* and *Cosmopolis* DeLillo’s writing’s intersection with history, its slipping “into the skin of historical figures,” creates an aesthetics of character and a mode of self-seeing in the nuclear world-at-large that depend on the stylistic reciprocation of the world’s possibilities foregrounded above.

Libra, DeLillo’s historical novel about the life of Lee Harvey Oswald and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, is a powerful example of DeLillo’s manner of giving historical figures “sweaty palms and head colds and urine-stained underwear and lines to speak in private and the terror of restless nights” - all the quotidian paraphernalia excised from the distant, uniformed figure. The novel is split between alternate chapters that describe Oswald’s life from childhood and various parties’ plotting and tracing the assassination, and that eventually merge as the two respective timelines align and Oswald becomes involved in the plot. Until the novel’s end Oswald is not “Lee Harvey Oswald”; hearing the name “on the radios and TVs” after his arrest “[h]e didn’t recognize himself in the full intonation of the name... No one called him by that name” (LB, 416). In the novel Oswald is “Lee”, “Ozzie”, and other possible names: “Hidell”, his secret name for himself meaning “hide the *L*” and “don’t tell” (LB, 89-90); “Leon” (LB, 317), the assassination conspirator David Ferrie’s name for him,

¹⁸⁵ D. DeLillo, “The Power of History”, 7 September 1997.

after Leon Trotsky. The transformation of this possible Lee into the Oswald of history is achieved in *Libra* not in a reduction of the character's possibilities down to one, but through the novel's connection of Lee to forces in the world-at-large well-served by the possibility that he could be anyone; that he "looks like everybody" (LB, 300).

DeLillo thematizes Oswald's desire, expressed in a letter to his brother, to "tak[e] part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one's own personal world, and the world in general" (LB, 1), as a longing to see himself in the common world. As a boy in New Orleans Lee reads Marx and Engels and biographies of Bolshevik leaders:

The drabness of his surroundings, his own shabby clothes were explained and transformed by these books. He saw himself as part of something vast and sweeping... He would need a secret name. He would join a cell located in the old buildings near the docks... He would move through the city in the rain, wearing dark clothes. (LB, 41)

Lee's desire to see himself as "part of something vast and sweeping" that puts the conditions of his own life in common with those of others, and thus to cross the "borderline" into the world, is frustrated by the "system" (LB, 357) he encounters in his experiences with authorities on both sides of the Cold War divide as a US Marine, a defector to the USSR, an FBI informant and in Mexico City trying to get a visa to travel to Cuba. "He feels he is living at the center of an emptiness," DeLillo narrates after he is turned down by the Cuban embassy, "He wants to sense a structure that includes him, a definition clear enough to specify where he belongs. But the system floats right through him, through everything, even the [Cuban] revolution. He is a zero in the system" (LB, 357).

DeLillo's Lee feels an incredible injustice at his exclusion from the world.

Though invested from an early age in Marxist literature's explanation and transformation of his unhappiness, nevertheless his continuing isolation and unsuccessful attempts to join with the revolution develop his sense of a personal injury, as if the world were not recompensing him for his efforts. The narration repeatedly emphasises his "serious time" (LB, 33, 155) spent reading in the library or learning Russian; in Mexico City he insists to Cuban and Soviet officials that "[h]is wife is Russian. They were married the day Castro won the Lenin Peace Prize", and shows forged documents evidencing "proof of leadership in the Fair Play for Cuba movement" (the movement in fact discouraged him from opening a branch office), because "[a] man with papers is substantial" (LB, 355-357). Lee clings to these bad impressions of authority and professionalism as his means of passage into the "world in general"; DeLillo portrays through their inadequacy and the character's anger a small pettiness but also great pathos for this young man's inept, "word-blind" (LB, 210) struggle, a pathos Lee sees in himself when writing his "Historic Diary":

Even as he printed the words, he imagined people reading them, people moved by his loneliness and disappointment, even by his wretched spelling, the childish mess of composition. Let them see the struggle and humiliation, the effort he had to exert to write a simple sentence. (LB, 211)

Throughout the novel, even as the "system" separates him from the revolution, and even as he struggles not only with literacy but with the language of substantiality in the system, what he elsewhere calls the capacity to "carry himself with a clear sense of role" (LB, 248), Lee sees his actions in the world as if they will eventually be seen by others, by sympathetic "people moved by

his loneliness and disappointment.” The adolescent dream of himself “mov[ing] through the city in the rain, wearing dark clothes” expands into a mode of self-seeing where the “struggle” in his life is redeemed by a fantasy of his latent historical significance; excited as he enters a tenement in a poor district of Tokyo to meet a contact for Russian lessons and to discuss defecting to the USSR, he narrates to himself as if describing the action in a film, “Hidell climbs the ancient creaking stairs” (LB, 109). This is the fantasy ignited by reading those books on Trotsky and Lenin as a boy, “men who lived in isolation for long periods, lived close to death through long winters in exile or prison, feeling history in the room, waiting for the moment when it would surge through the walls, taking them with it. History was a force to these men, a presence in the room. They felt it and waited” (LB, 34).

When history eventually “surge[s] through the walls” and takes Lee with it - a connection wonderfully formally reciprocated by Lee’s crossing over into the chapters concerning the plot on Kennedy’s life (see LB, 340) - his entrance into the world-at-large fulfills his pettier dreams of self-legitimation, as opposed to the achievement of a common unity of his struggle with that of others in the world. After the initial lack of self-recognition in the “full intonation of [his] name” (LB, 416) he hears in the police station after his arrest, it occurs to Lee that “he’d found his life’s work” (LB, 434):

After the crime comes the reconstruction. He will have motives to analyze, the whole rich question of truth and guilt. Time to reflect, time to turn this thing in his mind. Here is a crime that clearly yields material for deep interpretation. He will be able to bend the light of that heightened moment, shadows fixed on the lawn, the limousine shimmering and still... He will vary the act a hundred ways, speed it up and slow it down, shift emphasis, find shadings, see his whole life change.

This was the true beginning.

They will give him writing paper and books. He will fill his cell with books about the case... People will come to see him, the lawyers first, then psychologists, historians, biographers. His life had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald... Everybody knew who he was now. (LB, 434-435)

Lee perceives himself over the borderline into the “world in general” by having *become* the world’s common unity. As “Lee Harvey Oswald” his words and writings will be listened to and pored over by specialists for the benefit of the public because he finally has a role, a historical significance recognised by the “system”; “[e]verybody knew who he was now.” DeLillo depicts his character’s arrival at this position of power as ironically haphazard. Drawn by David Ferrie into a plot designed by rogue members of the CIA and supported by the Mob, he stands in the window of the Book Depository warehouse where he works and reassures himself that he is completing his mission: “Okay, he fired early the first time, hitting the President below the head, near the neck area somewhere. It was a foolishness he could dismiss at a certain level. Okay, he missed the President with the second shot and hit Connally” (LB, 398). Walking in the street and being watched by a policeman immediately after the assassination he reassures himself of the opposite fact, that his shots *didn’t* kill Kennedy: “Okay, he shot him once. But he didn’t kill him. To the best of his knowledge he hit him in the upper back or somewhere in the neck area, nonfatally. Then he missed and hit the Governor. Then he missed completely” (LB, 408). In his book *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo’s Dialogue with*

Culture, Mark Osteen describes collisions of forces in *Libra* such as Lee's half-blind stumbling into the role of Kennedy's assassin (a role for which, at least in the novel, he is mistakenly cast, since it is the hired gun Raymo Benitez who fires the fatal shot) as "creat[ing] only a fleeting unity that... ultimately explodes any lasting coherence."¹⁸⁶ For Osteen, the "fleeting unity" of a right-wing political assassination plot and a desperate young aspiring Marxist revolutionary "explodes" a coherent world within which to see and understand Kennedy's death. DeLillo's Lee would sustain his particular "fleeting unity" with the world-at-large by drawing a coherent world around *himself* as its enigmatic subject, keeping its attention by varying the act of Kennedy's murder "a hundred ways" to stay at the centre of the "whole rich question of truth and guilt" - until events cut the fantasy of significance short by extending beyond his control yet again, just as they did when they put him in the world, and Jack Ruby murders him.

On the one hand, the Oswald in *Libra* supplants his ambition of merging his personal context and the world in general with his personal world becoming the general world's news story. However, in the course of the novel Lee's mingled self-interest and aspiration for political transformation open him quite radically to the world. As Emmett Creed in *End Zone* would say, he "roam[s] all over the landscape": to Russia and back and into the sweep of a plot engineered by the political right in America, despite his belief in the revolution. Aleksei Kirilenko, the Russian KGB agent who manages Lee's defection to the USSR and summons him when an American U-2 spy plane is shot down in Soviet

¹⁸⁶ Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture*, p.161.

airspace, sees him as “some kind of Chaplinesque figure, skating along the edges of vast and dangerous events. Unknowing, partly knowing, knowing but not saying, the boy had a quality of trailing chaos behind him, causing disasters without seeing them happen, making riddles of his life and possibly fools of us all” (LB, 194). Having dismissed Lee as a boy who “played Ping-Pong in his head” and was “not agent material” (LB, 167), Kirilenko is forced to admit that he is the “one person in the USSR who had inside working knowledge of the U-2 [from his past station in the US military], who was American like [its pilot, Francis Gary] Powers, who could measure his countryman’s responses and telltale inflections, who could evaluate what he said about ground personnel, base security and so on” (LB, 194). DeLillo gives Lee a comedic manner of roaming and skating about in the world, accidentally connecting with it yet “without seeing [the connection] happen”, still miserably feeling “at the center of an emptiness.” The same oblivious entrance into dangerous events characterises his coming to the attention of Win Everett, the retired CIA agent whose idea it is to fake an attempt on the President’s life that can be traced to Cuba. Everett works in the basement of his home fabricating incriminating evidence:

His gunman would emerge and vanish in a maze of false names. Investigators would find an application for a post-office box; a certificate of service, U.S. Marine Corps; a Social Security card; a passport application; a driver’s license; a stolen credit card and half a dozen other documents - in two or three different names, each leading to a trail that would end at the Cuban Intelligence Directorate.

... Astonish them. Create coincidence so bizarre they have to believe it. Create a loneliness that beats with violent desire. This kind of man. An arrest, a false name, a stolen credit card. (LB, 145-147)

This sophisticated design of a gunman makes Everett feel “marvelously alert, sure of himself, putting together a man with scissors and tape” (LB, 145).

However, when his accomplice discovers Lee for the role, he is shocked that Oswald already has aliases:

He had his own names. He had variations of names. He had forged documents. Why was Everett playing in his basement with scissors and paste?

...Oswald was handing out leaflets in the street. The headline was “Hands Off Cuba!”

There was Oswald’s correspondence with the national director of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.

There was socialist literature strewn about. Speeches by Fidel Castro... (LB, 179-180)

Lee Harvey Oswald proves the ready existence of a Communist-leaning gunman in a maze of documentation replicating Everett’s design; beyond approximating the “kind of man” the plot requires, Lee is the incarnation of the “loneliness that beats with violent desire.” Like Kirilenko, Everett is unnerved by this character’s uncanny intersection with great events: “It produced a sensation of the eeriest panic, gave him a glimpse of the fiction he’d been devising, a fiction living prematurely in the world” (LB, 179). Once again Lee drifts into the heart of big history, again not seeing it happen until afterwards, hearing his full name on the news.

The paradox of Lee’s coincidence with the Presidential assassination plot is he specifically matches the design of a form of anonymity. Everett’s gunman is not meant to be immediately identifiable in his name, methods and motives but “would appear behind a strip of scenic gauze... This is what makes it real” (LB, 147). T.J. Mackey, the ex-CIA conspirator who takes control of Everett’s plan,

organises “creat[ing] our own Oswald. A second, a third, a fourth... Mackey wants Oswalds all over Texas” (LB, 354); the multiplication of Oswald figures contributes to Everett’s “gauze” effect, weaving trails of evidence that will frame Lee for the murder even if he decides not to go through with it. The novel includes within its chapters on the assassination sections describing retired intelligence analyst Nicholas Branch retrospectively researching the secret history of the event internally for the CIA. Branch’s tracing of Oswald in the “endless fact-rubble of the investigations” (LB, 300) into the President’s death, into Oswald’s death, and into all the suspected players in both, further emphasizes Oswald’s anonymity within the evidence, which includes but is not nearly limited to the plotters’ trails:

Oswald’s eyes are gray, they are blue, they are brown. He is five feet nine, five feet ten, five feet eleven. He is right-handed, he is left-handed. He drives a car, he does not. He is a crack shot and a dud. Branch has support for all these propositions in eyewitness testimony and commission exhibits.

Oswald even looks like different people from one photograph to the next. He is solid, frail, thin-lipped, broad-featured, extroverted, shy and bank-clerkish, all, with the columned neck of a fullback. He looks like everybody. In two photos taken in the military he is a grim killer and a baby-face hero. In another photo he sits in profile with a group of fellow Marines on a rattan mat under palm trees. Four or five men face the camera. They all look like Oswald. Branch thinks they look more like Oswald than the figure in profile, officially identified as him. (LB, 300)

The manifold “propositions” of Oswald that confront Branch have more to do with how the apparatus of photographing, documenting and evidencing the intricacies of an event distort an individual identity than they do with a subject whose face has the aesthetic quality of blurring with those of other men, or with a certain idea of what “everybody” looks like. The “multiple Oswald” who “reappears” (LB, 300) to Branch in testimonies and exhibits, the amorphous figure of “Lee Harvey Oswald” that amasses around DeLillo’s Lee in the course

of the novel, puts the latter character across the borderline into the world of actively vying possibilities, the world in which the event of Kennedy's death is visible as the event that causes Branch to question "our ability... to see things as they are, to recall them clearly, be able to say what happened" (LB, 300-301). This "gauze" effect, the smeared, anonymised perception produced by trying to see the assassination "makes it real"; it makes the assassination real and it makes DeLillo's Lee real by registering the mediations within which they appear. If DeLillo "slips into the skin"¹⁸⁷ of Oswald to clear a possible way beneath these mediations, the novel only "makes reality come true" (U, 177) by reconstructing his gauzy, blurred visibility in the world. This visibility that obscures the reality of a taken point in time - to "be able to say what happened" in Kennedy's assassination - *is* the reality of the different world, in which the conditions of self-seeing are insecure; it is not that fixed things we see change every time we look back at them, but that the things we see are smeared and multiple - they do not present a fixed picture.

As a novel about President Kennedy's murder, *Libra* is thus not the demystification of an event clouded by secret networks and public hysteria, but the reconstruction of the reality of its distortions upon the popular imagination. Though a narrative for how the assassination came to take place is told, it appears through a gauze of possible fictionality emphasised by the acknowledgement that DeLillo's version of Oswald fits a design such as Win Everett's, and by the wealth of evidence within which Nicholas Branch sees

¹⁸⁷ D. DeLillo, "The Power of History", 7 September 1997.

explanations contradicted and multiple Oswalds. These narrative layers register a fictionality that is not limited to the novel but extends into our perception of Oswald in the world. The design of “Lee”, also known as “Ozzie”, “Leon” and “Hidell”, as a lonely, desperate young man desiring a “clear sense of role” in the world is, whatever his level of autonomy in the assassination plot, incredibly likely. The gauze of fictionality in *Libra* is not to protect a single theory from its possible factual errors, but as with Everett’s “strip of scenic gauze” placed over his gunman figure, makes DeLillo’s version of Oswald real. What is “real” is the paradigm of a “loneliness that beats with violent desire”; this paradigm is part of the reality of the event, which will not appear as a set of clarified actions at a taken point in time separate to its distortions. DeLillo’s manner of unlocking the “vast and uniform Death” he describes history fashioning in “The Power of History” is perceptible here. In unlocking the assassination’s history, he does not contradict the paradigm of Lee Harvey Oswald - whose popular acceptance as the lone gunman, one might summarise, is mingled with suspicions of the government, the CIA and of secrets and corruption about which *we do not know*.¹⁸⁸ Instead, *Libra* reconstructs the possibilities *within* this paradigm; DeLillo *sees more* of history by seeing deeper into the world’s possibilities, presenting a plausible narrative in an unfixed manner.

In other words, as a writing of history *Libra* is a text that describes the possibility that *this* is how *it* is. The stylistic effect of possibility we have noted in DeLillo’s

¹⁸⁸ A Gallup public opinion poll in conducted in 2013 ahead of the fiftieth anniversary of Kennedy’s assassination showed that a “clear majority of Americans (61%) still believe others besides Lee Harvey Oswald were involved.” See Art Swift, “Majority in U.S. Still Believe JFK Killed in a Conspiracy”, 15 November 2013 < <http://www.gallup.com/poll/165893/majority-believe-jfk-killed-conspiracy.aspx> > [accessed 30 May 2014].

prose constructs the smeared world in which his version of Lee appears. In this novel, the effect is achieved by a style of sentence that reciprocates the anonymising multiplications of Lee's character, both deepening his appearance and removing it from a specific point in time. A section following a scene in which he fights with Marina, his Russian wife, describes the two of them in bed from her perspective. She thinks about their routine life, about events that happen regularly and her impressions of him:

She thought of walking the aisles of Montgomery Ward. She went in out of the heat to piped-in music and little ringing bells... She stood in an area with TVs stacked everywhere. She watched TV half the morning, five different programs side by side. She walked the aisles. It was cool and peaceful. Nobody talked to you unless you asked a question or made a purchase and she didn't have the means of doing either.

She saw him from a distance even when he was hitting her. He was never fully there... He is someone you see from a distance... They were brought together by fate but she wasn't sure who he really was. Sharing the bathroom she wasn't sure. Making love she didn't know who he was. (LB, 241-242)

Marina's life with Lee is described in its quotidian repetitions: going to the shopping mall where "[s]he watched TV half the morning" regularly; seeing him "from a distance" day in and day out - "He was never fully there." Interspersed with these lines is Marina's described awareness that Lee is thinking about making love to her there and then in their bed:

She knew he was trying to sense if she was awake. He was on the verge of saying something or leaning over to touch. He would probably touch, rise on an elbow and touch her on the hip with his hand curled soft. (LB, 241)

Though this last line pertains to the immediate scene, her knowledge that he "would probably touch" her "on the hip with his hand curled soft" communicates that the immediate scene is itself another repetition of a routine event in their domestic life; like her watching TV in the mall aisles, like her seeing him at a

distance when he hits her, there is the two of them in bed together, her thinking about their life and him making up his mind to touch her. This blurring of immediate action with a paradigm is further stylistically effected by the passage's final sentence, which returns to the subject of Lee touching Marina after the interruption of her other, interspersing thoughts:

When she learned English he would be less distant. It was absolutely true.

We buy groceries on Tuesday.

They made love, when they did, in a tender way, full of honest forgiving. (LB, 242)

On account of the break between Marina's anticipation of Lee touching her and this final line, and the implicit mingling of immediate action with routine events earlier in the passage, the temporal referent of "when they did" is unclear: does it refer to *when* on that particular night described in the passage's immediate action, or *when* in their routine life they made love? If the latter, mightn't this imply they didn't make love very often? But if the former, doesn't this imply they made love a lot, if this is a night like any other? The line's irreducible temporal gesture blurs a particular instance with a paradigm; it is uncertain whether Lee and Marina make love in the passage's immediate action, but that action describes the couple's lives in a larger sense, where the threshold of sex is part of a relationship that also negotiates his rough treatment of her, her intoxication with American consumerism, and his distance and alienation. The sex happens without happening in the passage as an inevitable extension in their routine, which does not mean "they did that night" but "when they did", in a passage that is both *just one scene* and more than one.

DeLillo thus deepens the world in *Libra* with a style of sentence that narratively instantiates more than one occasion, multiplying Lee's appearance as a reciprocation of the "gauze" effect of his character's construction within the assassination plot. This style of sentence also reciprocates the effect of Lee's anonymity in the novel. The lines "Ferrie looked out the window. On the wall next to him was a picture of Jesus with eyes that track the person passing by" (LB, 316) track Lee's emergence from Ferrie's bathroom into the living room; he moves across the scene otherwise unmentioned. Like the sex in the earlier passage, Lee's walking past the picture happens without happening; this example deepens his appearance in the world through the impression of his anonymity crossing the room as any "person passing by" does. Together, these examples demonstrate how the sentence style in *Libra* creates the blurred, anonymised visibility in the novel discussed above, through instantiations of events that are layered with the impression of both multiple occasions and multiple actors.

DeLillo's emphatic phrase in his later writing "*this* is how *it* is" and his right-feeling names for things in "Midnight in Dostoevsky" are both comparable to this sentence style in *Libra* that blurs paradigms with single instances. The line from "Baader-Meinhof" discussed earlier concludes, "and this is how it felt to her, that she was sitting as a person does in a mortuary chapel, keeping watch over the body of a relative or a friend" (AE, 105). The immediacy of the instantiation that "*this*," *here*, is how being *there*, alive at that moment with the Gerhard Richter paintings around her, felt, is eventually furnished by a referent for the "this":

“sitting as a person does in a mortuary chapel, keeping watch over the body of a relative or a friend” is how being alive in the gallery at that moment felt. In this sentence, DeLillo’s “*this*” without referent at the border of speaking about the world also finally refers to feeling oneself doing something “as a person does,” making the woman an anonymous actor within a paradigm of behaviour. The names that Robby and Todd assert in “Midnight in Dostoevsky”, meanwhile, are intended to sound their impressions of things in the world. “Isabel” would not only be the name of the middle-aged woman transporting her shopping up the steps to her house in a baby stroller, but would sound an impression of her entire life that the young men get when seeing her. The depth of a name’s potential reach in “Midnight in Dostoevsky” thus compares with the depth of routine experience communicated in the line of *Libra* “They made love, when they did, in a tender way, full of honest forgiving”; in both works language reaches beyond a particular instance to sound a way of life.

The relation of the effect of possibility in DeLillo’s later writing to the blurring of paradigms with particular instances in *Libra* makes clear that his linguistic reciprocation of possibility in the world is not the simple presentation of a pure, unfettered possibility in language, where any word might potentially mean any thing in the world. Both the emphatic phrase “*this* is how *it* is” and the names for things in “Midnight in Dostoevsky” instantiate *paradigms* of human action and ways of life that are nevertheless posited, sounded at the border of the world. Just as *Libra* reconstructs the possibilities *within* the popular paradigm of Lee Harvey Oswald, DeLillo’s later prose amalgamates the potential *confines* of a

paradigm with the *potential* within a paradigm. The *different world*, the common world ripped open by nuclear possibility, is thus reciprocated by an effect of possibility sounded within the instantiation of paradigms; the space within a paradigm for error, aberration, for things *turning out differently*, is the Blanchotian “unmediated” space “where everything is already given, ahead of time, where all is possible”¹⁸⁹ in the world.

A perspective on unmediated space within the paradigms in DeLillo’s writing - space for the “moment of the first simplicity”¹⁹⁰ of being alive in the world - helps address in this chapter’s final section those popular cultural ideas of DeLillo as a seer whose work has somehow predicted the future and speaks with mystic authority on the word “history.” Eric Packer, the young multi-billionaire asset manager protagonist of *Cosmopolis*, is described as a “seer” (C, 46); his seeing extends through his capacity to read and predict shifts in currency markets to an authority on obsolescence and the world’s future direction, an authority with which he tells the man who wants to assassinate him, “The crime you want to commit is cheap imitation... It has no history” (C, 193). The final section of this chapter will consider how the elision of Eric’s seeing with the world in *Cosmopolis* is premised not in his getting people and the world right but in his penetration into the unmediated space within the world in which he lives. The sight of possibility in *Cosmopolis* produces, I will argue, a new form of self-seeing that extends the reification of the different world’s multiple, smeared appearance we have seen in *Libra*; characters in *Cosmopolis* make visible the

¹⁸⁹ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.48, p.45.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.45.

very world in which they appear, establishing a reciprocity between being and seeing that locates the self in the world “ahead of time,” in Blanchot’s phrase, “where all is possible.”

7. Self-Seeing In the Different World II: *Cosmopolis*

‘Oh yes,’ [my mother] would say as I mentioned this or that unusual sensation. ‘Yes, I know all that,’ and with a somewhat eerie ingenuousness she would discuss such things as double sight, and little raps in the woodwork of tripod tables, and premonitions, and the feeling of *déjà vu*... Her intense and pure religiousness took the form of her having equal faith in the existence of another world and in the impossibility of comprehending it in terms of earthly life. All one could do was to glimpse, amid the haze and the chimeras, something real ahead, just as persons endowed with an unusual persistence of diurnal cerebration are able to perceive in their deepest sleep, somewhere beyond the throes of an entangled and inept nightmare, the ordered reality of the waking hour.¹⁹¹

Vladimir Nabokov’s optical hallucinations, which he mostly had before sleeping, read rather like instances of DeLillian seeing. His soothing photisms, “projected as it were, upon the inside of the eyelid - gray figures walking between beehives, or small black parrots gradually vanishing among mountain snows,”¹⁹² recall the white and desert environments of *End Zone* and “Midnight in Dostoevsky” at the border of the world; settings wrapped in “the robes of [St. Serapion’s] whiteness which is like midnight in Dostoevsky.”¹⁹³ Nabokov’s grotesque visions, meanwhile, in which he was “pestered by roguish profiles, by

¹⁹¹ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p.21.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁹³ This line is from Frank O’Hara’s poem “Meditations in an Emergency”. DeLillo takes the title of his story from this poem; furthermore, in the story Robby’s friend Jenna refers to a poem with the phrase “Like midnight in Dostoevsky” (AE, 134). See Frank O’Hara, *Selected Poems*, ed. Donald Allen (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2005), p.88.

some coarse-featured and florid dwarf with a swelling nostril or ear,”¹⁹⁴ compare with Eric Packer’s distorted images of his assistants in *Cosmopolis*. Watching Michael Chin, his currency analyst, “biting the dead skin at the side of his thumbnail,” Eric perceives “something awful and atavistic in the scene, Chin unborn, curled in a membranous sac, a scary little geek-headed humanoid, sucking his scalloped hands” (C, 36). Torval, his “bald and no-necked” chief of security, is “a man whose head seemed removable for maintenance” (C, 11). Like a “swelling nostril or ear”, Chin’s gnawing on his thumbnail and Torval’s invisible neck are amplified into grotesque visions.

In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov relates his hallucinations, what he calls “leakings and drafts” through the “[less than] solid walls”¹⁹⁵ of his consciousness, to his “colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life.”¹⁹⁶ This “darkness on both sides” is the world before and after his life (or the abysses of not being alive in the world), between which “common sense tells us... our existence is but a brief crack of light.”¹⁹⁷ As the quotation at the top of this section describes, for Nabokov’s mother the distortions of reality in hallucinations indicated “something real ahead”, another world perceptible but incomprehensible in illogical optical events; personal glimmers in a world beyond her death. This final section will explore Eric’s visions in *Cosmopolis* beyond the world in which he lives. His distorted impressions of his assistants are part of his deep seeing

¹⁹⁴ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p.17.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p.18.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p.6.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p.5.

that pierces beyond the common world taken at a fixed point in time; the different world appears as "something real ahead" visible in distortions as well as half-seen figures. DeLillo elides Eric's sight with the different world in this novel, so that there is no distinction between his seeing the different world and his seeing himself in it. As I will show, DeLillo produces a new form of self-seeing in this novel in which the world appears in character's opening to it.

Eric Packer is emphatically visible in *Cosmopolis*. A live feed videostreams his image "from the car, the plane, the office and selected sites in his apartment," first "worldwide", then "on a closed circuit" given security issues (C, 15); he has a medical check-up once a day. Alongside these accents on his filmic and anatomical visibility to others, he is described as "the seer" (C, 46), a gifted reader of currency markets who perceives the "cross-harmonies between nature and data... The way signals from a pulsar in deepest space follow classical number sequences, which in turn can describe the fluctuations of a given stock or currency... How market cycles can be interchangeable with the time cycles of grasshopper breeding, wheat harvesting" (C, 200). Eric's seeing produces the grotesque impressions of his assistants. The rogue inhuman bodies of Chin in an artificial womb and Torval with a detachable head present themselves as penetrative pictures of their subjects, productions of Eric's deep seeing, like his knowledge of Shiner, his chief of technology, whose "bone marrow [he'd know] in a beaker" (C, 11-12). The irony of his ability to see right into these characters is that they appear before him to advise him on the yen, the currency that is improbably continuing to rise in value against Eric's

predictions, losing him and his investors enormous amounts of money. Jane Melman, his chief of finance, out running in Manhattan on her day off and called to Eric's limo, tells him, "You should do the seeing. You're the seer" (C, 46). DeLillo's presentation of the uselessness of Eric's assistants to him in images of grotesque physicality (in Melman's case, she drops into the limo's jump seat "with the kind of grim deliverance that marks a deadweight drop to the toilet" (C, 39)) recalls the philosopher Giorgio Agamben's treatment of the unhelpful assistants in Kafka's novels, whom he compares to a little hunchback from Walter Benjamin's childhood that Benjamin described as a "tenant of the distorted life."¹⁹⁸ Through a comparison with Ibn al-'Arabi's *The Meccan Revelations*, Agamben sees such figures as paradisiacal glimmers that "present [themselves] in order to lay claim to the aspect of oblivion that resides in every thing"¹⁹⁹; useless in adult life, like brilliant but idle childhood friends who "must be left behind in the end,"²⁰⁰ their distorted appearances are premonitions of the world at the end of time. In *Cosmopolis* it is Eric who lays claim to the aspect of oblivion that resides in each of his assistants, finding and expanding the grotesque detail that penetrates each of them. Jane Melman's response to Eric's laying claim to the oblivion inside of her particularly suggests the authenticity of his seeing. Bent over in his limo as the doctor examines his prostate, face to face with Melman, he tells her:

Do you know what I see when I look at you? I see a woman who wants to live shamelessly in her body. Tell me this is not the truth. You want to follow your body into idleness and fleshiness. That's why you have to run, to escape the drift of your basic nature... What do I see? Something lazy, sexy and insatiable... This is the woman you are inside the life. (C, 49)

¹⁹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), p.33.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p.30.

Melman responds to Eric's claim on the oblivion inside of her; "I'm comfortable with that," she says, "...How come we've never spent this kind of time together?" (C, 49-50). The sexual tension between the couple mounts until both climax, without having touched each other. Leaving the limo, she calls herself "a woman who would still be married to her husbands if they had looked at her the way you have looked at me here today" (C, 54).

The style of narration in *Cosmopolis* elides it with Eric's emphatic visibility, and with his deep seeing. On account of the narration visibility and seeing are not separate events in the novel: that Eric sees and that he is seen are co-terminous. For example, the novel's opening line reads, "Sleep failed him more often now, not once or twice a week but four times, five" (C, 5). The second sentence asks, "What did he do when this happened?" (C, 5), enlisting the reader's speculation like a children's picture book. The proceeding narration describes what Eric tried for his insomnia, as well as what he didn't or couldn't try, before stating, "There was no answer to the question... Every act he performed was self-haunted and synthetic. The palest thought carried an anxious shadow. What did he do?" (C, 6). The effect of the question's second instance is different. The entreatment to a young reader recurs, but the preceding narration's details of successive failed remedies, delving into the pattern of his thoughts and his impressions of those thoughts, also creates the effect that Eric is asking himself the question, "What did he do?", as if the text were an interior monologue by which he sees his predicament. The narration thus sticks to him, making indivisible the question of whether he is seeing or

being seen from outside. This effect of being both inside and outside Eric produced by this stylistic dovetailing of sight and visibility in the novel's language is described in an image of self-seeing near the end of the novel, when Eric is sat with Richard Sheets, his assassin: "He closed his eyes again, briefly. He could feel himself contained in the dark but also just beyond it, on the lighted outer surface, the other side, belonged to both, feeling both, being himself and seeing himself" (C, 201).

Cosmopolis' language also has the effect of eliding Eric, both seer and seen, with the world. "He did not consult an analyst in a tall leather chair," the narration continues, "Freud is finished, Einstein's next. He was reading the Special Theory tonight, in English and German..." (C, 6). The pun on "finished" here combines Eric's having finished reading Freud with the statement that the man's theories are "finished", of no use to him. His similar discarding of the term "automated teller machines" as "anti-futuristic, so cumbrous and mechanical that even the acronym seemed dated" (C, 54) and the word "skyscraper" as "anachronistic...[,] belong[ing] to the olden soul of awe, to the arrowed towers that were a narrative long before he was born" (C, 9) position Eric as a seer of the world's future direction. His seeing devours knowledge, as in his walking through his apartment after reading Einstein, "absorbing what was there, deeply seeing, retaining every fleck of energy in rays and waves" (C, 8), the forms he has been learning about. He is not a gifted cultural journalist with his finger on the pulse of the contemporary, but a ruthless seeker of what is not "synthetic", as he calls his attempts to remedy his insomnia; not "posthumous" (C, 209), but

authentic. It is this deep sense of an authentic world picture that produces his grotesque visions of his assistants, impressions of reality beneath the fixed common world's "rehearsed and layered and cosmetic look" (U, 157) discussed earlier; Chin as a humanoid fetus and Torval's removable head disclose, like the dead weight of Melman's body in which secretly she would love to live shamelessly, who these beings really are. His stripping away of outmoded terms, frameworks, theories, cultural objects, elides him with the world as it really is; his sight is indivisible from the world itself, as epitomised in the line at the end of the novel's opening passage: "When he died he would not end. The world would end" (C, 6).

DeLillo thus constructs Eric Packer as a character authentically seeing the world whose depiction is an authentic vision in the world. There is something of the Gorgon to this authentic vision that is the reflection of someone seeing, but unlike Roth's father invisibly seeing his death in the shaving mirror, what Eric sees is visible to the reader through the stylistic construction of his seeing; on account of the stylistic effects traced above, his seeing and his visibility are co-terminous. Eric thus functions as a medium, a locus through which DeLillo's vision of the world runs. The character's position might resemble exactly that of the mystic that we have seen ascribed to DeLillo himself; it is as authentic seer and authentic vision, being and seeing, that Eric takes the authority to tell his assassin that his action has "no history." "You're not a violent man," he says, penetratively seeing Richard Sheets. "Violence is meant to be real, based on real motives, on forces in the world that what. That make us want to defend

ourselves or take aggressive action. The crime you want to commit is cheap imitation. It's a stale fantasy. People do it because other people do it. It's another syndrome, a thing you caught from others. It has no history" (C, 193). Eric predicts shifts in currency markets, he gets his assistants right, seeing inside their lives to who they really are, and he also sees what is real in the world and what is "cheap imitation" of things and actions that used to have meaning in the world. Like the acronym "ATM" and the word "skyscraper", the assassination act that is so important to Sheets - "there's no life for me unless I do this (C, 201)" - is in Eric's eyes obsolescent. However, it has been the purpose of this chapter to elucidate how DeLillo's manner of seeing character opens up possibility in the world, aside from the simplistic notion of a special self predicting, from one taken point in time, the reality at a future taken point. Eric is not an aggrandized reflection of the prophet DeLillo as described in *Esquire* magazine. As I will show, the fusion of being and seeing in the character of Eric in *Cosmopolis* elaborates the aesthetics of smeared, gauzy character in *Libra* to produce a mode of self-seeing that instantiates the different world in the novel. The different world's visibility in DeLillo is not contained within a didactic vision; rather, self-seeing opens up the world through instantiations of characters whose appearances, visions and assertions include their own possibility, or contingency, in an amorphous world of actively vying possibilities.

At the opening of *Underworld*, set in the different world where the pastoral setting of the baseball game and the nuclear technology of the atomic bomb

illuminate each other, the boy Cotter Martin jumping the barriers to see the game is a “half-seen figure” (U, 13). The sentence containing DeLillo’s emphatic phrase that I discussed earlier reads:

He is just a running boy, a half-seen figure from the streets, but the way running reveals some clue to being, the way a runner bares himself to consciousness, this is how the dark-skinned kid seems to open to the world, how the bloodrush of a dozen strides brings him into eloquence. (U, 13)

Running opens Cotter to the world in this sentence; his running contributes to his being “half-seen”, glimpsed out of the corner of one’s eye. He is a smeared appearance like Oswald in *Libra*, and he opens to the world by appearing smeared; unfixed; by not being still. Stood outside his limo on the street in Manhattan in *Cosmopolis* Eric registers similar smeared appearances:

People hurried past, the others of the street, endless anonymous, twenty-one lives per second, race-walking in their faces and pigments, sprays of fleetest being. They were here to make the point that you did not have to look at them. (C, 20-21)

Like Cotter and Oswald, the “others of the street” are smeared, “sprays of fleetest being” whose “faces and pigments” mingle in the crowd. Both Cotter, “just a running boy, a half-seen figure from the streets,” and the city multitudes, “endless anonymous, twenty-one lives per second,” echo the effect of Oswald’s anonymity: “he looks like everybody” (LB, 300). And just as Oswald’s smeary visibility that obscures the reality of a taken point in time reifies the different world in *Libra*, and Cotter’s glimpsed, unfixed appearance opens him to the world in *Underworld*, the crowd in *Cosmopolis* open the world for Eric. “[T]he point that you did not have to look at them” is that if you didn’t, they would still

be there. Eric makes the same point about the inessentiality of looking with reference to his chief of technology Shiner, who he “did not look at... anymore. He hadn’t looked in three years” (C, 11), and his driver Ibrahim Hamadou, who he “stopped and looked at... He’d never done this before” (C, 157). The reliable presence of the “endless” city crowds, and the ubiquitous presence of Eric’s assistants, emphasise the expense of looking. Yet when Eric does look at someone, he sees the different world; Chin the humanoid foetus sucking scalloped hands, Torval’s robot head, Melman luxuriating in folds of fleshiness - deep, real pictures of people that exemplify a paradigmatic form of seeing unfixed from the common world in which, at a taken point in time, these people are out running in a fit human body or typing with human hands. Like these distortions, the half-seen figures of the runner in *Underworld* and the city crowds in *Cosmopolis* open up the different world; they do so by appearing unfixed, smeared, irreducible to the reality of a taken point in time. These half-seen figures are paradigms too, “endless”, happening multiple times and anonymously, appearing “the way a runner” does or the way a city crowd does, so reliably that “you did not have to look at them.” In *Cosmopolis*, both glimpses and distortions are expensive, throwaway appearances in which the world of actively vying possibilities opens to Eric’s seeing; the different world is there, going on as well as everything else, while he crosses Manhattan in traffic that “speaks in quarter inches” (C, 11) to get a haircut. Instantiations of the paradigmatic blur of the Manhattan crowds and the paradigmatic pictures of his assistants as they really are resemble respectively the “haze” and “chimeras” in

Nabokov's mother's hallucinations; as in Nabokov, there is "something real" amid the smears and distortions: the different world.

In the examples above there is no difference between Cotter's "open[ing] to the world" in *Underworld* and the "endless anonymous" crowd opening the world in *Cosmopolis*. These half-seen figures open the world by opening up to it; they make visible the very world in which they appear. In the same manner, by seeing into his assistants Eric exposes the different world and exposes *them* to it; his deep seeing exposes them to the reality of who they are in the world. Thus in DeLillo who I am in the world *is* the world; it makes the world visible. "This is the woman you are inside the life," Eric tells Melman, in a version of the DeLillian emphatic phrase "*This* is what *it* is"; in DeLillo's aesthetics of character, *this* - as in *this* appearance - is what *the world* is.

The difference between the distortions in Philip Roth's *The Anatomy Lesson* and the distortions in DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* is perceptible here. Roth's distortions mediate where his character Zuckerman *is* through where he can no longer be; images such as an adult Zuckerman lapping at a spot of breast milk on a baby book found in his recently deceased mother's apartment amplify his distance from the past. The exact point of character's transformative connection with the world, where "real work" (F, 17) in the world becomes possible for the self, is an *invisible* reality in Roth. DeLillo's distortions, by contrast, visibly reify characters *as they really are* in the world, unmediated by the Coetzee-ian

“word-mirror”²⁰¹ where words will say what they mean so that everyone might appear on the fictive glass in the same way in one common, quasi-eternal world. To borrow the phrase from Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*, “what is really going on”²⁰² in the appearance of a female runner swollen into folds of fleshiness by Eric’s seeing is visible in the common world’s distortion. This comparison of DeLillo and Roth recalls another of Nabokov’s hallucinations:

One day, after a long illness, as I lay in bed still very weak, I found myself basking in an unusual euphoria of lightness and repose. I knew my mother had gone to buy me the daily present that made those convalescences so delightful. What it would be this time I could not guess, but through the crystal of my strangely translucent state I vividly visualized her driving away down Morskaya Street toward Nevski Avenue. I distinguished the light sleigh drawn by a chestnut courser...

Still watching the sleigh, I saw it stop at Treumann’s (writing implements, bronze baubles, playing cards). Presently, my mother came out of this shop followed by the footman. He carried her purchase, which looked to me like a pencil. I was astonished that she did not carry so small an object herself...

A few minutes later, she entered my room. In her arms she held a big parcel. It had been, in my vision, greatly reduced in size - perhaps, because I subliminally corrected what logic warned me might still be the dreaded remnants of delirium’s dilating world. Now the object proved to be a giant polygonal Faber pencil, four feet long and correspondingly thick. It had been hanging as a showpiece in the shop’s window, and she presumed I had coveted it, as I coveted all things that were not quite purchasable.²⁰³

Perceiving the giant pencil in his vision as a remnant of the dilated, distorted vision of fever, Nabokov corrects it to a common size only to discover his mother has in fact bought him a giant pencil. In *The Anatomy Lesson* there is a comparable procedure of locating reality through the correction of a seemingly unreal distortion; the invisible reality of where Zuckerman is in the world is at a distance from the fictive glass, mediated through the distorted image of where he can no longer be. In *Cosmopolis* meanwhile the illogical, dilated appearance

²⁰¹ J.M. Coetzee, p.19.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p.19-20.

on the glass is itself real, just as it turns out to be in Nabokov's vision; beyond the corrective vision of the common world, the distortion pictures the different world.

What lingers from Roth's character-writing in *Cosmopolis* is the effect of putting character in transformative connection with the world. Despite the seemingly didactic tenor of Eric's seeing, his visions that pinpoint the mores, the abandon - the aspect of oblivion - "inside the life" (C, 49) of each of his assistants open these people to a world of actively vying possibilities; it is by seeing and responding to the "lazy, sexy and insatiable" (C, 49) fleshiness *inside* Melman that Eric opens up a deep connection between the two of them; that is, opens up possibilities in the world for who she deeply and really is, in contrast to her running that she does to "escape the drift of [her] basic nature" (C, 49). Like Roth's "real work" in the world that "must be done, and by no-one but you" (F, 17), DeLillian self-seeing is thus not the unbounded freedom to imagine myself however I wish but confronts the reality of a self's deep and real wants and limits. In DeLillo, and in *Cosmopolis* specifically, this is a lack of freedom to *appear* however I wish, since Eric's seeing finds the self out; "Sex finds us out. Sex sees through us," he tells Melman, "That's why it's so shattering. It strips us of appearances" (C, 50), meaning the appearances we would like to have, as opposed to the appearances that we are. Nevertheless, in Eric's visions the instantiated visibility of a self's delimited character - who I really am - in an amorphous world is the Blanchotian "moment of the first simplicity, where

everything is given, ahead of time,”²⁰⁴ where all becomes possible for a self that feels itself recognised, alive and able to transform in the world. The self’s delimitations are put in connection with the world so that they aren’t limits forever.

Like DeLillo’s emphatic phrase “*This is how it is*” and the names for things in “Midnight in Dostoevsky”, the effect of possibility in Eric’s visions of his assistants derives from the moment of their instantiation. In “Midnight in Dostoevsky” Robby does not say “Isabel” is who the woman transporting her shopping up the steps to her house in a baby stroller is from *outside* the world, but within a game of reconstructing the world that registers all its “scattered rhythms of circumstance and occurrence” (AE, 122) through the *differences* in his and Todd’s impressions; their game happens *in* the different world, and any agreement between the two of them on a fact, such as how many boxcars on a passing freight train, “unsettled us, it made the world flat” (AE, 120), as if they were watching the world from outside. Eric’s visions similarly happen *in* the world. As explored above, the stylistic elision in *Cosmopolis* of his sight and his visibility means that he is “being himself and seeing himself” (C, 201) simultaneously; he is *already* in the world that he sees. In this novel Blanchot’s possibility in being, “where everything is given, ahead of time,” is located in *already* being in the world that I see and in which I appear. When Eric sees Melman deeply “follow[ing her] body into idleness and fleshiness” and tells her, “This is the woman you are inside the life” (C, 49), Melman is not an object that

²⁰⁴ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.45.

he sees from an exterior position, but someone he is in a relationship with - in *the world* with - at the moment of his vision's instantiation. When he says of her gripping her water bottle, "It's sexual tension," and she responds, "It's everyday nervousness in a life," and he counters, "It's sexual tension" (C, 48-49), it's not simply that her gripping her bottle definitely *is* a priori one thing and he gets it right or wrong; his saying "It's sexual tension" happens between him and her in the world, touching on what he feels might already be there between them and amplifying it. Thus Eric is *in* the different world that his visions of his assistants open up, there *with* them. Just as in the emphatic phrase in "Baader-Meinhof" "*this* is how *it* felt to her", the instantiation *here* of a "*this*" without referent makes "how it felt to her" mean not "how a character felt seated on a bench looking at some Gerhard Richter paintings" but instead "how being alive at that moment with the paintings set around her felt", Eric's emphatic visions of his assistants instantiate the "moment of the first simplicity" of his being alive with them in the amorphous world of the present; *he* is opened up to the different world by his penetrative seeing into his assistants. Insofar as the novel's stylistic fusion of being and seeing means that the narration is indivisibly inside and outside Eric throughout, in *Cosmopolis* DeLillo constructs a self-seeing prose in which the inside of the protagonist's life opens out at every moment in transformative connection with the world's actively vying possibilities. Eric's deceptively plain self-seeing thoughts "What did he do?" (C, 6) and "He didn't know what he wanted. Then he knew. He wanted to get a haircut" (C, 7) *happen* in the world;

they *are* the different world unrolling in the transforming present with the “all-encompassing murmur,” the “planetary song,”²⁰⁵ of Blanchot’s last man.²⁰⁶

DeLillo’s reputation as a prophet might be tempered through an understanding of the self’s opening to the world in *Cosmopolis*. When Eric tells Melman, “It’s sexual tension,” he touches on a possibility, and in seeing his assistants he is open to the possibility that who the person in front of him deeply, really and visibly is is not restricted to an appearance in the common world. The same approach to possibility pertains to his assertions of the obsolescence of words, terms and objects. He is not abstractly *right* that “skyscraper” sounds anachronistic and “ATM” anti-futuristic; these are his *impressions* of the words, and the quasi-didactic tone of the narration of his thoughts - “It was anti-futuristic, so cumbrous and mechanical that even the acronym seemed dated” (C, 54, my emphasis) - marks his ambition to see the world in the present as it really is, rather than a mystic authority. The power - that is, the *possibility* - of his assertions derives from their instantiation; he thinks and says these things *in the world*, and this changes the world. The same applies to his decision that Sheets’ assassination act “has no history” (C, 193). In DeLillo “history” is not something that I simply place myself in successfully or otherwise; as we have seen in *Libra*, Lee is constructed as a character who while feeling himself disconnected from history has *already* obviously entered it, proving the ready-made existence of Win Everett’s model of a Communist-leaning, lonely and

²⁰⁵ M. Blanchot, *The Last Man*, p.4.

²⁰⁶ In this last line I have in mind the phrase from the opening of DeLillo’s novel *The Body Artist*, “The world happens, unrolling into moments...” See Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist* (London: Picador, 2001), p.7.

violent gunman, “a fiction living prematurely in the world” (LB, 179). When Eric tells Sheets, “Violence is meant to be real” (C, 193), he thinks of his driver Ibrahim Hamadou with his collapsed eye, “tortured for politics or religion or clan hatreds, a victim of rooted violence driven by the spirits of his enemies’ forebears” (C, 194); this is Eric’s impression of what real violence in the world is. Yet as DeLillo explored in *Libra* and as he has further commented in his essay “The American Absurd”, the “lonely and rootless” violence of the Kennedy assassination did not *derealise* the world but “shaded into... a condition of estrangement and helplessness, an undependable reality. We felt the shock of unmeaning.”²⁰⁷ DeLillo’s description of the “shadings” of an “undependable reality” here refers to the smeared, gauzy visibility of the different world that he reconstructed in *Libra* through the distortions of the character Lee, a world in which our capacity to “see things as they are, to recall them clearly, be able to say what happened” (LB, 301), is broken. In *Cosmopolis*, trying to see “something real ahead” amid the different world’s shades, Eric dismisses Sheets’ Oswald-esque action and nostalgically imagines the “rooted” violence of “clan hatreds” evoking ancestry, bloodlines and primitive “spirits”, even as he dreams of “transcending his body mass, the soft tissue over the bones, the muscle and fat... to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in whirl” (C, 206). Yet as in his visions of his assistants, this is Eric’s impression *in* the world; he is *already* in the world with Sheets, pursuing an authenticity of place and purpose as intensely as his assassin, who feels “pervious to visible light” and for whom there is “no life” unless he kills Eric (C, 195, 201). Neither

²⁰⁷ Don DeLillo, ‘The American Absurd’, February 2004.

character has fixed control of their place and meaning in the amorphous world that they are *already* in, since their appearances open up the world in the novel; neither character has authority over DeLillian history.

The notion that DeLillo the writer *predicts* history is in itself nothing but a careless cultural myth. As *Cosmopolis* makes apparent, the sensation that his fiction is somehow in the world *ahead of time* is produced by a literary self-seeing that instantiates the self's *already* being in the world, and that thus reconstructs through character's visibility a world that includes the nuclear possibility of its becoming different from itself; a world in which the capacity to "see things as they are" produces distortions of the common world. From the gauze of multiple Oswalds in *Libra* to Eric's *already* being and seeing in *Cosmopolis*, the depth and reality of DeLillian self-seeing produces the reciprocation on his fiction's glass of the world "where everything is given, ahead of time, where all is possible"; Blanchot's unmediated present moment of being alive in the world that yields the visible reality of our world-at-large smeared with unmeaning.

Conclusion

1. Seeing Through Writing As a Way of Being In the World

“One day we’ll wake up and one thing will have changed and that one thing will be everything and after that our decline will be inexorable. One day we’ll wake up on the wrong side of the world. Or we already have.”²⁰⁸ In Sarah Nicole Prickett’s prediction of the human realisation that it is the end of the world, “one thing” will change and the end of the world will suddenly appear irrevocable; we will realise, too late, what we’ve done. As things are, the Earth’s alteration is happening quasi-invisibly despite the world’s unprecedented surveillance; forms of technological visibility perpetuate the self’s desires that result in practices of consumption with which we have “torched”²⁰⁹ the planet, while simultaneously occluding the self’s visibility.

The technological advances and technological society of the past century have radically reduced our sense of the viability of the possibility of human being; the “tiny, fragile human body”²¹⁰ that Walter Benjamin described amid the gunfire and explosions of technological warfare in the First World War has been dismissed in favour of the technological ambition described in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* of “transcending... body mass... to live outside the given limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness saved from

²⁰⁸ Sarah Nicole Prickett, “Reasons Not To Kill Yourself Today, No. 19: Lars Von Trier’s Bizarro Optimism”, 15 November 2011.

²⁰⁹ Richard Powers, “The Seventh Event”, p.70.

²¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 3: 1935-1938*, p.144.

void... It would be the master thrust of cyber-capital, to extend the human experience toward infinity as a medium for corporate growth and investment, for the accumulation of profits and vigorous reinvestment” (C, 206-207). The corporate alignment of technology and the human experience - the production of a culture in which “we can curate what’s real everyday on our timeline or feed”²¹¹ - edits and filters the human body; real people look stark and unfinished, as in the “stunted humans” Eric Packer sees “in the shadow of the underwear gods that adorned the soaring billboards” (C, 83). For all I know, the translation of human consciousness into digital information may circumvent the need that our altering planet be inhabitable for human life; digitally rendered identities may live “outside the given limits” of human being and require fewer or different things of the planet. Yet what is certain is that this supposed “extension” of the human reduces the individual to a “pattern of life”²¹², a compilation of information that is seen and known within a technological aesthetics of transparency that negates a space for the darkness of a self inside the life that *can not* appear - that vulnerable depth of me that engages with you deeply, in the experience of being in the world. This depth of me *needs* our altering planet to be inhabitable for human life; it is inseparable from the world in which it *is*.

My thesis has traced through the manners of self-seeing in Paul Auster, Philip Roth and Don DeLillo a perception in contemporary American character-writing that the depths of the self are *already* in the real world. When Roth’s Neil

²¹¹ Childish Gambino <<http://iamdonald.com/deepweb>> [accessed 2 June 2014].

²¹² David S. Cloud, “CIA drones have broader list of targets”, 5 May 2010.

Klugman asks of his reflection at the end of *Goodbye, Columbus*, “What was it inside me that had turned pursuit and clutching into love, and then turned it inside out again?” (GC, 97), the self does not appear in the world. “I was only that substance,” Neil thinks, “those limbs, that face that I saw in front of me” (GC, 96), but his self-assurance of his physical reality doesn’t yield the perspective of being alive in the world described in Richard Powers’ “The Seventh Event”: “A whole reef of neural modules, all updating each other, changed by everything we look at, and little bits of self scraping off on everything we brush up against”²¹³; Neil sees his image as a “darkening of the glass” (GC, 97). My thesis considers how contemporary fiction that delves into the Modernist darkness of the self can open up and make visible the perception that every time I think and every time I look at something this *happens* in the world; that my self is contingent, “scraping off on everything” and transforming amongst everything else in a world of actively vying possibilities. In Roth this reality of being in an altering world remains invisible, but is disclosed through visions of a distance between where a character *is* and where he used to be that produces distortions on the fictive glass. In *Zuckerman Bound*, the terror, pleasure and absurdity in obscenity that Roth found in *Portnoy’s Complaint* derives from very real things that can’t be seen as such in the world; the reality that goes unseen and unchecked in *Portnoy* as Alex tries to rape a woman who looks like his mother is communicated in the amplified image of Zuckerman lapping at a spot of his mother’s dried breast milk on a book he finds after her

²¹³ R. Powers, p.70-71.

death. Roth's acceptance of reality as "one thing"²¹⁴ that "should have turned out differently" (F, 13) is retrospective; reflecting on the damage he apparently did to his relationship with his father by writing *Carnovsky*, Zuckerman "knew, he knew, he'd known it all along... He'd known when he was writing the book. But he'd written it anyway" (ZB, 287). As in Prickett's human realisation of the end of the world, Zuckerman realises too late what he has done - but then he wouldn't want to have done it differently anyway. In DeLillo, the reality of being in an altering world is visible. While for Roth's Neil Klugman "the outside of me gave up little information about the inside of me" (GC, 96-97), in DeLillo's later writing the "outside" of half-seen and distorted characters completely opens the inside of them to the world. In *Cosmopolis*, a grotesque detail of each of Eric's assistants' appearances opens up distorted visions of who they deeply and really are; their real appearances instantiate the visibility of the real, altering world beyond the "rehearsed and layered and cosmetic look" (U, 157) of the common world. While the self's invisibility in *Goodbye, Columbus* stems from Neil's inability to see and understand the connection between himself and his girlfriend, Eric's visions make a possible connection between himself and another person visible; by voicing his impression - as in his saying to Jane Melman "It's sexual tension" (C, 48) - Eric doesn't necessarily get the connection "right", but his saying "It's sexual tension" *already* happens between him and her in the world, touching on what he feels might already be there

²¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, p.130.

between them and amplifying it. Eric's visions instantiate him "ahead of time"²¹⁵ in a world of actively vying possibilities.

Through visions of distorted character, my thesis thus witnesses the steady reification of the darkness of the self. The Eliotian "hidden pathways of feeling and thought"²¹⁶ are real; like the darkness of outer space, they happen in the world. The self needs this world - that is, not the common world of appearance but the real world on an altering, *different* planet; it is only in this latter world that the self inside the life can be seen. It is reciprocally true, however, that the real world's appearance depends on the fictive appearance of the self; within the "cosmetic look" of contemporary visibilities outside the life, both the real world and the darkness of the self are occluded. It is a curious truth today that fictive seeing that "get[s] people wrong"²¹⁷, that registers that "the eye is not adequate" (CP, 381) and that has the world "appear behind a strip of scenic gauze" (LB, 147) makes the real world visible, while forms of technological visibility that create the effect of the world's transparency conceal the real world. Auster's self-seeing seeks this real world; Roth's self-seeing invisibly locates it; and DeLillo's self-seeing makes it visible. All three authors construct literature that, like Charles Reznikoff's poetry, sees in the "effort to create presence"; sees as a "way of being in the world" (CP, 376, 374).

²¹⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.45.

²¹⁶ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p.164.

²¹⁷ Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*, p.35.

2. Visible Vulnerability

It is apt that Prickett's description of the human perception of the end of the world registers an unfixed sensation of time: "One day we'll wake up on the wrong side of the world. Or we already have." In *Don DeLillo: The possibility of fiction*, Peter Boxall describes a "suspended non-time of posthistorical mourning"²¹⁸ in DeLillo's work after the advent of the millennium; a "kind of time that had no narrative quality,"²¹⁹ as DeLillo writes in *The Body Artist*. Boxall argues that in *The Body Artist* and *Cosmopolis* "a deficit of time is indistinguishable from a surplus. The voided emptiness of the moment is also its plenary fullness. If 'time is a thing that grows scarcer every day' (C, 69), then it is also a thing that grows more abundant."²²⁰

In my thesis, I have argued that this coincident deficit and surplus of time is an effect that stretches further back into DeLillo's oeuvre, to his getting inside the assassination of President Kennedy in *Libra*, opening it up as the event that distorted "our ability... to see things as they are, to recall them clearly, be able to say what happened" (LB, 300-301). Smeared, scattered impressions of the world in DeLillo yield the reality of a world made different from itself, first by nuclear power and now by human-made climate change. In this world that distorts "what happened" at any taken point in time, characters are instantiated

²¹⁸ Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The possibility of fiction*, p.217.

²¹⁹ Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist*, p.65.

²²⁰ P. Boxall, *Don DeLillo*, p.217.

in an “unrolling,”²²¹ transforming present within which they are connected to an abundance of actively vying possibilities.

If DeLillo’s later writing instantiates an unfixed time of abundant possibility, in Auster’s late writing time is only scarce. As described at the end of this thesis’ first chapter, Auster’s contemporary fiction sees the abrupt end of the world with an appearance of Prickett’s “one thing” that is “everything”²²² - this “one thing” being 9/11. Unable to inhabit the world-at-large in which “there is no future” (SP, 308), Auster’s characters now retreat into Boxall’s “suspended non-time,” what Miles Heller in *Sunset Park* calls “now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever” (SP, 308).

Both the Austerian scarcity of time and its DeLillian abundance are produced by porous constructions of character in which the self inside the life is exposed to the world. The self’s exposure is a late development in Auster’s fiction. His elastic concept of character depended on the fantasy of an “only person in the world”²²³ untouched by the world; this untouched character who sees “what is in front of him” as if it weren’t “also inside him” (CP, 125) figured the bare possibility of being in the world. This manner of self-seeing is arrested in *Man in the Dark* by the world’s penetrating the self. August Brill and his family watch the film of Titus’ execution in Iraq, keeping “our eyes open to the horror for his sake, to breathe him into us and hold him there - in us, that lonely, miserable

²²¹ D. DeLillo, *The Body Artist*, p.7.

²²² S.N. Prickett, 15 November 2011.

²²³ Paul Auster, *Winter Journal*, p.1.

death, in us.”²²⁴ The end of the world that Auster’s late fiction has seen in 9/11, the Iraq War and climate change exposes the self to “lonely, miserable death,” precluding his writing possibilities for the self in the world. By contrast, in DeLillo characters’ “open[ing] to the world” (U, 13) instantiates an abundance of possibilities for the self; DeLillo’s porous constructions of character make visible the nuclear world that is seen differently but is still going on.

The impossibility of writing character in Auster’s late fiction communicates the vulnerability of a self that is porous in the world - that, as in Powers’ definition, “scrapes off” on things and is penetrated by things. In *A Death in the Family* the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard remarks upon the difference between his and his father’s perspectives when he was an eight-year-old boy and his father was thirty-two:

While my days were jam-packed with meaning, when each step opened up a new opportunity, and when every opportunity filled me to the brim, in a way which is now actually incomprehensible, the meaning of his days was not concentrated in individual events... [H]e was... in a world he knew and was familiar with. It was not until I myself reached the same age that I understood there was indeed a price to pay for this. As your perspective of the world increases not only is the pain it inflicts on you less but also its meaning. Understanding the world requires you to keep a certain distance from it. Things that are too small to see with the naked eye, such as molecules and atoms, we magnify. Things that are too large, such as cloud formations, river deltas, constellations, we reduce. At length we bring it within the scope of our senses and stabilise it with a fixer. When it has been fixed we call it knowledge. Throughout our childhood and teenage years we strive to attain the correct distance from objects and phenomena. We read, we learn, we experience, we make adjustments. Then one day we reach the point where all the necessary distances have been set, all the necessary systems have been put in place. That is when time begins to pick up speed. It no longer meets any obstacles[.]²²⁵

²²⁴ Paul Auster, *Man in the Dark*, p.175.

²²⁵ Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family*, trans. Don Bartlett (London: Vintage, 2013), p.8-10.

This passage describes the individual's learning to fix the common world of appearance for himself or herself; an adult attains the "correct distance from objects and phenomena" that permits him or her to participate in a common understanding of the world. Time flows freely through this self in fixed position in the world; the self's experience "no longer meets any obstacles," no longer scrapes against or is penetrated by anything. The various distortions of character in Auster, Roth and DeLillo's fiction disrupt this corrective vision of the common world; the distortions are aimed at instantiating the Blanchotian "moment of the first simplicity, where everything is already given, ahead of time, where all is possible,"²²⁶ reconnecting the self to the experience of the world that Knausgaard describes having as a child, "when each step opened up a new opportunity, and when every opportunity filled me to the brim." The porous, vulnerable self in the world that is traced in my thesis bears comparison with this characterisation of childhood, and also with Nabokov's erotic description of a young girl in his novella *The Enchanter* as a "still delicate membrane, before it has had time to harden, become overgrown, lose the fragrance and the shimmer through which one penetrates to the throbbing star of... bliss[.]"²²⁷

In *Underworld* DeLillo describes a young girl filming someone out of the back window of her own family's car and happening to capture his murder by the Texas Highway Killer:

²²⁶ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.45.

²²⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Novellas: The Eye, The Enchanter, The Original of Laura*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov (London: Penguin, 2012), p.110.

She wandered into it. The girl got lost and wandered clear-eyed into horror. This is a children's story about straying too far from home. But it isn't the family car that serves as the instrument of the child's curiosity, her inclination to explore. It is the camera that puts her in the tale. (U, 157)

DeLillo writes that the "sputtering black-and-white tones" of the girl's videotape are "more real, truer-to-life than anything around you" and give the common world its comparatively "rehearsed and layered and cosmetic look" (U, 157).

The child is involved in the tape's effect of reality both insofar as her manner of filming has a "jostled sort of noneventness" (U, 156) different to a professional commercial production and because the viewer knows the child is "watching what you're watching, unprepared... [E]ven as you see [the murder victim] die you're thinking of the girl" (U, 158). And yet it is not only the "unprepared" child whose penetration is communicated when watching the tape. DeLillo describes the murder victim, the driver in the car behind the family car that the girl is in, as "bald up the middle of his head, a nice guy in his forties whose whole life seems open to the hand-held camera" (U, 156). Like the assistants in *Cosmopolis* opening to Eric's gaze, and like the name "Isabel" that sounds an impression of the middle-aged woman's entire life in "Midnight in Dostoevsky", the "sputtering black-and-white" video footage opens the inside of the driver to the world. In DeLillo's writing, adult and child characters alike are "delicate,"²²⁸ porous, their vulnerable appearance opening up the real world of altering conditions and possibilities.

The reciprocal visibility of a pervious self vulnerable to the real world and a real world vulnerable to human-made change witnessed in my thesis posits a

²²⁸ V. Nabokov, *Novellas*, p.110.

powerful case for the importance today that we make our vulnerability visible, regardless of the Knausgaardian reduction of pain that comes from fixing the world in its “correct” distance. The increased cultural visibility of the self’s vulnerability might have two positive outcomes: deeper and more real visibilities of the individual in the world, and a clearer perspective of the Earth’s alteration and the necessity of ensuring its being inhabitable for human life. The question posited in this thesis’ Introduction is how to appear vulnerable - how to make vulnerability inside the life appear - when technological visibilities are so inhospitable to its appearance. In the film *Pitch Perfect* the vulnerability of a self that can not appear in public is immediately negated by its “discovery”; Beca, having denied she can sing to her college’s glee club, is accosted while singing to herself in the shower. The structures and appearances of social media applications are similarly designed to negate the appearance of vulnerability. Deep personal expressions, particularly expressions of “negativity”, appear incongruous on these apps and are very often greeted with hysteria; in 2013 Donald Glover (the writer and rapper also known as Childish Gambino) posted an open letter on Instagram that included the statements “I’m afraid my parents won’t live long enough to see my kids”, “I’m afraid I hate who I really am” and “I’m scared people will find out what I masturbate to”²²⁹, and it was interpreted in the media as a “cry for help.”²³⁰ Glover’s letter is an example of a DeLillian

²²⁹ Childish Gambino, ‘Open Letter on Instagram’, *Rap Genius* <<http://news.rapgenius.com/Childish-gambino-open-letter-on-instagram-annotated>> [accessed 4 June 2014].

²³⁰ *The Huffington Post* described Childish Gambino’s open letter as “troubling” and a “cry for help”, and asked, “Should we be worried?” *Medical Daily* felt compelled to clarify that the letter displayed “suicide warning signs.” See “Donald Glover Explains Those Worrisome Instagram Photos, Says He’s Happy He Vented”, *The Huffington Post*, 18 October 2013 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/18/donald-glover-explains-instagram-photos_n_4122831.html> [accessed 5 June 2014], “Donald Glover Posts Troubling Instagram

distortion of a popular form of visibility; like DeLillo in *Libra*, Glover locates space within a paradigm for the “first simplicity” of being alive in the world.

Such aesthetic civil disobedience is indicative of ways in which contemporary fiction might now respond to the pressure of the real by distorting the common world, smearing the “pattern[s] of life”²³¹ to which contemporary surveillance technologies reduce the individual. The fictive rendering of vulnerable characters “scraping off” on things and penetrated by the world produces appearances of the individual that are “different” to what a video surveillance system “usually sees.”²³² In order to artificially detect “abnormal”²³³ behaviour, a surveillance system such as “AISight” in Boston necessarily sees the “rehearsed, layered and cosmetic look” (U, 157) of a culture in which I cannot be; “AISight” doesn’t see the real world in which the depth of me engages with you deeply, in the experience of being in the world. The survival of the conditions of human being far into the future depends on “see[ing] things, somehow, differently,”²³⁴ as the character Keith Neudecker does in DeLillo’s *Falling Man* immediately after escaping from one of the falling Twin Towers: “[Things] were unseen, whatever that means, shop windows, loading platforms, paint-sprayed walls. Maybe this is what things will look like when there is no one

Note, *Speaks Of Fear and Loneliness*”, *The Huffington Post*, 15 October 2013 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/15/donald-glover-instagram-note_n_4100574.html> [accessed 5 June 2014], and Nadia-Elyse Harris, “Are Actor Donald Glover’s Instagram Posts A Cry For Help? How To Recognize Depression And Suicide Warning Signs”, *Medical Daily*, 19 October 2013 <<http://www.medicaldaily.com/are-actor-donald-glovers-instagram-posts-cry-help-how-recognize-depression-and-suicide-warning-signs>> [accessed 5 June 2014].

²³¹ D.S. Cloud, 5 May 2010.

²³² Paul Cooper, “Introducing AISight: The slightly scary CCTV network completely run by AI”, 16 April 2014.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (London: Picador, 2011), p.5.

here to see them.”²³⁵ Contemporary fiction might see this unadorned, vulnerable, real world “ahead of time,”²³⁶ before there is no one here.

²³⁵ D. DeLillo, *Falling Man*, p.5.

²³⁶ M. Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, p.45.

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