Authoring Death: Mourning Masculinity in American Autobiography

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the anxiety surrounding identity and notions of selfhood in contemporary American life writing. Male corporeality is too often conflated with robust health, and treated as an afterthought in the analyses of gender and identity. My work addresses this critical lacuna by probing the “unhealthy” male bodies that permeate American autobiographies. I scrutinize the many instances in American life writing where the male subject experiences his own corporeality as diseased or dying. The autobiographical treatment of death and decay, this thesis argues, relieves the life writer from an individualistic relationship with his body, and contributes to the decomposition of the very boundaries that separate the self from the other. My work thus pivots on a paradox: even though the autobiographer’s corporeality frees him from isolating notions of singularity, the autobiographical “I” cannot help but be capricious and inconsistent, since his desire for freedom is so profoundly mired in convention. By exposing the different ways the autobiographical text manifests the writer’s failing corporeality—even when he struggles to conceal it—I look to challenge the myth of the self-made and invulnerable man of American autobiography.

Through a reading of Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* (1964), Chapter One considers how silence and omission are sometimes the only ways traumatic
memories can be represented. The second chapter examines the leaky and diseased bodies that permeate Tennessee Williams’s *Memoirs* (1975), connecting the playwright’s nausea with the gendered contradictions that undermine the coherence of “masculine” subjecthood. Chapter Three explores the “subterranean” presence of women in Roth’s *The Facts* (1989) and *Patrimony* (1991) that undermines the writer’s discrete self. I conclude my dissertation with a discussion of filmic life “writing,” and the political potential of “adapted autobiographies.” This chapter studies Julian Schnabel’s *Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007) as a form of “death writing,” and explores the ways the filmmaker transforms the corporeal boundaries that initially separate self and other into the connective tissue that links the many “I”s/eyes of the film.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my supervisor Naomi Morgenstern. It was she who introduced me to the field of American literature fifteen years ago; and it is her incisive and rigorous engagement with my work that continues to push my boundaries as a thinker. I truly could not have asked for a more devoted and inspiring mentor. I am similarly grateful for the fierceness and wide-ranging knowledge of Corinn Columpar and Dana Seitler; it is Corinn who opened my eyes to the visuality of literature, and Dana who alerted me of the ethical dimension of stories. Together my thesis committee guided me through the treacherous terrain of the “masculine” body, and it is because of them that I have survived to tell the tale. I am also deeply indebted to Linda Hutcheon, whose encouragement and intellectual rigor have inspired me to think more deliberately and act with greater generosity.

I cannot even imagine what my dissertation (not to mention these last seven years) would be like without the unflagging support, friendship, and patient forbearance of my colleagues at the University of Toronto and McGill. To Vicki Hogarth and Christopher J. Pugh, thank you for helping me lip-synch for my life! To my writing group—Jennifer McDermott, Spencer Morrison, and Kailin Wright—thank you for making me a better writer. I couldn’t have done it without you guys. A very special thanks goes to two of my closest friends, Alex Hollenberg and Dru Jeffries, who have not only read every ill-conceived, frantic, and abandoned idea of mine since the inception of this thesis, but who have acted as models of professionalism, kindness, and sheer tenacity. Alex, my work wholeheartedly tolls for thee. Dru, when the academic world feels too big, you remind me to make it small.

Finally, to my family—Mom, Dad, Jennifer, Aunt Linda, and Grandma—whose lifetime of support made my dream possible, I dedicate this dissertation.
Preface

The photograph before you is a portrait of my maternal grandfather. He was born in 1900 (one year after the birth of Ernest Hemingway), and would have been between thirty and forty years old when this picture was taken. I have always found this photograph to be an odd representation of the man I briefly knew. Although my grandfather was born in Vietnam and lived there for most of his life, my parents were finally able to get the official papers authorized so that he could immigrate to Canada for his final years. But by the time he came to Toronto in the 1980s, he was already only a shadow of the person he used to be. He was battling both Alzheimer’s and some kind of cancer—of which type I was never informed. Because my mother didn’t think it was appropriate for my sister and me (both still in the first decade of our lives) to see her father in such a degenerative state, she kept him in the basement of our home, where he lived for several months, until he was finally moved to the hospital, where he died. Alone.
I never really had a tangible relationship with my maternal grandfather—whose name is foreign to me (there is no English equivalent), whose origins are unknown, and whose death remains enigmatic. What I do have of him is this photograph, a picture of a man in his prime, handsome and strong. It is the only photograph my mother has of her father (for she had lost most of her personal belongings as a refugee en route to Canada) and it is the only document of him that remains. However, when I try to remember him, I picture him as wrinkled, frail, bespectacled, and very confused. He had no idea who I was or where he was. And so this photograph, to me, has always been rather alienating. It is as if this official family photo contradicted my own personal memories of a man to whom I was supposed to feel intimately connected.

In many ways, my dissertation is a refusal to relegate the sick and dying man to the basement. The hard, muscular, and solitary figure of the photograph was for me always unidentifiable. And while the autobiographers I study (Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, Philip Roth, and Julian Schnabel) were not displaced by others, I saw their concealment of their own vulnerable bodies as a form of self-imposed exile. It is this subterranean space within male autobiography that my project exhumes. My dissertation examines life writing written by men who deflect attention from their “shameful” bodies while simultaneously (and perhaps inadvertently) calling attention to them. Why, I wondered, does Hemingway have the dying Evan Shipman ask, “Should we not talk about our bodies? I’m so glad your tests are negative,” only to excise the entire section from *A Moveable Feast* (Hemingway, *AMF* 224)?

I first became interested in the body’s textuality through my readings of Julia Kristeva, especially when I encountered her theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror*
(1982). I became fascinated with abject bodies and their capacity to shatter the singular subject. What I set out to do with my dissertation was close the gap between so-called “paternal” or “classic” autobiographies and their abject or “feminine” counterparts.\(^1\) This is to say, I wanted to de-essentialize life writing. What would it mean, for instance, if I were to read Roth’s body as “maternal” in a book called *Patrimony*?

My dissertation, as one might suspect, is deeply indebted to Judith Butler’s work on vulnerable subjectivity as it is articulated in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004); her foundational work on gender performativity, however, also profoundly informs my thinking on sexuality, gender, and identity. That is, I subscribe to the notion that “gender is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core” (Butler, “Imitation” 28). It is with this in mind that I approached Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). Even though Mulvey would later assert in “Afterthoughts” that the male spectator that is central to Hollywood cinema is more accurately described as a masculine “point of view,” “regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviance) of any real live movie-goer,” the “female object” of the original essay nevertheless remains rooted in her biological sex (“Afterthoughts” 24). It is clear, therefore, that my chapter on Tennessee Williams’s *Memoirs*, which studies the playwright’s queer gaze through Mulvey’s spectatorial

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\(^1\) Masculine, paternal, or classic autobiographies often focus on the development of the individual mind and his career. The body and its ailments are generally considered obstacles to be overcome in texts like *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. As an obverse, feminine autobiographies tend to stress community, collaboration, and the maternal body. For a more in-depth comparison of male-authored autobiographies and female-authored “autogynographies,” see Donna C. Stanton’s “Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?” For a deconstruction of these generic/“genderic” binaries, also see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.
framework, is not immediately intuitive. Williams’s gay lover Kip is by no means a biological woman. And yet just as “trans-sex identification is a habit that very easily becomes second Nature” (28) for a female spectator, my reading implies that the same can be said of the object of desire. The Williams chapter, thus, employs Mulvey’s apparatus but in a way that revises it. By juxtaposing Gaylyn Studlar with Mulvey, I hope to immediately avow the complexities of the Kip-Williams scene. Not only is Williams’s spectatorial position of power precarious, but Kip is not even a woman! And yet what this pointed application articulates is that one needs not be a woman to be a “female object.” Kip is a “female object” insofar as he is defined by Williams’s “male gaze”—a masculine perspective that, according to Butler, “safeguards its own disembodied status through identifying women generally with the bodily sphere” (“Variations” 28). This bodily sphere circumscribes all people—regardless of sexuality, gender, or race.

Obviously, there are many male-authored autobiographies that document the non-“normative” or “abject” corporeality of the author; however, texts like addiction memoirs, narratives of disability and disease life writing (“autopathographies”), which collectively saturate the literary market, take for granted the abjection of the subject.ii Consequently, it was not a claim I needed to make for them. What I wanted to do was locate the abject within all autobiographical subjects, even supposedly “normative” and “healthy” ones. This leads me to the conspicuous absence of AIDS life-writing in my dissertation. As a gay man who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, I am certainly aware of the devastation the AIDS crisis had on the LGBT community (American and otherwise).

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ii An “autopathography,” according to G. Thomas Couser, is a type of “autobiographical narrative of illness or disability” that heightens “one’s awareness of one’s mortality, threatening one’s sense of identity, and disrupting the apparent plot of one’s life” (5).
I am also conscious of the fact that this thesis, among other things, is about the various ways human vulnerability and disease can reform the subject’s relations to the other (and death), which is of course precisely what the AIDS crisis demanded.

Because of the deadliness of the syndrome, as well as the widespread homophobia that aligned the syndrome with homosexuality—AIDS was originally known as gay-related immune deficiency (GRID)—the LGBT community rallied to raise funds for drug research and other treatments, effectively altering the way medical trials are run today, and even accelerating the rate at which the FDA approves new drugs. In short, the AIDS crisis catalyzed a solidarity and activist-spirit within the LGBT community that had hitherto been in the closet. It is for this reason that I want to give a nod—albeit a very brief one—to AIDS life writings through my introductory reading of Reinaldo Arenas’s *Before Night Falls* (1992). I have decided, however, not to write a chapter on AIDS memoirs, because of the specificity of my thesis. In general, AIDS life writings do not disavow corporeal abjection—indeed most declare and linger on the devastating symptoms of an AIDS-ravaged body—presenting diarrhea, pneumonia, blindness, fevers, sweats, and extreme fatigue as typical challenges of the autobiographical subject. As a result, such life writings belong in a different project, since this dissertation focuses on the failures of corporeal concealment rather than the voluntary exhibition of the abject self.

In this sense, my thesis is really about what Michel Pêcheux and Jose Muñoz call “disidentification.” As Pêcheux argues, when a person is unable to fully adhere to the subject positions available to him, he unconsciously “disidentifies” through ruptures or contradictions within his text (158). These fractures are manifestations of the
incompatibilities between the subject and the ideologies that produce him. My interest in autobiography lies in its tendency to unwittingly succumb to the abject. It is the autobiographer’s concealment of the fragmentations and incoherencies of his self (and their inevitable resurfacing) that reveal the contradictions and violence of hegemonic culture. As Pêcheux observes, “Ideology . . . does not disappear, but operates as it were in reverse, i.e., on and against itself” (Pêcheux 159). In this sense, AIDS memoirs are often what G. Thomas Couser calls “counterdiscourses”—texts that openly reject the dominant ideologies of the day—and are thus outside of the purview of this particular dissertation. Paul Monette’s Borrowed Time (1988), for instance, which is a memoir by the HIV-infected partner (Monette) of a gay man who died of AIDS (Roger Horwitz), beautifully captures what Nancy K. Miller and John Paul Eakin call “relationality.” Indeed, the book’s structure is very similar to Roth’s Patrimony. Monette, however, is not merely a loving caretaker as Roth was to his father Herman. Within the narrative of the memoir, Monette discovers his seropositive status and acknowledges the imminence of his own inevitable decline and death: “I don’t know if I will live to finish this,” the author declares in the very first line of the book (1). There is thus no concealment of the abject. The two lovers share a life, an illness, and eventually a death: “How was it even physically possible to separate us now,” Monette asks, “With the two of us so interchangeably one?” (315).

iii “The effect [of Borrowed Time’s narrative structure],” Ross Chambers posits in Facing It: AIDS Diaries and the Death of the Author (1998), “is not unlike that of a relay, and it has something in common, therefore, with the narrative structure of relay that is characteristic of the genre of AIDS narrative that might be called ‘dual autobiography,’ in which . . . the writer who records another’s death from AIDS is himself infected and may go on to record his own living out of the same scenario” (7).
Again, what my dissertation focuses on is the death that always already resides within the supposedly “healthy” subject. However, my writing on the death of the author, which is of course informed by Barthes, Foucault, and de Man, does not simply accept the extinction of the author as fact. Even though Barthes argued in 1968 that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148), just three years later in the Preface of Sade, Fourier, Loyola (1971), he would state plainly that “The pleasure of the Text also includes the amicable return of the author” (8). The pleasurable reading experience, Barthes adds, takes place whenever the “literary Text (the Book) transmigrates into our life, whenever another writing (the Other’s writing) succeeds in writing fragments of our own daily lives, in short, whenever a coexistence occurs” (7). The “author” that I write about is one that coexists with the reader. He is not a singular Author—living and breathing—but the intertwining of multiple subjectivities. Just as Hemingway speculates on the perspectives of Stein, Fitzgerald, and the mechanic, so too do I as a reader of Hemingway imagine the perspectives of the author. It is precisely in this pleasurable yet impossible coupling—a “coexistence” of self and imagined other—that I as the reader of autobiography come to yearn not only for the return of the author, but also acknowledge the final impossibility of such a resurrection. The authors that haunt my dissertation, therefore, are always heterogeneous—simultaneously announcing their presence and their absence. My thesis, in this way, is bolstered by the pleasurable coexistence—even if it is a wholly fantasized one—that the autobiographical reading experience furnishes. Through the figure of this imagined or “implied” author, the reader becomes, like Hemingway, Williams, Monette, Roth, and Schnabel, abjectly enmeshed with the death of the author.
# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

PREFACE v

TABLE OF CONTENTS xii

LIST OF FIGURES xiii

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER ONE 22
The Fictional Selves of *A Moveable Feast*

CHAPTER TWO 58
“I look into their myriad eyes”: the Queer Gaze of Tennessee Williams’s *Memoirs*

CHAPTER THREE 89
Matrimony: Re-Conceiving the Mother in Philip Roth’s Life Writing

CHAPTER FOUR 123
The Dying “I” in Julian Schnabel’s *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*

WORKS CONSULTED 160
List of Figures

Figure 1 124
Figure 2 125
Figure 3 139
Figure 4 141
Figure 5 144
Figure 6 146
Figure 7 147
Figure 8 149
Figure 9 150

All photographic stills from Julian Schnabel’s *Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007). By permission of eOne Films.
Introduction

Inhabiting a male body is like having a bank account; as long as it’s healthy, you don’t think much about it.

—John Updike, “Disposable Rocket”

This dissertation interrogates the unsustainable boundaries—both corporeal and ideological—that traditionally separate the (masculine) self from the (feminine) other, thereby calling into question the dominance of individualistic models of male-authored life writing.¹ In the last decade or so, numerous theorists including Butler, Derrida, Sobchack, and Berlant have emphasized the precariousness of human life as the connective tissue that binds people together and reveals our responsibility to—and inextricability from—suffering others. We are all subject to wounding and death. Each muscle, wrinkle, tumor and fissure tells about who we are as people and as individuals. But despite academia’s interest in the “constructedness” of corporeality, instigated in part by thinkers like Cixous, Kristeva, Bordo, Grosz, and Butler, the realm of the vulnerable body is still too often considered feminine. Since the late 1980s, feminist theorists of autobiography have recuperated the “feminine” aspects of life writing: thus wounds, abject bodies, and the domestic sphere, all things conventionally regarded as the province of women, have since become worthy subjects of study. Although both men and women are subject to what Augustine calls the “slimy desires” of the body, corporeal weakness

¹ According to Nancy K. Miller, “The deepest vein of inspiration in the 1970s came from the desire to pose a massive challenge to the regime of the universal subject. It was imperative . . . to expose that regime as particularized. The universal subject, it turned out, was merely a man” (“Representing Others” 27). I use the masculine pronoun in this dissertation because my research interrogates the male body and the relationship between masculinity and autobiography. This by no means implies a reversion to the universal masculine subject.
continues to be tethered to femininity.² The feminine body is either the source of these temptations (as in the case of Rousseau’s Madame de Warens or Benjamin Franklin’s Mrs. T., on whom the young printer “attempted Familiarities” [Franklin, Autobiography 36]) or the weakness itself (as in Fitzgerald’s “delicate long-lipped Irish mouth that, on a girl, would have been the mouth of a beauty” [Hemingway, AMF 125]). It is only the unmanly subject who exposes his body to “Dulness, Weakness, or the Injury of [his] own or another’s Peace or Reputation” (Franklin, Autobiography 68). In this hegemonic and paternal narrative, the autobiographical act takes place the moment the weak and unruly (read: feminine) body is vanquished. It is no surprise, therefore, that much of the established canon in life writing studies has been written by men, since this formula necessarily devalues female experiences. Yet despite critiquing this phallocentric tradition and its suppression of female voices, few feminist critics have made it their aim to disassociate male life writing from the realm of the mind.³ As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out, “The question of how male embodiment is presented or concealed in life narratives is a rich prospect for future research” (Reading 40). Even with this pointed

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² In part due to Augustine’s genre-founding Confessions, the autobiographical act is often regarded as an undertaking of the soul—a dramatization of the writer’s journey from physical bondage (both literal and figurative) to spiritual liberation. As F. Scott Fitzgerald puts it, “there are always those to whom all self-revelation is contemptible, unless it ends with a noble thanks to the gods for the Unconquerable Soul” (63).

³ “Feminist texts,” Jeanne Perreault observes, often “make the female body of she who says ‘I’ a site and source of written subjectivity, investing that individual body with the shifting ethics of a political, racial, and sexual consciousness” (190). To align female subjects with their bodies without an extended examination of male embodiment, however, implies that men in contradistinction to women are disconnected from corporeality, and have the capacity to achieve what Bordo describes as “intellectual independence from the lure of the body’s illusions, to become impervious to its distractions, and, most important, to kill off its desires and hungers” (Unbearable Weight 145).
observation, however, examinations of the male body in “traditional” or “paternal” autobiography research remain scant. I argue that to disregard male embodiment is to allow it to maintain its “healthy” position in the mythos of patriarchal culture. Rather than celebrate male subjectivity as disembodied, coherent, and normative, this study analyzes the various ways American autobiographers obscure their own sickly and sometimes even dying bodies.

This thesis studies male corporeality through the critical lens of what Kristeva calls the “abject.” While this term is typically associated with the maternal, I look at the many instances in American autobiography where the male subject regards his own corporeality as monstrous and abject. An abject body is polluted, sick, unruly, and sometimes even dying; it threatens the coherence of the physical self, reminding us of our precarious subjecthood. When faced with the abject, we spasm in order to externalize our shame, and to protect ourselves from the annihilation of identity. So violent are these breaches that they can shatter the integrity of an autobiographer’s life writing. By exposing the different ways autobiographies manifest the writer’s abject corporeality—even when he struggles to conceal it—I look to challenge the myth of the self-made and invulnerable man of American life writing. My research scrutinizes the chronological fractures and narrative inconsistencies that frequently accompany an autobiographer’s confrontation with death: in the form of deceased friends (Chapter 1), lovers (Chapter 2),

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4 In *The Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva argues that “When a woman ventures out in those regions [the site of the other] it is usually to gratify, in very maternal fashion, the desire for the abject that insures the life . . . of the man whose symbolic authority she accepts” (54). She adds, “If ‘something maternal’ happens to bear upon the uncertainty that I call abjection, it illuminates the literary scription of the essential struggle that a writer (man or woman) has to engage in with what he calls demonic only to call attention to it as the inseparable obverse of his very being, of the other (sex) that torments and possesses him” (208).
parents (Chapter 3), and even the dying self (Chapter 4).\(^5\) In this way, an autobiography spams just as its author might when facing his own abject corporeality. Such fractures provide the key to demystifying the idealizations of male subjectivity. In what ways, I ask, does the life writer fail to compose himself when confronting mortality? The autobiographical treatment of death and decay, this dissertation argues, relieves the life writer from an individualistic relationship with his body, and contributes to the decomposition of the very boundaries that separate the self from the other.

An autobiographer frequently conceals his own bodily “deviancy” so as to establish his compliance with the “norms” of the community. As Lennard Davis contends, “normalcy must constantly be enforced in public venues (like the novel), must always be creating and bolstering its image by processing, comparing, constructing, deconstructing images of normalcy and the abnormal” (44). What I have found, however, is that the autobiographical self tends to vacillate between identifying with “normalcy and the abnormal,” conformity and independence. This is especially the case, I posit, in autobiographies written during the Cold War era (1947-1991). Despite the conventional understanding of the 1950s being an age of conformity, Leerom Medovoi contends that this period in US history also saw the rise of the American rebel; mid-century America, he argues, “bestowed a mythic sanction on images of defiant youth for expressing a needed resistance to the ‘organized society’ and its compliant ‘organization man’” (34). Fictional characters like Holden Caulfield, Jim Stark, and Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom dominated the cultural imaginary of post-war America. “The rebel,” according to Medovoi, “conveyed the spirit of a young America in revolutionary action” (31). Yet

\(^5\) “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science,” Kristeva suggests, “is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject” (4).
despite his independent spirit, the contradictory pulls to simultaneously conform to and rebel against his community would eventually lead him to his ruin. The life writings of this period are also riven with contradictions. Like the many rebellious icons of the Cold War, autobiographers can neither fully commit to nor extricate themselves from the exigencies of mainstream culture. In the seminal essay, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” (1956), Georges Gusdorf argues that the conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life is the late product of a specific civilization. Throughout most of human history, the individual does not oppose himself to all others; he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community. (29)

While critics often quote the first part of the above passage as a way to align Gusdorf with the individualistic model of autobiography, the Belgian theorist in fact acknowledges the production—that is the process and artifice—that is involved in the construction of a singular self. The notion of an autonomous subject who is separate from others, even if he is a “product of a specific civilization,” is ultimately a fiction: “the narrative that [the autobiographer] makes of his life is already a first work of art, the first deciphering of an affirmation that, at a further stage of stripping down and recomposing, will open out in novels, in tragedies, or in poems” (45). Because autobiographies combine the techniques and devices of fictional writing (characterization, plotting, dialogue, etc.) with personal history (the “facts” or what Philippe Lejeune calls the “vital
statistics” of the writer), the autobiographical “I” cannot help but be capricious and inconsistent, since his desire for freedom is so profoundly mired in convention.

These inconsistencies, I suggest, are manifested most conspicuously in the trope of the vulnerable, diseased, and dying male bodies that pervade American autobiography. Four of the five autobiographical pieces studied in this dissertation were written between the end of WWII and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, a period in which American hegemony depended on the containment and expulsion of the communist other. It is no coincidence that this period in American history saw the robust male body as a matter of national import. A soft and unhealthy physique was regarded as a threat to the very stability of the social order. John F. Kennedy even warns his fellow Americans that the feminization of the male body could “strip and destroy the vitality of the nation,” and that “our growing softness, our increasing lack of physical fitness, is a menace to our [national] security” (*Sports Illustrated*). It makes sense, then, that so many autobiographers of this era regard their corporeality with such discomfiture.

Although this dissertation concentrates on American autobiographies published after the end of WWII, the moments of abjection that I observe are not exclusive to contemporary life writings, even if they are more pronounced within the texts of this period. Breaches permeate the entire body of American autobiography. Even the life writing of Benjamin Franklin, whose discipline and integrity is commonly accepted as a truism in American letters, trembles at the site of the dying self.

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6 During this period, the production of Cold War masculinity hit a fever pitch. According to Brian Baker, “To fail in producing hegemonic masculinity” was tantamount to “open[ing] the floodgates to communism” (66).
As a young man, Franklin composed his own epitaph, employing a poetic conceit that compares his future corpse to a printed book:

The Body of

B. Franklin,

Printer;

Like the Cover of an old Book,

Its Contents torn out,

And stript of its Lettering and Gilding,

Lies here, Food for Worms.

But the Work shall not be wholly lost.

For it will, as he believ’d, appear once more,

In a new & more perfect Edition,

Corrected and amended

By the Author. (109)

Franklin was only twenty-two years old when he wrote this fictional epitaph in 1728; by the time of its composition, however, the young man had already faced death and escaped it narrowly. Both Franklin and his good friend Thomas Denham had taken ill in February 1726. While Franklin—after having “suffered a good deal”—eventually returned to health, Denham’s “distemper” finally “carried him off” in 1727 (41). In this context, it would not be a stretch to assume that the young printer wrote his epitaph in part as a consolatio for his deceased friend. Through the epitaph Franklin makes a pledge to carry
on his older friend’s legacy. Franklin embodies the “more perfect Edition” of the original draft that was Denham’s life. That is, Franklin takes on the task of ghostwriting his friend’s life narrative by fictionalizing his own death. The epitaph compensates for the dying body by insisting that a life’s “Contents” continue to live even after one ceases to exist. The “Author” who corrects and amends the errata of the first edition, then, is also the reader who models himself after a character’s life story. In this way, Franklin coalesces with his departed friend by imaginatively sharing in the latter’s death. Having just witnessed his close friend pass away, Franklin uses his epitaph to transcend the dying body. Just as Charles Osborne promises to posthumously “acquaint [Franklin with] how he found things in that separate state [of death]” (30), this epitaph pledges to give death a living voice.

Franklin’s *Autobiography* (1784), like the epitaph, negates the limitations of the body by dramatizing the founding father’s journey towards “moral Perfection” (66). The book crucially disavows Franklin’s imperfections and weaknesses, stating that the statesman never possessed them in the first place. The reader is told, for instance, that throughout Franklin’s life, “little or no notice was ever taken of what related to the victuals on the table” (7), even though we find him lusting for the taste of pan-fried cod later in the narrative. Franklin thus directly contradicts his earlier claim to being

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7 After his death, Denham literally left Franklin a “small Legacy in a nuncupative Will” (41).

8 Like Wordsworth’s *Essays upon Epitaphs*, Franklin’s short poem acts as a kind of autobiographical “prosopopeia.” According to Paul de Man, prosopopeia is the act of giving speech to an imaginary or absent person. De Man contends that “it is the figure of prosopopeia, the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech” (926). He adds, “Prosopopeia is the trope of autobiography, by which one’s name . . . is made as intelligible and memorable as a face” (926).
indifferent about food when he recalls that he “had formerly been a great Lover of Fish” (28). Indeed, some of the book’s most memorable scenes show Franklin indulging his various appetites to excess. Despite his higher reason, he repeatedly succumbs to his “inclinations”—whether they be the “great Puffy Rolls” of Philadelphia or the “low Women that fell in [his] Way” (20, 56). In this manner, the body breaks the mind’s promise, undermining the statesman’s convictions and self-conceptions. Franklin’s corporeality, therefore, fractures the *Autobiography* and acts as a site of contradiction. Even though the narrative dramatizes the weakness of the flesh and the great influence of physical inclinations, Franklin nonetheless attempts to efface them with a counter version of himself. The *Autobiography* vacillates between two different “editions” of Franklin: the virtuous founding father whose incorporeal voice resounds even after his death; and the corruptible and fleshly man who pledges to speak beyond the grave, but is well aware that, like his deceased friend Osborne, he may “never fulfil[1] his promise” (31).9

Two notions of authorial death shape this thesis. While the singular “Author” has been dead since at least the rise of poststructuralism,10 until recently few critics have

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9 For a discussion of the textual transformation of Franklin’s body/self in his life writings, see Michael Warner’s “Franklin and the Letters of the Republic” (1986).

10 “The birth of the reader,” as Barthes’s manifesto goes, “must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (“Death” 148). As a “destination” for the text, the reader is a matrix of codes, an amalgamation of multiple histories, biographies, and psychological profiles. He is an intertextual mesh—“the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost” (148)—and finally inseparable from the linguistic fragments in which he is immersed. Put another way, he reconfigures, integrates, and augments the whole existing order that is the text even though he is constituted by it. In this way, the reader is one of many “authors” of a text. The “Author” that Barthes consigns to death, then, is not an individual, living, breathing person, but rather the idea of a singular subject whose identity is untraceable and unrelated to others. See also Michel Foucault’s “What Is an Author?” (1969): “Our culture has metamorphosed this idea of narrative, or writing, as something designed to ward off death. Writing has become linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life: it is now a
examined the representations of dying authors in life writing. In scrutinizing the
disintegration of the autobiographical subject, I consider not only the decomposition of
the subject’s autonomous identity, but also the decay of his biological self.11 In recent
years, scholars of autobiography have returned to Barthes’s dictum not to posit the
linguistic impossibility of life writing, which Paul de Man had already done in his
influential essay “Autobiography as De-Facement” (1979),12 but as a way to examine the
effects of the death of a once-living author on the reader. After encountering a book
whose writer had died only months earlier, for instance, Jane Gallop remembers in The
Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time (2011) that her reading experience
was profoundly “haunted by the death of the author” (1), adding that “the death of the
author actually institutes a relation in which the reader desires the author” (5). Thomas H.
Kane similarly observes in “The Deaths of the Authors: Literary Celebrity and
Automortography in Acker, Barthelme, Bukowski, and Carver’s Last Acts” (2004) that
voluntary effacement that does not need to be represented in books, since it is brought
about in the writer’s very existence” (378).

11 Like E. S. Burt’s Regard for the Other: Autothanatography in Rousseau, De Quincey,
Baudelaire and Wilde (2009), this dissertation explores the “question of the other” and
the death of the autobiographical subject. My work deviates from Burt’s research,
however, in its concentration on the autobiographer’s representation of the human body’s
physical decomposition, which inevitably accompanies the act or fact of dying. Despite
invoking Barthes’s “Death of the Author” and examining the genre of autothanatography,
Burt does not in fact spend very much time on the biological death of authors or their
failing corporeality.

12 De Man contends that autobiographical discourse willfully obscures the death of the
Author by positing a “proper name” as a substitute for the absent subject. This linguistic
“restoration,” however, is always wanting, since “it is indeed not the thing itself but the
representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute”
(930). For this reason de Man concludes that autobiography “demonstrates in a striking
way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming
into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions” (922).
the presence of a deceased writer frequently produces a libidinous reader who wishes for
the return of the departed. Many dying writers, Kane contends, fictionalize their own
biographies in an “attempt to represent death. But using mortality to mobilize the readers’
desire, the texts serve as invitations to read through the lens of the author’s death” (409).
Although both Gallop and Kane articulate a desire for what Barthes refers to as “the
amicable return of the author” (*Sade* 8), they do not finally propose to bring him back to
life; rather, their necrological approaches to life writing dramatize the need to
acknowledge death’s omnipresence in the conception of the self. For both theorists the
reading of autobiography is a work of mourning. We love, are devoted to, and in the end
interiorize the deceased authors whom we read as a part of our own egos. What is
provocative about Kane’s and Gallop’s respective essays is their suggestion that authors
have the capacity to mourn themselves even before their life’s cessation. Writers bear
witness to their own deaths, as Kane and Gallop demonstrate, through fictional accounts
of the dying “I.” Because the dead cannot speak or testify to their own passing, we as
readers are summoned to ventriloquize and complete the life narratives that we
encounter. 13 For this reason neither theorist focuses on autobiography proper: while
Gallop investigates the relationship between theorists and the deceased authors they read,
Kane focuses his analysis on writers’ fictional stories about their own death. Of course,
there is no such thing as “pure” autobiography; the overwhelming presence of others
corrupts all forms of self-writing. But by only studying “automortographies,” which

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13 As Derrida points out, “From the viewpoint of common sense, I certainly cannot testify
to my death—by definition. I cannot say, according to common sense, I should not be
able to say: I died or I am dead” (“Demeure” 46).
address the author’s death by fictionalizing the moments of his departure, Kane suggests that the narrating “I” somehow escapes death in classical iterations of the genre.

In order to examine the immanence of death in the processes of identity construction, we must interrogate genres or traditional apparatuses that are not conventionally associated with death or the abject. If fiction is indeed the “privileged signifier” of abjection, as Kristeva suggests, then autobiography, its supposed obverse, must stand for “Prohibition and Law” (208, 16). For this reason, I would argue, it is not contemporary fiction that “acknowledges the impossibility of Religion, Morality, and Law—their power play, their necessary and absurd seeming,” but rather it is “non-fictional” life writing that renders the separation of the social and anti-social, self and other, feminine and masculine to be finally untenable. Fiction, through its codification of the abject, can only act as a temporary escape from the established order of power structures. Through fictional representations of death and decay, readers attain a kind of cathartic release—an ecstatic immersion in the impurities of the abject—so that they may eventually return to a culturally legitimated space of normalcy and “real life.” After closing the book, the dying “I” remains abjectly external to the realities of the reader. For these reasons, this dissertation concentrates on autobiographies that manifest the death of the author through their concealment of it. Rather than act as exceptions within certain autobiographies, these narrative breaches function as the very condition for the genre’s existence. The Lejeunian “proper name,” notions of autonomy, and prosopopeia are all (in Kristeva’s words) “beautiful masks” (135) that cover over the disfigurement of death in life writing. In other words, it is autobiography rather than fiction that “involve[s] not an ultimate resistance but an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge, and a
hollowing out of abjection through the Crisis of the Word” (208). And yet these masks cannot help but betray their master. By directing my critical gaze at what Leigh Gilmore calls the “limits of autobiography” within “non-fictional” texts, I look to crumble the very mask that “automortographies” can only temporarily displace. This thesis, therefore, explores the ways in which all autobiographies are alive to the death of the self.¹⁴

“What grief displays,” Butler declares in Precarious Life (2004), “is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control” (23). A central aim of this thesis is to illustrate the various ways life writers are undone by the people around them, and to draw the reader’s attention to the impossibility of recounting an “I” disconnected from others. Autobiography is traditionally thought of as a forum for the individual to tell his unique story.¹⁵ Consequently, in order to assert his singularity, the autobiographer often disavows debts—refusing to acknowledge any lineage that binds him to the other—and sometimes even turns to character assassination. But as I have already mentioned, life writers never solely present the self as separate from others, but in fact waver between this desire for singularity and a competing impulse towards “relationality”—a way of defining the self that is constituted through the individual’s relation to “others.” My dissertation focuses on three writers and a filmmaker primarily known for their interrogations of masculine selfhood: Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, Philip Roth, and Julian Schnabel. In each of their

¹⁴ For Miller, “Every autobiography, we might say, is also an autothanatography” (14).

autobiographical texts, there is a survivalist impulse that initially compels them to disavow death, both in the obvious sense of refusing to confront their own mortality, but also in the related repudiation of deceased significant others. The loss of a loved one haunts all four of the life writers I examine. The past, however, remains stubbornly alive in the autobiographer despite his desire to keep it at arm’s length. Death makes demands on both the life writers’ abject bodies as well as the bodies of their autobiographical texts.

Through a reading of Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* (1964)—a memoir that details the author’s early life in Jazz-Age Paris—Chapter 1 considers how silence and omission are sometimes the only ways traumatic memories can be represented. Hemingway does not once mention his own war experiences in the memoir. And yet World War I subtly permeates the text: the decay of “the lost generation” and references to wounded soldiers suffuse *A Moveable Feast*. Although much has been written about the presence (and absence) of WWI in Hemingway’s fiction by critics like Malcolm Cowley, Edmund Wilson, Kenneth S. Lynn and Frederick Crews, no critical attention has been paid to the significant influence of the Great War on *A Moveable Feast*. After WWI, I argue, Hemingway could no longer conceive of a self disconnected from others—even in his own memoir. In order to examine Hemingway’s theorization of “self”-narration, this chapter analyzes the ways in which the author intertwines his own minimized point of view with the imagined perspectives and voices of the people in his memoir. In this way, Hemingway articulates his fraught ties with Gertrude Stein as the antagonistic and “vertical” child-parent relationship that many critics have noticed, as well as the “transverse or lateral” relations of “feminist friendship,” which Nancy K. Miller considers “crucial to understanding the acts of self-fashioning at the heart of life writing”
(“Feminist Friendship” 69). It is through Stein’s ghostly voice, I argue, that much of *A Moveable Feast* is narrated; by adopting his former mentor’s perspective, Hemingway finally comes to indict his past actions, and thus vacillates between violent Oedipal anxieties and a friendly fusion of self and other. Through a kind of autobiographical impersonality, the novelist presents the autonomous “I” as merely the fantasy of a young man. *A Moveable Feast*, therefore, is best described through F. Scott Fitzgerald’s concept of the “double vision”: like the many relational memoirs of the modernist period—Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) being the most prominent—Hemingway’s memoir portrays its author as uncompromisingly individualistic as well as inextricably connected with the men and women of his community.

While *A Moveable Feast* diverts the reader’s gaze away from its author’s wounded body, Tennessee Williams’s *Memoirs* (1975) cannot help but linger on the autobiographer’s corporeal “shame.” Chapter 2 probes the leaky and diseased bodies that permeate Williams’s *Memoirs*. When faced with his queerness, the dramatist consistently spasms and vomits. This nausea, I argue, is connected with the “horrors” of femininity that Williams exiles for the sake of a coherent “I.” Consequently, when confronted with his precarious subjecthood, he gags and heaves in order to protect his masculine persona. The playwright repeatedly turns the reader’s eyes away from his own disfigurement and onto the bodies of his many lovers. The abject male bodies in *Memoirs*, this section suggests, embody the gendered contradictions that lie beneath *Memoirs*’s narrative surface. Williams’s desire to differentiate himself from the “swishy” supporting characters of his life is finally frustrated by his first and last great male lovers—Kip and Frank Merlo—who both succumb to cancer. Recollections of their abject bodies splinter
the narrative coherence of *Memoirs*, compelling the playwright to finally acknowledge the significant positions Kip and Merlo hold in his life story. The autobiography—in spite of its author’s anxieties—tasks its readers to acknowledge the presence of the two lovers’ lives. Through a dynamic constellation of gazes, the reader is abjectly fused with Williams as well as the “boys” of his life, and thus transformed into what Gilmore refers to as a “figure of the literary witness” (79).

Just as Williams initially disavows his connections with dying lovers, so too does Philip Roth repudiate his ties (both artistic and marital) to his first wife Josie after her death. While Roth has written many “autobiographical” novels, Chapter 3 focuses on *The Facts* (1988) and *Patrimony* (1991), the novelist’s two explicit works of life writing. In both texts, Roth’s significant others make demands on him, threatening his “supremely independent” identity (*Facts* 110). In *The Facts*, his wife and mother encroach upon the author’s singularity. Like his father in *Patrimony*, Roth at first clings to masculine notions of autonomy and self-sufficiency. This chapter argues that *The Facts* and *Patrimony* act as a two-part revision of the traditional *Künstlerroman*, where the author eventually succumbs to the sublimity of the maternal.  

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16 In a *Künstlerroman*, the artist-protagonist is often divided between his inner life and the crude external world. As Randolph P. Shaffner observes, the artist of a *Künstlerroman* frequently seeks “to achieve an aesthetic ideal, he struggles against an uncompromising and contemplative, artificial, uncontaminated ivory-tower existence or engagement in the social struggles within the world of his time” (13). That is, the protagonist must either reject the impurities of the external world in his isolated “ivory tower” of fiction or immerse himself in the “sacred fount” of facts, and live life among physical, earthly experiences (Beebe 6). In a *Künstlerroman*, therefore, the artist must choose between two options: the ivory tower, a representation of the abstractions of fiction, and the factuality of the sacred fount.
dissolution; by acknowledging Bessie’s influence over both his life and writing, Roth eventually breaks down the personal boundaries that isolated him in *The Facts*.

If the life writings of the first three chapters manifest the schism between the “decade of conformity” and the “age of the rebel” that make up Cold War America, then Julian Schnabel’s *Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007) can be seen as a product of a post-9/11 ethos. In *Diving Bell*, Jean-Dominique Bauby’s friend Pierre Roussin compares the protagonist’s locked-in syndrome with his own four-year detainment as a hostage in Beirut: “In a way, I know what you’re going through and I thought I could be of some help. . . . Being taken hostage is not so different from what you’re going through” (321). Schnabel’s cinematic adaptation of *Diving Bell* asks, who holds the modern man hostage? While the obvious answer is the body that immobilizes Bauby, Schnabel’s film posits the singular “I” as the ultimate prison from which the human soul must escape.

After the 9/11 attacks, America could no longer conceive of itself as invulnerable to attacks. It is partly for this reason that a film like *Diving Bell* is more readily able to forgo fictions of salubrious selfhood and accept its enmeshment with others. My final chapter thus studies the dying body as a site of intersubjectivity. In telling his own life/death story through the body of an other, and conflating his biographical details with Bauby’s end-of-life narrative, Schnabel raises ontological questions that trouble the very notion of autobiographical writing. The film systematically denies the viewer the scopophilic “pleasure [of] looking at another person as object” (Mulvey 9) because, immersed in the spectacles before us, the viewer becomes Bauby’s immobile eye, and then finally the “inanimate” environment that envelops him. Our participation in the film thus pushes the act of identification to its limits, as we too are thrown into the transports
of death. By developing a shattering aesthetic of misrecognition, I argue, Schnabel transforms the corporeal boundaries that initially separate self and other into the connective tissue that links the many eyes/I’s of the film.

A word is in order on my choice of texts. This dissertation is by no means meant to be exhaustive. Even within the second half of the twentieth century, there are many other autobiographies that illustrate the kind of corporeal anxiety that this thesis investigates. In Self-Consciousness: Memoirs (1989), for instance, John Updike’s bouts of psoriasis trigger a racial self-awareness that marks his white body as “other” to both himself and the watchful world. The author recalls hiding his “mottled” skin out of embarrassment. He would sometimes even leave America in order to take sanctuary in foreign lands. According to Updike, however, it is his prose, “a parody of my skin’s embarrassing production,” that most effectively distracts him and the public from his disfigurement (75). Given my interest in the concealment of the abject, it makes sense that I pay particular attention to what Richard Dyer calls the “invisibility” of the white subject. By focusing on the abject embodiment of white male-authored life writing, my work looks to reveal the apparatuses behind the construction of white ethnicity/invisibility, and expose “healthy” masculinity as merely a form of autobiographical passing.

17 For an expert analysis of Updike’s psoriasis in Self-Consciousness, see Jay Prosser’s “Under the Skin of John Updike: Self-Consciousness and the Racial Unconscious”: “Updike seeks in his autobiographical mirror not his self but a racial other, and as the memoir incorporates this other into the self, Self-Consciousness becomes increasingly unconscious. This incorporation takes place through a series of pronominal substitutions, transferences really, as Updike displaces his I into a you, identifies this you as a reading other, and then internalizes the reading other into his I. Updike’s address to a reading other moves self-consciously into a racial unconscious” (582).
This is not to say, of course, that only white male life writers compensate for the limitations of their bodies with the hardness of their prose. Far from it. Even though the Cuban-American writer Reinaldo Arenas acknowledges in his memoir, _Before Night Falls_ (1992), that “death was knocking at my door and the only thing I could do was face it” (x), he nonetheless presents his poetry as a bulwark against both his fascist homeland and his AIDS-ravaged body. “I scream,” the poet declares, “therefore I exist” (301). In 1990, Arenas would eventually commit suicide—thus literally killing his own body—so that his “to be published” work would live on in his stead (317). Through the act of death, the poet presents life and writing in equivalent terms. Arenas explicitly states in his suicide note that he chose death, because he was so physically ill that he could no longer compose poetry: “I end my life voluntarily because I cannot continue working” (317). In this sense, Arenas commits suicide partly because his infirmity prevented him from adding to his body of work. As Michael Warner would put it, “to live is to be published” (111).

Likewise, Richard Wright supplants the groans of his hungry black body with the composure of his autobiographical voice. “Hunger was with us always,” the author recalls of his childhood in _Black Boy_ (28). Indeed, because of his family’s poverty, almost every scene of the book is punctuated with recollections of material scarcity and near-starvation. But even though the autobiography depicts the many physical ravages of starvation, it does not finally “lead to an ultimate agreement upon the urgent need for hunger’s cessation,” as Andrew Warnes suggests in his sociological reading of the book (140). Rather, Wright depicts his development as an artist through a progressive refinement of his hungers. Even though a “plate of greens” would be waiting at his
childhood home, the young writer would “forfeit [his] food for twelve hours” so that he could explore the nocturnal world and feed his imagination (127). The adult Wright similarly turns down food as a form of personal revolution. “The problem of human unity,” according to the author, “was more important than bread” (318). The memoir thus dramatizes Wright’s ascetic journey towards worldly rejection—an aspect of the book that is frequently ignored by critics. By repudiating food, Wright becomes, as the Communists label him, a dangerous “Intellectual” who diminishes his body for the sake of his mind.

As I hope will become clear throughout this thesis, the autobiographies I have chosen are not meant to be read as exceptional texts, so much as exemplary illustrations of the textual spasms that are symptomatic of obligatory masculinity and its discontents. From slave narratives to addiction memoirs, the central conflict of American autobiographies takes place when the life writer moves from restrictive entanglements to transcendence and freedom—that is, the moment he becomes unencumbered by others. But no individual can ever function fully in isolation. The fiction of independence, whether on the level of the nation or the citizen, needs to be re-examined if we are to seriously reform our relations to the other. This is not to say, however, that borders are necessarily injurious. Theories of autobiography, like the study of international relations, acknowledge the necessity for a degree of individuation. This dissertation does not prescribe a kind of utopian erasure of boundaries. Rather, it seeks to reconceptualize the freedom and singularity that have been for so long valorized in both American and autobiography studies. The “freedom” of the ethical subject, according to Emmanuel Lévinas, “is not like the freedom of a being free as the wind. It implies responsibility . . .
The coinciding of freedom with responsibility constitutes the I, doubled with itself” (77 271). It is precisely this “doubling” of the autobiographical subject that my dissertation scrutinizes. By acknowledging the individual’s contradictory need for separation and union, distinction and conflation, this study interrogates the paradoxical boundaries that simultaneously construct and undermine the autobiographical “I.”
The Fictional Selves of *A Moveable Feast*

...it would seem that the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life.

—Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography”

Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein’s tempestuous friendship and subsequent falling-out have inspired volumes of biographical accounts, yet surprisingly few critics have considered their actual memoirs in dialogue with each other. In many ways, Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* can be read as a companion piece to Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Both memoirs take place in Jazz-Age Paris and chronicle the many artists and literati of the modernist period. They meditate on the craft of writing, dish on those who write poorly, and celebrate the literary careers of their respective authors. Occasionally, the two texts even tell the same stories. In this chapter, I look to the different ways Hemingway’s memoir responds to, ventriloquizes, and finally revises Stein’s book. Even though Stein’s *Autobiography* is commonly accepted as a key text within the canon of autobiography studies, its subversive form in fact challenges the very possibility of the genre of which it is a part. As an account of Stein’s shared life with Alice told through the perspective of the latter but written by the former, the book undermines the notion of an individual “self” that is distinct from “others”—what Sidonie Smith considers the “fantasy which sustains ‘traditional,’ or... ‘paternal’ autobiography” (“Performativity” 112). In the final two paragraphs of *Autobiography*, the pronoun “I” shifts fluidly from referring to Alice to Stein:

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18 Both Hemingway and Stein relate the story of Guillaume Apollinaire’s death on the night of the armistice, and his unfortunate misinterpretation of the phrase “à bas Guillaume,” which was heard outside his deathbed, as referring to himself rather than the German Kaiser.
I am a pretty good housekeeper and a pretty good gardener and a pretty good needlewoman and a pretty good secretary and a pretty good editor and a pretty good vet for dogs and I have to do them all at once and I found it difficult to add being a pretty good author.

About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it. (237)

Stein fictionalizes *Autobiography* by ventriloquizing Alice, the supposed subject, just as Defoe ventriloquizes in *Robinson Crusoe*. By invoking the figure of Defoe, and what is arguably the first English novel, Stein calls to attention the unavoidable fictions that go into recounting a life. Smith aptly points out that the text “subverts” paternal autobiography’s affirmation of traditional gender roles, since “neither the ‘wife’ [Alice] nor the ‘husband’ [Stein] functions as a unified narrator” (112). The above passage thus stratifies the autobiographical “I” and places Stein-Alice into three complementary roles: editor, life writer, novelist—a Toklas is a Stein is a Defoe.

Despite the conflation of subjects, however, *Autobiography* is not above prioritizing Stein and extolling her virtues. In Alice’s voice, Stein frequently describes herself as an innovator—a true “original.” It is Stein’s “first-class genius” that rings like a bell not only for Alice, but also for all the readers of her book; it is Stein who discovers Matisse’s paintings; and it is Stein who writes *Three Lives*, “the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature” (50). Indeed, a
considerable amount of Alice’s “autobiography” is spent lionizing Stein’s literary work. Through Alice, Stein creates a mask: the author detaches her own voice so that she may speak what would otherwise be awkward or inaccrochable. Alice sings Stein’s praises and disparages many of the writer’s artistic friends so that Stein doesn’t have to. For example, even though the writer “always remembered” Hemingway’s pivotal role in the serialization of *The Making of Americans* in the journal *Transatlantic*, “After all he was the first of the young men to knock at my door and he did make Ford print the first piece of [the book]” (203), Alice flatly denies this fact: “I myself have not so much confidence that Hemingway did do this” (203).

In spite of its hybrid form, *Autobiography* manifests Stein’s desire for singularity and self-promotion. Like many “traditional” or “paternal” life narratives, it constructs a self through the disparagement and suppression of others. Although Stein and Alice were a part of the American Fund for French Wounded, and helped transport stranded soldiers with their own Ford truck, their elitism and contempt for the new crowds of Paris are nonetheless conspicuous in the autobiography:

> It was a changed Paris. Guillaume Apollinaire was dead. We saw a tremendous number of people but none of them as far as I can remember that we had ever known before. Paris was crowded. As Clive Bell remarked, they say that an awful lot of people were killed in the war but it seems to me that an extraordinary large number of grown men and women have suddenly been born. (180)

Nostalgia suffuses the above passage. Everything changed after WWI. Fifteen million people died, but as awful as the casualties were, the overcrowding of Paris was even
more “extraordinary” for Stein. The writer, of course, never states her scorn directly; rather, these sentiments are expressed through the voice of Clive Bell. The art critic helps to detach Stein from the rabble that overtook Paris’s streets: unlike old intimates like Guillaume Apollinaire, these new people are nameless; unlike the cultured and worldly Stein, these expatriates are dilettantes who “have suddenly been born.” Because of the influx of young American expatriates, the French capital no longer recognized Stein’s genius and had become as common as the philistine editors who originally excluded her from *Who’s Who in America*.

Although in the past Stein had suffered from the indifference—and sometimes even the ridicule—of the reading public, she could always count on her artistic coterie for publicity. Even if no one read Stein, everyone in France knew who she was (and even where she lived). After the war, however, many of her avant-garde companions were either dead or estranged: “the old crowd had disappeared. Matisse was now permanently in Nice [and] they practically never met. This was the time when Gertrude Stein and Picasso were not seeing each other. Guillaume Apollinaire was dead” (182). Without the support of her bohemian friends, Stein had become nearly anonymous. According to Alfred Kreymborg, who met her in 1922, “Miss Stein, outside the circles in which she moved and a few devotees at home, had virtually no recognition” (370). It was imperative, therefore, that the author remind the French of her role in their artistic development. Through *Autobiography*, Craig Monk argues, Stein “framed elements of her personal and professional life to shape her own reputation” (43). Monk continues, “But because the Toklas book also gives shape to the Lost Generation of Americans abroad, and because her narrative strategy places her among them under the gaze of Alice
B. Toklas, Stein conflates subject and object and ties her own reputation unalterably to theirs” (44). This sentiment—that the writer ultimately conceives of herself within *Autobiography* as a part of a community of artists rather than as an individual genius—has monopolized much Stein criticism: the voices in the text, Carolyn A. Barros avers, “perform the modernist autobiographical subject in the manner of an avant-garde chorus, a cacophony. When Stein draws their verbal portraits, these portraits mirror, refract, or stand in glaring contrast to the multifaceted Stein of the *Autobiography* (178).19 Similarly, Smith suggests that Stein’s appropriation of Alice’s voice “commingles the boundaries of identity into a shared subject,” adding that the “subject” of the text “is irreducible to either ‘Gertrude’ or ‘Alice’” (*Reading Autobiography* 31). Despite the self-interested and reputation-conscious ventriloquism that takes place in the book, Stein’s *Autobiography* continues to be considered collaborative, non-hierarchical and relational by the majority of her critics.

What I am suggesting is that because *Autobiography* was written by a woman and about another woman, the book has been placed within the tradition of “women’s autobiography,” which according to Mary Mason’s oft-cited “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers,” “acknowledge[s] the real presence . . . of another consciousness, and the disclosure of the female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other’” (321).20 Life writing can be split, theorists like Domna C. Stanton argue, into two

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20 For other notable works on “women’s autobiography” and “relationality,” see Susan Stanford Friedman’s “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice”; Joy
gendered branches—male (autobiography) and female (autogynography): “a binary opposition recurred that associated the female with personal and intimate concerns, the male with professional achievement—a replication, it seemed, of the private/public, inner/outer dichotomies that mark genderic differences in our symbolic system” (137). 21
While women’s autobiography is relational or communal, male life writing, as many early scholars define it, is a forum for the individual to tell his unique and singular story. 22 Under this gendered model of autobiography, a male life writer will attack, inform against, and betray the people who populate his life in order to assert his

Hooton’s “Individuation and Autobiography”; and Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck’s Introduction to Life/Lines.

21 Lillian Hellman, who was an acquaintance of both Stein and Hemingway, destabilizes the notion of gendered writing in Pentimento, her 1973 memoir. There are two female characters in Pentimento that represent gendered models of authorship: Princess Bibesco (feminine) and Julia (masculine) signify Hellman’s two very different modes of writing. Pentimento continually shifts from a feminine style (non-linear, elliptical, and somber) to one that is traditionally more masculine (linear, pithy, and aggressive). The most memorable scenes of the book occur when Hellman is indignant, annoyed, or about to erupt. While these moments of anger are frequent, there are also many instances where the playwright presents herself as grief-stricken and somber. These bipolar shifts in mood could simply be accurate characterizations of Hellman’s fiery and capricious temper; however, the tension between anger and sorrow in Pentimento also represents Hellman’s struggle with “feminine writing.” Near the end of Pentimento, Hellman destabilizes the binary of anger (masculine) and sadness (feminine). When describing Arthur W. A. Cowan, she points out that “sadness often looked like temper, often turned into it” (236). This statement bespeaks Hellman’s writing style, which is at once fluid yet rational, candid and private. She calls into question the concept of “masculine” and “feminine” styles by incorporating both in her writing, refusing to define her prose with her sex.

22 Philippe Lejeune famously declares the genre to be a “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). Georges Gusdorf even compares the autobiographical act to the Copernican Revolution, where the individual subject is the sun around which “others” circulate: “at the moment it enters into history, humanity, which previously aligned its development to the great cosmic cycles, finds itself engaged in an autonomous adventure; soon mankind even brings the domain of the sciences into line with its own reckoning, organizing them, by means of technical expertise, according to its own desires” (31).
singularity within his own narrative. The auxiliary stories and secrets—those that belong to supporting characters—in paternal autobiographies are exposed, compromised, and emptied of their original meaning. They no longer belong to the person whose life they were originally about. Instead, these stories, because they are anthologized by the male life writer, come together as a single (ideological) narrative that confirms the autobiographer’s freedom and professional prominence. Borders are violently drawn, separating the sovereign “I” from all those who make claims on his life. That is, the male life writer who covets autonomy will write about others only to write them off.

But as Nancy K. Miller points out, many male-authored life writings also possess a “structure of self-portrayal through the relation to a privileged other that characterizes most female-authored autobiography” (“Representing” 6). John Paul Eakin similarly notes, “all selfhood . . . is relational despite differences that fall out along gender lines . . . The fact that a case for it should need to be made in autobiography studies shows just how profoundly the myth of autonomous individualism has marked the thinking of autobiographers and their critics” (50-51). Certainly male writers also interact with one another and acknowledge their relations with other people. Writers like Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, Ford Madox Ford and F. Scott Fitzgerald, despite their competitiveness, frequently read and edited each other’s writing, sometimes taking so much interest in one another’s work as to create a communal “Bel Esprit” to help fund the careers of those who could not subsist solely on their creative output. It is the prevalence of the gendered dichotomies within autobiography studies, I believe, that prompts critics like Monk to praise Stein (whose avant-garde style does not even comfortably conform to the conventional category of “feminine”) for her “relational” life
writing—even as he acknowledges that she “attempts to use the Autobiography . . . to distance herself from her contemporaries” (15)—while critiquing a male autobiographer like Hemingway for “develop[ing] [his] reputation in contrast with the demonstrable shortcomings of those people around him” (141). According to Monk, Hemingway was someone “who hoped above all else to refute accounts of a cohesive generation abroad” (127). Although A Moveable Feast does indeed portray a young Hemingway who belittles the people within his literary circle as a way to bolster his own precarious esteem, I would argue that the book betrays a much more relational voice than the majority of readers have previously assumed. Through a close reading of Hemingway’s memoir, this chapter aims to put pressure on the idea that an autobiography can and should be identified as either individualistic/self-serving/public (masculine) or relational/collectivist/private (feminine). It is my contention that A Moveable Feast, much like Stein’s Autobiography, dramatizes its author’s contradictory impulses for both self-promotion and effacement.

In a 1964 article for The New York Times Book Review, Mary Hemingway recalls objecting to the many anecdotal digressions of A Moveable Feast. After reading the manuscript, which she had taken to be autobiography, Mary declared to her husband, “It’s not much about you.” To this critique, Hemingway responded by complicating the genre of his “Paris Sketches.” The book, the author explained to his wife, is “biography by remate”; or, as Mary would come to describe it, life writing “by reflection.” Many critics regard this idea of remate, a term taken from the sport jai alai,23 as key to

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23 In jai alai, a rubber ball (called a pelota) is thrown against a three-walled court with curved wicker baskets, where it ricochets onto a designated area; the opposing player
understanding the author’s body of work. Rose Marie Burwell, for instance, observes in Hemingway’s late-style a “twinning, cloning and splitting” of characters. She argues that “In Feast the vertical surfaces for the writer’s remate are good or bad women and good or bad writers; and the momentum of the rebound can be calculated from their impact on Hemingway’s development as a writer” (161). For example, in the memoir Hemingway codes characters like Sylvia Beach as “good” by ricocheting them off of “bad” people like Stein. This biographical form of remate, however, is not limited to the book’s supporting characters. *A Moveable Feast* also depicts Hemingway through a similar technique of reflection and contrast. Members of the “Lost Generation” frequently act as foils for the author’s self-characterization. The sickly F. Scott Fitzgerald and the prudish Miss Stein, for instance, starkly contrast the robust and inaccrochable Hemingway.24

According to Suzanne del Gizzo, *A Moveable Feast*’s systemic disparagement of auxiliary characters demands a critical reconsideration of the remate metaphor, since earlier analyses of the memoir gloss over the term’s violent etymology: “It comes from the Spanish verb, rematar, which literally means ‘to re-kill,’ with the suggestion of ‘to kill’ coming from matar. . . . Traditionally remate is used to refer to any type of ‘kill shot,’ a shot so forceful or perfectly placed that it cannot be returned” (122). Critics generally agree that Hemingway forcefully asserts dominance over his companions in *A Moveable Feast*. After all, many of the book’s characters were more than just friends for the author; they were also his literary rivals, and are attacked in the memoir as such.

24 In his youth, Hemingway was “marked for Life” (*AMF* 98) and insisted on using the inaccrochable “words that people would actually use” (25).
Hemingway evidently had acrimonious things to say about the many writers and artists that were a part of his coterie: Stein was a malicious gossip (63); Ford Madox Ford “lied about money” (199); Fitzgerald was an effete neurotic (140-47); and Wyndham Lewis had the eyes of “an unsuccessful rapist” (89). Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin observes that “there is . . . a great deal of hostility in his choosing mostly episodes that show his contemporaries in the worst light. The greater the competition they offered, the more negatively and at a greater length they are portrayed” (108). Jeffrey Meyers similarly notes that the memoir’s literary portraits are “inspired by an intense personal animus which is never explained in the book,” adding that “Hemingway could not help attacking writers who had tried to advance his career and using his discarded benefactors as satiric victims” (41). Such conclusions are common in the literature on *A Moveable Feast*. Critical studies of the book frequently take for granted that the author’s “animus” and “attacks” originate from a place of hostility—that the memoir serves as a kind of late-life exorcism of literary predecessors who haunted Hemingway for most of his career. The memoir is in this way very much like a biographical “kill shot” that cannot be reciprocated, since many of the people Hemingway maligns in the book had died by the time he started compiling his “Paris Sketches.”

Although *A Moveable Feast* was written long after the end of WWI, I propose that the author’s excoriation of his literary peers is partially animated by the dualist mentality (self versus other) that, according to Paul Fussell, dominated the Great War. As Fitzgerald cannily remarks in a letter to Beatrice Dance, “literary men allow themselves to get into internecine quarrels and finish about as victoriously as most of the nations at the end of the World War” (qtd. in Hampl 107). Hemingway conspicuously attacks his
literary opponents in the memoir, but he does so as a way to connect the betrayal and injuriousness inherent in autobiographical self-making with the ontological violence of war. “One of the legacies of the [WWI],” Fussell posits, is “this habit of simple distinction, simplification, and opposition. If truth is the main casualty in war, ambiguity is another” (77). People and nations during the War were reduced to either “allies”/”defensive” or “opponents”/”offensive”—there was no in-between (77). *A Moveable Feast* initially inscribes dichotomies that separate self from other, but eventually undercuts this “versus habit” by dividing the subject himself. There is no doubt that the writer advances his own reputation by hostilely undermining his literary opponents. And yet *A Moveable Feast* does not merely distinguish the author from the characters of his life; the memoir also implicates Hemingway in the lives of others, rendering his characterization inseparable from theirs. Within the text, the author braids the voices of auxiliary characters—most notably Stein and Fitzgerald—with his own. By eschewing the integrity of the autobiographical “I,” the book manifests a form of impersonality, which Hemingway saw as vital to fiction-writing, that entwines the individual’s experiences with those of his supporting characters. If *A Moveable Feast* is a kill shot, then my point is that its final target is Hemingway himself. The author’s “masculine” aggressiveness, which is commonly accepted as a truism in Hemingway scholarship, is in this way inextricable from the man’s relational and thus “feminine” self-narration.
Fictionalizing the Self

*A Moveable Feast* was first published in December 1964, three years after Hemingway ended his own life with a shotgun. While the memoir is now inextricable from the title that Aaron Hotchner and Mary Hemingway came up with after the author’s death, Hemingway in fact never once called the book “A Moveable Feast.” While putting together the memoir, Hemingway simply referred to the manuscript as his “Paris Sketches,” in part because of his editors’ refusal to publish it. Hemingway’s autobiographical pieces were, according to the publishers, “little sketches not short stories” (qtd. in Mary Hemingway, “The Making of the Book”). Indeed, the unifying title that his widow provides gives the memoir a coherence that the book does not actually possess. Despite the ordering (that Mary Hemingway and Malcolm Cowley provide in 1960s) and the re-ordering (that Séan Hemingway and Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin provide decades later) of the “sketches,” *A Moveable Feast* remains stubbornly fragmentary. As Louis A. Renza points out in “The Importance of Being Ernest,” *A Moveable Feast*, much like *In Our Time* (the composition of which the memoir details), should be considered a “collectio[n] of short prose” (213). Similar to the disjointed structure of *In Our Time*—a text which critics have rigorously debated even its generic coding as a short story collection, cycle, or “fragmentary novel”—*A Moveable Feast*

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25 Mary Hemingway allegedly derives the title “A Moveable Feast” from a conversation between her husband and Aaron Hotchner about Paris in the 1920s: “If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast” (qtd. in Lynn 8).
refuses to simply center upon Hemingway’s consciousness and instead weaves in and out of its characters’ different perspectives.\textsuperscript{26}

It is my contention that the fragmentation of \textit{A Moveable Feast} manifests Hemingway’s understanding of identity—it is an articulation of the contingency and partiality of self-knowledge—and is not simply a result of the editors’ shoddy patchwork. Like much of the author’s fiction, the memoir dramatizes the narration of self as necessarily fragmentary and consisting of multiple perspectives. In the now infamous section, “A Matter of Measurements,” Hemingway recalls reassuring Fitzgerald about his sexual equipment: after gazing at his friend’s genitals, Hemingway calmly proclaims, “You are O.K. There’s nothing wrong with you. You look at yourself from above and you look foreshortened” (162). This seemingly simple and amusing moment, I believe, crucially points to the preoccupation of the entire memoir and provides a key to its interpretation. Hemingway’s exchange with Fitzgerald demonstrates the impoverishment of a singular perspective: an omniscient or elevated point of view inevitably leads to a “foreshortened” sense of self. Just as Fitzgerald augments his vision with Hemingway’s and Zelda’s vastly different perspectives, so too does Hemingway conceptualize his own personal history with the viewpoints of others.

\textit{A Moveable Feast} frequently shifts pronominally even within single sections, refusing to be focalized by any one perspective. Although the essay “On Writing in the First Person,” is ostensibly a study of fiction-writing as craft, and for this reason excluded from the “original” Mary Hemingway edition of the memoir, I believe, its discussion of the interchangeability of experience and perspective contextualizes the many

\textsuperscript{26} See, for instance, Stephen P. Clifford’s “Hemingway’s Fragmentary Novel: Readers Writing the Hero in \textit{In Our Time}.”
contradictions of *A Moveable Feast* that have confounded its critics. While written from
the point of view of a “writer of fiction” (181), the essay in fact deconstructs the very
boundaries that separate autobiography and fictional storytelling: “When you first start
writing stories in the first person,” the essay starts, “if the stories are made so real that
people believe them, the people reading them nearly always think the stories really
happened to you” (181). Verisimilitude (“so real”), according to this passage, has no
direct relation to physical truth or verifiability, but rather rests entirely on the emotional
resonances and believability of a piece of writing. Consequently, well-written fiction in
the first person detaches both the reader and the writer from their personal experiences.
They are exhorted to identify with an other: if the author writes “successfully enough,
you make the person who is reading [your stories] believe that the things happened to
him too” (181). Furthermore, just as Harold Krebs from “Soldier’s Home” tells other
people’s stories as if they were his own, so too does a good storyteller “attribut[e] to
himself things other men had seen” (*IOT* 70). The writer, in this sense, is a reader first
and foremost, because his stories come from the tales and experiences of others. He is so
immersed in the tales he hears that he vicariously experiences them himself.

Unlike Fitzgerald, who in his autobiographical essay “Handle with Care” asks
despairingly “why [he] had become identified with the objects of [his] horror or
compassion” (69), Hemingway promotes an approach to writing so profoundly

27 This previously unpublished essay was “restored” in the 2009 edition of the *A
Moveable Feast*.

28 Fitzgerald’s *Esquire* pieces, “The Crack-Up,” “Pasting It Together,” and “Handle with
Care,” were published in February, March, and April of 1936, respectively. They were
later collected by Edmund Wilson, the author’s good friend and fellow Princeton
alumnus, and published posthumously in 1945. This chapter quotes from the latter
collection.
identificatory that the boundary between the author (subject) and his characters (object) virtually collapses: “I would invent not only from my own experience but from the experiences and knowledge of my friends and all the people I had known” (181). He adds that a writer naturally bridges the gap between himself and his characters, because “while you were making them up you had to make them happen to the person who was telling them” (181). Even though the reading audience is not directly addressed in the essay, the pronoun “you” that permeates the entire piece invites the reader to adopt the writer’s subject position. Despite explicitly championing the first person perspective, much of “On Writing” is in fact written in the second person. Hemingway refers to the first person narrator/character as “the person who was telling them”—relegating the readers (“them”) to the third position—while the writer is addressed as “you.” The reader who is directly addressed by the essay, therefore, is promoted to the first position of the writer. Our primary responsibility is not to read passively, then, but rather to create actively. In short, Hemingway and the reader converge at the first and second position of this essay. As Mieke Bal points out, because the pronouns “I” and “you” do not refer to a specific individual, “first and second-person positions are by definition reversible” (308). In this way, the first person can be seen as encompassing all three positions: writer, reader, and character.

According to Robert W. Trogdon, second person narration is “typical of [Hemingway’s] mature style” (26). The editors of the 1964 edition of *A Moveable Feast*, however, preferred the less ambiguous first person perspective, and excised Hemingway’s many invocations of the “you”/reader. For the 2009 edition, Seán Hemingway restores the second person voice, pointing out that “this intentional and carefully conceived narrative device gives the effect of the author speaking to himself and, subconsciously, through the repetition of the word ‘you,’ brings the reader into the story” (*AMF* 4).
While Hemingway regards the conflation of perspectives as his ultimate goal, Fitzgerald warns against it in his autobiographical essays, calling the act of “identification” a dangerous form of “self-immolation” (69):

Identification such as this spells the death of accomplishment. It is something like this that keeps insane people from working. Lenin did not willingly endure the sufferings of his proletariat, nor Washington of his troops, nor Dickens of his London poor. And when Tolstoy tried some such merging of himself with the objects of his attention, it was a fake and a failure. (69)

Fitzgerald cautions against the excesses of empathy: individuals who immerse themselves in others too deeply, he argues, risk losing their sense of self. Consequently, a writer of fiction who routinely identifies with his creations inevitably deprives himself of his “vitality.” While autobiography sustains the integrity of the “I,” fiction threatens to overwhelm or even annihilate it. In part because of his vocation as a novelist, by the time Fitzgerald had started composing his autobiographical pieces for *Esquire*, “there was not an ‘I’ any more—not a basis on which I could organize my self-respect” (69). His craft had driven him into a life of fictions and slowly cannibalized his individual identity. Choosing to continue with his career as a writer was for Fitzgerald tantamount to abandoning life and “ceas[ing] any attempts to be a person” (70).

As a devotee of fiction, Hemingway was quick to impugn his friend’s judgment. In a letter to Max Perkins, written just days after the first “Crack-Up” essay was published, Hemingway remarks that Fitzgerald “seems to take pride in his shamelessness

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30 Perkins was Fitzgerald’s and Hemingway’s then mutual editor.
I always knew he couldn’t think—he never could—but he had a marvelous talent and the thing is to use it—not whine in public” (Letters 437-38). For Hemingway, fiction and “honest work” were the answers to his friend’s problem rather than the problem itself (438). Indeed, by admitting to cracking like a plate in a glossy magazine, Fitzgerald had exposed himself to the ridicule of many of his peers. The writer was faced, however, with two seemingly contradictory charges. While Perkins considered the querulous essays to be an “indecent invasion of his [Fitzgerald’s] own privacy” (qtd. in Bruccoli, “The Perkins-Wilson Correspondence” 65), later readers criticized the author for being too evasive with factual details. “The thing most conspicuously left out was,” according to Scott Donaldson, “Fitzgerald’s alcoholism” (178). Similarly, in a 2012 article for The American Scholar, Patricia Hampl observes, “None of this sounds genuine” (110), adding that

Fitzgerald’s essays seem decorously vague, cloaked in metaphor rather than disclosure. Though he describes his psychological and spiritual breakdown, his utter collapse, often in a wry, self-deprecating style, he doesn’t spill many autobiographical beans. We don’t learn of his despair over his wife’s mental illness. He doesn’t divulge his bouts with drinking, his imprudent affair with a married woman, his money worries, his literary woes. Mother, father, those stock figures of personal narrative—never mentioned. The master storyteller isn’t even very narrative, employing drifts of figurative language rather than episodes and scenes. (104)

Yet to fault Fitzgerald for being “vague” or avoiding autobiographical facts seems to miss the very point of the essays, as it is precisely the author’s inability be a “person” and
his lack of “vitality” that he bemoans. In substituting metaphor for disclosure and figurative language for narrative, Fitzgerald dramatizes his begrudging withdrawal into a fictional identity. Like his fellow modernists, the writer laments the loss of a coherent and meaningful self—that is, the Romantic notion of a non-fragmentary individual genius. He could no longer be an integrated person of vitality, because in the fractured and de-centered world of modernity, no such person could exist: “The old dream of being an entire man in the Goethe-Byron-Shaw tradition, . . . has been relegated to the junk heap of the shoulder pads worn for one day on the Princeton freshman football field” (Fitzgerald 72). To “spill . . . autobiographical beans” as a way to illuminate his “crack-up,” as Hampl suggests, would imply that there is a rational explanation for Fitzgerald’s psychological breakdown. The dearth of life details in the essays, then, articulates the writer’s loss of faith in autobiographical narration, which according to Georges Gusdorf, “reassemble[s] the scattered elements of [the life writer’s] individual life and . . . regroup[s] them in a comprehensive sketch. . . . [T]he autobiographer strains toward a complete and coherent expression of his entire destiny” (35). Fitzgerald finally succumbs to a life of fiction, because in the meaninglessness of the modern world, he had nowhere else to turn. For Fitzgerald, as it was for T. S. Eliot before him, myth and fictions had come to be the only “way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Eliot, “Ulysses, Myth, and Order” 177).
It is in part because of such concerns that Hemingway privileges fiction in the ostensibly autobiographical *A Moveable Feast*. Like Wyndham Lewis, who would assess a piece of art by taking “a pencil out of his pocket and . . . measuring it on the pencil with his thumb” (*AMF* 89-90), the writer who tries to capture a life—even his own—with quantifiable facts “mis[s] what it’s all about” (89). Hemingway acknowledges the critic’s desire for a “truthful” account of his life; however, he does not believe a writer should be bound by facts. Indeed, the writer openly scorns what he calls the “private detective school of literary criticism”:

> What is, if not easy, almost always possible to do is for members of the private detective school of literary criticism to prove that the writer of fiction written in the first person could not possibly have done everything that the narrator did or, perhaps not even any of it. What importance this has or what it proves except that the writer is not devoid of imagination or the power of invention I have never understood. (181)

In Hemingway’s estimation, the goal of such critics is to pointlessly separate fact from fiction. This school’s preoccupation with experiential authenticity troubles Hemingway’s sensibilities as a writer, because it not only diminishes his “power of invention” (181), but it also distinguishes the boundary between the self and the other far too decisively.  

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31 Many modernists preferred fiction to facts. Through the voice of Edgar “Tar” Moorehead, for instance, Sherwood Anderson pointedly asks, “If you are a born liar, a man of the fancy, why not be what you are?” (10). Marcel Proust, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway are just a few of the many modernist writers who opted to create fiction out of their lives rather than adhere to facts.

32 Despite being written more than two decades before the publication of Lejeune’s “The Autobiographical Pact,” Hemingway’s “On Writing” can be read as an anticipatory critique of the strict generic and subjective boundaries that the later essay espouses. The autobiographer’s signature or “proper name,” according to Lejeune, is a pledge of
These critics would posit that only those who physically experience an event can authoritatively (and authentically) bear witness to it. There is a significant difference, however, between Harold Krebs’s lying and Hemingway’s fictionalizing in the memoir: while the former claims to tell the truth about his own experiences, the writer refuses to attribute fact to his autobiography. Hemingway confesses that “Many things have been changed in fact to try to make it a picture of a true time” (231).

Despite Simon and Schuster’s marketing of *A Moveable Feast* as a “memoir” for public consumption, Hemingway explicitly refers to his “Paris sketches” as a work of the imagination. In handwritten drafts of the book’s introduction, the writer declares that his “book is fiction. But there is always a chance that such a work of fiction may throw light on what has been written as fact” (230). All autobiographies, Hemingway seems to suggest, are necessarily fictional, since “No one can write true fact in reminiscences” (230). The passage of time fractures the individual self and his memories. This was especially the case for the aging Hemingway because, as his son Patrick Hemingway points out in the book’s Foreword, the writer composed much of *A Moveable Feast* while believing he could no longer trust his own memory. Due to the electroconvulsive therapy he received at the Mayo Clinic, the writer found much of his past irretrievable. As his son

honorable intentions and a promise of authenticity; it binds the autobiographical subject, the man who lives and breathes, with his textual self. Lejeune’s definition maintains that all autobiographies take on this “double equation”: “author = narrator, and author = character” (6). The protagonist, the narrator, and the author, therefore, must converge at the moment of subscription for the text to be autobiographical. The reader and the writer, in this model of autobiography, are antagonistic, because of their seemingly different aims: “Confronted with what looks like an autobiographical narrative, the reader often tends to think of himself as a detective, that is to say, to look for breaches of contract (whatever the contract)” (14). While the reader desires the truth, and nothing but the truth, the writer will fictionalize the past in order to present himself in the best light possible.
puts it, “With memory gone, and knowing that it is gone, is likely to come despair, the sin against the Holy Ghost. Electric shock therapy can destroy memory like dementia or death does, but, unlike dementia or death, you are left aware that it has been destroyed” (xiv). Because the writer knew his memories were fading, he imaginatively supplements what he could not remember. Indeed, he makes it a point to undercut the facticity and autobiographical status of his sketches. Ultimately, unlike Fitzgerald two decades earlier, Hemingway does not consider his compulsory turn to fiction as tragic; rather, the writer dramatizes in *A Moveable Feast* the intersubjective possibilities of a composit self. By accepting the “I” as a fictional construct, Hemingway comes to imaginatively connect with the “objects of his attention.”

The Parity of You and I

Like Fitzgerald’s “Crack-Up” essays, *A Moveable Feast* could also be considered “evasive,” since it too excludes many of its author’s intimate details. When recounting Hadley’s role in losing his early Paris manuscripts in 1922, for instance, Hemingway depicts the experience without the emotional intensity of his fictional reimaginings of the same event. Marc Seals observes, “Gone are the bitterness and despair of the account from ‘The Strange Country’; gone is the desire to twist it into a vicious tale of a wife’s revenge that surfaced in *The Garden of Eden*. All that remains seems to be forgiveness” (70). Seals’s repeated use of the word “gone” of course points to Hemingway’s deliberate omission of facts. The stoic tone of *A Moveable Feast* might reflect the author’s late-life disposition and forgiveness of Hadley, as Seals argues, but

33 According to Seán Hemingway, his grandfather routinely “altered the facts to improve the story” (6).
the memoir nonetheless misrepresents the past by leaving out the young author’s initial feelings of anger and betrayal. Exclusions such as this, however, are generally regarded as par for the course in autobiographical writing, since people’s reputations and privacies are at stake. Moreover, memory—and thus the autobiographer’s capacity to recount the past—is always fragmentary and partial.

Yet there is one glaring omission in the book that I believe warrants further analysis: even though A Moveable Feast chronicles Hemingway’s life in Paris soon after his triumphant return as a wounded WWI soldier, the memoir does not once mention the author’s own war experiences. Hemingway volunteered for duty with the Red Cross in 1917 after America declared war on the Central Powers. In June 1918, while in canteen service—dispensing chocolates and cigarettes to Italian soldiers—the young writer was severely injured by an Austrian trench mortar. Although Hemingway was never in active combat, it is peculiar that he does not speak of his injuries in a memoir full of wounded people, especially since his war experience greatly traumatized the writer. Just as Hemingway’s “The Big Two-Hearted River” is read as “the most famous piece of fiction about war with no mention of war in it” (Vernon 34), the seeming absence of the author’s own WWI experiences bespeaks the complexities involved in representing traumatic memories in life writing. “Very likely,” Matthew Stewart posits, “Hemingway did as

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34 In “On Writing in the First Person,” Hemingway claims that “you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood” (71).

35 According to Agnes von Kurowsky, the American Red Cross nurse with whom Hemingway fell in love while at a Milan hospital, the injured writer “was worried about his leg. He was afraid they’d amputate” (qtd. in Reynolds, “Agnes Tapes” 269).

36 Because traumatic experience demands to be transmitted “in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Caruth
millions of war veterans have done and adopted the uncomplaining, kidding stoicism expected of him under the circumstances. The manly thing, the adult thing, the heroic thing was not to let on to those at home” (201). While this may indeed be the case, I would add that the omission of Hemingway’s WWI experience in *A Moveable Feast* is more than simply a performance of masculine forbearance. His conspicuous exclusion of the Great War in the memoir, I believe, is at least partially motivated by Eliot’s influential dictum of impersonality (“a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” [“Tradition” 39])—what Fitzgerald calls “self-immolation.” This is not to say, however, that Hemingway’s self is completely excised from the text. Rather, the memoir channels the kind of impersonality that suffuses Eliot’s own *Four Quartets*, which according to Sharon Cameron, “strips identity from experience, so that what is represented is experience that is particularized without being particularized as someone’s” (149).

In grammatical terms, *A Moveable Feast* overlays the singular subject (“I”) onto the second person (“you”), so that experiences come to be marked in the accusative sense by both the individual self and the other; as a result, the subject is also marked by the

5), the traumatized subject of autobiography necessarily straddles the boundary between fact and fiction. In part because of this divide, Leigh Gilmore contends in *The Limits of Autobiography*, “documentary and creative talents” must combine in order to give shape to traumatic experience (24). Fiction in autobiography, she adds, crucially challenges “the assumption that honesty lies in personal revelation where one assumes that testimonial transparency is not only necessary and desirable but possible. There may be ways some trauma narratives can never meet the strictest standards of evidence . . . and still come into being” (24). Through ventriloquism, Hemingway demonstrates the necessary fictions involved in the reconstruction of traumatic experience. Indeed, as Gilmore’s own paradoxical language implies, fact and fiction are not so distinct (“honesty lies”) when it comes to trauma narratives.
experience. A brief examination of Hemingway’s introduction to *Men at War*, will help illustrate the point:

When you go to war as a boy you have a great illusion of immortality. Other people get killed; not you. It can happen to other people; but not to you. Then when you are badly wounded the first time you lose that illusion and you know it can happen to you. After being severely wounded two weeks before my nineteenth birthday I had a bad time until I figured out that nothing could happen to me that had not happened to all men before me. Whatever I had to do men had always done. If they had done it then I could do it too and the best thing was not to worry about it. (xii)

The author does not eradicate the “I” when articulating the collective event of war, since doing so would abstract the individual from the experience. Indeed, Hemingway demonstrates this by associating the second person pronoun (“you”)—the abstract subject who refuses to be marked by nominative experiences—to the “illusions of immortality.” In the first two sentences, the pronoun “you” shifts from the nominative (subject) to the accusative (object) case. And yet no experience is able to mark the subject in the second person, because of his detachment. Only by particularizing the second person subject does the impact of war finally “happen to me.” In other words, the “I” (subject) is marked by the experience and transformed into a “me” (object) even though the experience is shared by many. While the cohesion of the human condition (“Whatever I had to do men had always done”) provided the injured Hemingway solace, it is only in taking possession of his own particularized and wounded body that the young soldier comes to connect with the experiences of others. In short, his wounding in WWI mortifies and subsequently
links him to a more profound experience of interconnectedness. As the rest of this chapter argues, it is precisely this palimpsestic imbrication of the experiential self and other—facilitated by the woundability of the individual—that constitutes the subject of *A Moveable Feast*. If Hemingway’s memoir is an act of self-portraiture, it is one that must be viewed as a kind of pentimento, where the “I” is both obscured by and visible through layers of otherness.

Skeptical about his individual perceptions, the author preferred instead to write about his experiences obliquely, that is, through the filter of another. Hemingway felt connected to those who fought in the Great War—especially those who had been wounded. “In those days,” the author reminisces in *A Moveable Feast*, “we did not trust anyone who had not been in the war” (74). Consequently, when Stein charged all the young people who served in WWI as being a part of “a lost generation,” the author reacted indignantly: “the hell with her lost-generation talk and all the dirty, easy labels” (62). What had inspired Stein’s invective was the perceived insolence of a young veteran

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37 This is, of course, not to say that the people that populate the memoir are all versions of Hemingway—alter egos created in the likeness of the author. As Jackson J. Benson points out, “Generations of readers, among them some of our most sophisticated critics, have insisted on seeing Nick, Jake, Frederic, Robert Cantwell, and Santiago as extensions of their author, essentially ‘disguised’ personal histories. The result is not only flawed criticism and weak interpretation but a view of the fiction that has been very narrow, since it has been often formulated out of a reaction to what we think we know about a man” (346).

38 Many of Hemingway’s good friends were severely injured during the Great War. When asked by his son whether Fitzgerald had been traumatized by the war, Hemingway flatly denies it, but confesses that “it would be no disgrace if he had been demolished mentally by the war” (*AMF* 207). The implication of course is that Hemingway himself had also been a casualty of war—that somehow he too had been wounded in both body and mind. Yet, despite his compulsion to write about WWI throughout his career, the author generally refused to document his own experiences directly. “Having seen the [atrocities of war] I did not care to talk about them” (57), he admits in *A Moveable Feast*. 
who failed to repair her Model T Ford in a timely manner. The mechanic, as Hemingway tells it, “had not broken the priority of other vehicles, in repairing Miss Stein’s Ford” (61), and for this reason was considered not “sérieux” by his patroness. Stein was furious with the mechanic because she viewed herself as a “priority” relative to others. With her “easy labels,” Stein reduces the young man with an individual history into a type: an unserious and drunken lout who did not respect his elders. In order to counterbalance Stein’s flattening of the boy’s character, Hemingway provides an alternative narrative for the mechanic. The author projects his own memories onto the young man so as to flesh out Stein’s caricature:

I thought about the boy in the garage and if he had ever been hauled in one of those vehicles when they were converted to ambulances. I remembered how they used to burn out their brakes going down the mountain roads with a full load of wounded and braking in low and finally using the reverse, and how the last ones were driven over the mountainside empty, so they could be replaced by big Fiats with a good H-shift and metal-to-metal brakes. (62)

Hemingway connects himself to the veteran through their respective experiences. Even though he could not have known whether the mechanic had been injured while at war, the author nonetheless imagines the younger man being taken away by an ambulance, because the boy’s wound—whether fictional or not—would provide Hemingway with an entry point into the mechanic’s character. By furnishing the mechanic with a version of his own wound, Hemingway is able to see himself in the imagined other. As an ambulance driver for the Red Cross during the War, the writer could easily picture the
mechanic as an injured soldier, being carried away by the very vehicles that he now repairs. Although Hemingway’s account of the mechanic’s war experience is speculative, the hypothetical injuries help create a communion between the two men. By mapping his own wound onto the mechanic, the author closes the gap between self and other: Hemingway emotionally dissociates himself from his own personal experiences by visualizing himself as the WWI veteran. There is an inversion of subjectivities, therefore, where the writer’s “own” wound is made foreign, while the other man’s trauma becomes uncannily familiar.

The mechanic’s traumatic history beckons to Hemingway and demands to be told. According to Cathy Caruth, “trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). The wound’s story, however, is not readily understood. Indeed, Caruth is careful to explain that this wound that demands our attention is always alien to the hearer, because it can never be fully known. And yet,

we can also read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another’s wound (8).

Caruth translates the corporeal wound, which belongs to an individual’s body, into a cry that is transmittable to all those who hear it (4). These traumatic cries thus make claims
on all those who come across it. Hemingway hears the silent cries of the veteran mechanic, and as a way to identify with the ex-soldier, projects his own experience onto him. Yet the writer never claims to fully apprehend the mechanic; nor does he fuse traumatically with the other. Rather, he addresses the mechanic’s cry with his own story. That is, he puts himself in the place of the minor character. But even then the other remains inscrutable. Elaine Scarry contends that there are two paths for achieving mental equality between the imagining self and the objects of the writer’s imagination: in the first path, the subject “attempt[s] to acquire knowledge about the weight and complexity of others” (“Difficulty” 50). In the case of the mechanic, for Hemingway to take the first path, he would have to assume a kind of omniscient knowledge about the boy’s past in order to state facts about the latter’s life. While this may at first seem to be the approach that the author adopts when speculating about the mechanic, I would suggest that there is a significant difference between his fictionalizing and the untenable desire to fully know the other. Hemingway crucially refrains from stating the mechanic’s injury as fact. Instead, he wonders “if he [the mechanic] had” been injured (emphasis mine). The possibility that the boy was wounded in war is left open. Hemingway simply posits a plausible scenario with his own personal knowledge of the war. He ultimately recognizes “the constraints on imagining others,” as Scarry would put it. Rather than “attempt to acquire knowledge about the weight and complexity” of the mechanic (50), Hemingway “dis-imagines” himself; that is, he attains a sense of parity between self and other “not by trying to make one’s knowledge of others as weighty as one’s knowledge of oneself, but by making one ignorant about oneself, and therefore as weightless as all others” (51). Unlike Stein, Hemingway resists prioritizing himself. By omitting personal “facts” and
displacing his wound, Hemingway presents the self—like the other—as finally unknowable. The imagined other is always only a plausible fiction. This skepticism is that which must be preserved if we are to approach the other person as not simply subordinate to the self. Similarly, the version an individual presents of himself is also just that—a partial version.

Warring Selves

Despite the apparent compassion that Hemingway extends to the mechanic, his defense of the young man is nonetheless a barely veiled critique of Stein’s “easy labels.” After being told by Stein that he spent too much time in the “milieu of criminals and perverts,” Hemingway retorts that he “had lived in a world such as it was and there were all kinds of people in it and [he] tried to understand them” (AMF 28). He pointedly adds, however, that “some of them I could not like and some I still hated” (28). Stein is of course one of those people with whom the younger author had such an ambivalent relationship. Indeed, Hemingway depicts their relationship as explicitly antagonistic and even war-like. When describing Stein’s dislike of Joyce, for instance, Hemingway unfavorably compares his former mentor to a jealous military officer: “You learned not to do it [speak positively of another general] the first time you made the mistake. You could always mention a general, though, that the general you were talking to had beaten” (60). At moments, A Moveable Feast even evokes the genre of military history: the book studies the events leading up to a cataclysmic feud and details the final disintegration of former allies.
Consequently, many scholars have taken Hemingway’s memoir as a literary counter-attack against Stein for writing *Autobiography*. Stein’s book was hugely popular: published first in *The Atlantic Monthly* in serial form and later by Harcourt Brace, its accessible style and gossipy anecdotes about its author’s famous friends made *Autobiography* Stein’s most commercially successful work.\(^{39}\) The indiscretions that endeared it to the public, however, infuriated the people she wrote about. Stein notoriously calls Hemingway a coward (“Hemingway was yellow” [204]), an unthinking student (“it is so flattering to have a pupil who does it without understanding it” [204]), and a bad writer (“Hemingway, remarks are not literature” [207]). After reading Stein’s *Autobiography*, Hemingway “seethed with anger and called it a ‘damned pitiful book’” (Souhami 193). Stein had publicly challenged him, declaring in *Autobiography* that a memoir by Hemingway would be much more compelling than the fictional stories that he usually writes: “what a book . . . would be the real story of Hemingway, not those he writes [i.e., his novels] but the confessions of the real Ernest” (*Autobiography* 204). As a response, the younger writer “threatened that one day he would come out with some memoirs of his own” (Souhami 193). In a letter to Arnold Gingrich dated November 16, 1934, Hemingway declares with much bravado that

> I’ve got the gun and it’s loaded and I know where the vital spots are and friendship aside there’s a certain damned fine feeling of superiority in knowing you can finish anybody off whenever you want to and still not doing it. . . . I’ve written all the facts about Gertrude so they’ll be on tap if

\(^{39}\) “The general public bought the book,” according to Diana Souhami. “The first printing, of 5,400 copies, was sold out by 22 August 1933, nine days before publication. There were four reprints in the next two years. The literary Guild sold it as a bookclub choice” (192).
anything happens to me but I don’t like to slam the old bitch around when
she’s here having a wonderful time. (Selected Letters 411)

In other words, Hemingway had the ammunition (”the facts about Gertrude”), but would
refrain from using it. In this letter, Hemingway presents himself as magnanimous,
superior, and merciful, while also exposing his capacity for violence.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Hemingway would place his mentor in an
antagonist’s role within his memoir. Yet like the above letter, the author would also
repeatedly refer to Stein as an intimate “friend.” In A Moveable Feast, Hemingway
even pronounces the significant contributions Stein made to literary modernism in
general and to his own work in particular: “[Stein] had also discovered many things about
rhythms and the uses of words in repetition that were valid and valuable and she talked
well about them” (27). Her influence over Hemingway’s writing is clear even in the style
of this short description. The absence of commas, the rhythmic and paratactic
interlocking of disparate ideas with the conjunction “and,” as well as the alliterative play
of this sentence echo Stein’s distinctive style. Hemingway’s vacillation between
respectful pupil and competitive peer in the memoir has predictably generated much
confusion. When read as a simple first person account of people’s lives, A Moveable
Feast certainly does seem like a kind of biographical “kill shot” (del Gizzo 124). Stein,
he tells his wife, “is nice . . . But she does talk a lot of rot sometimes” (AMF 63). Yet

40 In “Portraits of Grief,” Miller argues that mourning an ambivalent relationship can be
more traumatic for the “survivor” than grieving the loss of a loved one. When
memorializing, she observes, the bereaved is frequently beholden to “codes of
idealization” that “make the expression of certain kinds of feelings taboo in the public
domain” (121). Put another way, a mourner often suppresses his negative feelings for the
deceased in order to “celebrate” the latter’s life.
Hemingway was guilty of many of his own accusations. Is it likely, then, that the author (even in his old age) simply did not perceive the hypocrisy of his charges?

Regarding Hemingway’s claim that he would “do my best to serve [Stein] and see she gets justice for the good work she had done as long as I can, so help me God and Mike Ney” (62), Gerry Brenner plainly states that the “pledge is disingenuous, its sentimentality oozing with hypocrisy” (102-3). It is my claim that Hemingway was neither hypocritical nor disingenuous when pledging his fidelity to Stein, and that the author does in fact attempt to provide his mentor the justice she deserves. By conspicuously “attacking” his mentor in *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway brings attention to his own questionable conduct, and thereby indirectly indicts himself: the virulence and offensiveness of his attacks invite the reader’s moral skepticism. Indeed, the author’s ironic invocation of the “treasonous” Michel Ney (“Mike Ney”)—a deeply ambiguous model for loyalty—at the end of his vow to “serve” Stein calls into question his own sincerity and loyalties towards the once “warm and affectionate friend” (62). After railing against Stein for her “easy labels” (“who is calling who a lost generation?” [62]), Hemingway heads to the Closerie des Lilas where he spots François Rude’s statue of Ney:

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41 Michel Ney, one of Napoleon’s leading marshals, pledged his allegiance to the French monarchy, but then shifted his loyalties after Napoleon reappeared in France in 1815. After his defeat at the battle of Waterloo, Ney was executed by a firing squad for his treason.

42 In a letter to Edmund Wilson written in 1951, Hemingway states that “Now that we live in a time of such violence, false-witness, inaccuracy, calumnies and lies for profit I am going to spend the rest of my life trying to be just. That doesn’t mean that there are not people that should be justly hanged though” (*Selected Letters* 737).
Then as I was getting up to the Closerie des Lilas with the light on my old friend, the statue of Marshal Ney with his sword out and the shadows of the trees on the bronze, and he alone there and nobody behind him and what a balls-up he’d made of Waterloo, I thought that all generations were lost by something and always had been and always would be and I stopped at the Lilas to keep the statue company and drank a cold beer before going home to the flat over the sawmill. (62)

Soon after visiting the statue, Hemingway pledges his allegiance to Stein. The narrative sequencing of this scene (angry Hemingway—statue of Michel Ney—remorseful Hemingway) combined with the history of Ney’s “treasonous” behavior remind the reader of the author’s own acts of betrayal. Both the statue of Ney and *A Moveable Feast* depict deeply flawed people. Hemingway, however, does not idealize Stein or “ignore [her] flaw[s] . . . as François Rude did with Ney” (Brenner 104); instead, he presents his former mentor in an utterly unflattering light. Brenner concludes, therefore, that Hemingway’s “memoirs are, paradoxically, acts of loyal treachery. To best serve Stein and see that ‘she gets justice’ requires just such an act as he is committing” (105). Although I would agree that Hemingway’s “betrayal was also an act of supreme personal loyalty” (105), since the “flaws” that the author puts on display render his former mentor more full and “significant” (104), I believe Brenner mistakenly limits the target of Hemingway’s “betrayal.” It is true that Hemingway does not obscure Stein’s bad behavior in *A Moveable Feast*, but his exhibition of her flaws alone does not amount to the “justice” that he pledges. Rather the referential slipperiness of the statue—it symbolizes Hemingway, Stein, and Ney simultaneously—points to the pervasiveness of
betrayal in the memoir. An autobiographer cannot help but betray himself: he must either expose the “selfishness and treachery of everything we did” (*AMF* 218), or risk compromising his own artistic integrity. The “loyal treachery” that Brenner correctly observes, then, is directed not only at Stein but also at Hemingway himself.

Just as the statue represents more than Hemingway, so too does *A Moveable Feast* capture more than its author’s voice. While Lejeune demands that the narrator of an autobiography map perfectly onto the autobiographical subject (i.e., the author), *A Moveable Feast*, like the statue of Ney, resists such one-to-one formulations. He does not, however, divorce himself from his own individual perspective: the first person narration of *A Moveable Feast* continues to be associated with the author, yet it is heterogeneous, concurrently focalized by both the narrator (Hemingway) and the characters that surround him (in this case Stein). In the above scene, it is Hemingway who sees Rude’s sculpture. Appropriately, the statue is described in the author’s perspective, but the portrait is also reported in Stein’s signature paratactic style. Commas are few in number and the syntax is tortuous. The sculpture of Ney, because of the profusion of details—the lighting, the sword, the bronze, and so forth—lifts the historical Ney from the past tense of memorialization into the “constant present” of Hemingway’s perceptions. Stein, of course, originated this style in order to flatten temporality in works like *The Making of Americans* and *Tender Buttons*: the artist, she explains, “can’t live in the past, because it is gone. He can’t live in the future because no one knows what it is. He can only live in the present of his daily life” (“How Writing” 151). The regrets Hemingway feels for his past indiscretions are not given a veil of pastness in *A Moveable Feast*; his treachery and “black remorse” are stripped of their historicity and given a
present form through the autobiographical act. In other words, through the incorporation of Stein’s style, Hemingway refuses to distance himself from his prior actions. By representing his youthful antagonism towards Stein, Hemingway self-consciously reenacts it. Past crimes are in this way transported to the present moment.

Furthermore, this passage not only echoes Stein’s style, but also reiterates her famous “lost generation” epithet. By ventriloquizing his mentor’s voice while depicting Ney’s statue, Hemingway not only indicts himself for his betrayal, but also does so through the very expressions of the one he had betrayed. Just as the marshal made a “balls-up” of Waterloo, so too did Hemingway make mistakes in “betraying” his old friends. The author’s identification with Ney, therefore, is not “an artistic flaw in a writer whose ironic sensibility was always his first defense against self pity” (105), as Brenner posits. Hemingway treats Stein as an equal who, like himself, had the capacity to both injure and be injured. The writer, by evoking Stein, willingly puts himself in front of the firing squad. In this way, Hemingway refuses to be caught like Ney, “alone there and nobody behind him.” He is at once Ney, Stein, and himself. In this moment, the author relinquishes the “versus habit”—a dichotomous mentality of self versus other—that often characterizes autobiography, opting instead for a heterogeneous “I.” Like the grammatical practice of parataxis, this passage overlays three great figures without hierarchy or coordination.

As we have seen, autobiographers often seek to settle scores, defend themselves, and sometimes even exorcise the specters that lay claim to them. Such seemingly antithetical impulses animate Hemingway’s memoir. *A Moveable Feast* ultimately betrays the author’s ambivalence towards people like Stein, whom he saw as both an
opponent and as an ally. Although the writer greatly resented his former mentor, he also respected her very much. Hemingway does not, as a result, simply vilify or celebrate Stein. The “test of a first-rate intelligence,” according to Fitzgerald, “is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (Crack-Up 57). If Fitzgerald is correct, then A Moveable Feast proves that Hemingway did not in fact lose “control of his material” in his old age, nor did he lack “the capacity to understand what his portrait depicts” (Brenner 103). Rather, within the memoir lie the contradictions that are typical of a fictional self. Both Hemingway and A Moveable Feast contain a host of antithetical extremes: the author, like Stein, is defensive and offensive, talented and covetous, generous and petty. The main split that fragments the book, therefore, does not exist between Hemingway and other characters, but within the writer himself. And yet, A Moveable Feast is as much about the characters of Hemingway’s past as it is about the old man writing them. If alterity (the offensive, wicked, and deficient) always already resides within the self, then the boundaries that separate self and other cannot finally hold. As the Ritz bartender Georges reminds both the reader and Hemingway, “[O]ne does not forget people because they are dead” (164).
“I look into their myriad eyes”: the Queer Gaze of Tennessee Williams’s *Memoirs*

...most constructions of disability assume that the person with disabilities is in some sense damaged while the observer is undamaged. Furthermore, there is an assumption that society at large is intact, normal, setting a norm, undamaged. But the notion of an undamaged observer who is part of an undamaged society is certainly one that needs to be questioned.

—Lennard Davis

They have propped my head between the pillows and the sheet-cuff
Like an eye between two white lids that will not stay shut.
Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.

—Sylvia Plath, “Tulips”

Tennessee Williams recalls his early life as marked by loneliness and social alienation. After moving from Westminster Place to 5 South Taylor in St. Louis, a “radical step down in the social scale” (*Memoirs* 13), the playwright-to-be found himself deserted by his former friends and unable to make new ones. Because of his debilitating shyness, as well as a nearly fatal bout of diphtheria, the young boy could not bring himself to look at others his own age, let alone approach and mingle with them. By the age of eleven, Williams already knew the isolating effects of a dysfunctional body. He became acutely aware of other people’s perceptions of his physicality because of his weak heart and an early brush with death. He learned to conceal his physical disfigurements in order to feign good health and obviate the humiliation of a discredited body. During this difficult period in his life, right before puberty, Williams discovered the salubriousness of writing: “It was about this time, age eleven or twelve, that [he]

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43 Among the numerous ailments that plague Williams in *Memoirs*, here are several: diphtheria “with complications” (11), a “cardiovascular condition” (38), impotence (43), a cataract in his left eye (53), the vomiting of blood (57), “clap in the ass” (75), a perforated appendix (103), a “*Maecles Diverticulum* of the small intestine” (104), a staphylococcic infection (181), depression (194), “suspected breast cancer” (235), and gynecomastia (237).
started writing stories—it was a compensation” for his vulnerable body (14). His craft was “the only thing [that] saved [his] life” (42), as it provides him with the “freedom of being” (230). To be a writer, according to Williams, is “like being free,” and “[t]o be free is to have achieved your life” (230). He saw in his vocation the capacity to alter and even construct lives.

Like his younger self, Williams would again use stories to compensate for the failings of his body when composing his autobiography. In *Memoirs*, the playwright presents himself as active and career-oriented, characteristics he saw as more consistent with the robust men of his father’s illustrious lineage than with the coddled and infirm “sissy” he felt his mother had cultivated (12). He recasts himself from the part of a boy with the “makings of a sissy”—a role that greatly disappointed his father—to the character-type he believed was in his blood to play: the “frontiersmen-heroes of east Tennessee” (12). Writing his life story was a way for Williams to distance himself from the shortcomings of his “queer” physique.

Autobiographers, as I argue in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, are traditionally prompted by two competing tendencies: the desire to personify cultural ideals and the need to characterize accurately an individual identity. Williams frequently vacillates between these two opposing injunctions within *Memoirs*. He at first detaches himself from his queer boyfriends by acting as their dominating and watchful lover. Like Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams sought refuge in darkness. He would prowl for boys only at night, so as to “obscure [the] opaque iris of [his] left eye” (53). Even at a young age, the playwright could not tolerate being seen. He was terrified by the scrutiny of the gaze, as he feared that his “abominable secret” would be perceived by the
spectator (17). And so he uses his penetrative looks to transform men into erotic objects for his pleasure; later, they become sickly under his controlling gaze. The distinction between the playwright and his many “swishy” paramours, however, ultimately blurs. By gazing at the bodies of his lovers, Williams ironically places his own corporeality at centre stage.

The deaths of Kip and Frank Merlo, the first and last great loves of Williams’s life, finally overwhelm the playwright’s will to differentiate himself from the queer supporting characters of his past. Both men initially submit themselves to Williams’s desires, but eventually demand autonomy. Kip breaks up with Williams and is banished from the older man’s life. Memories of Kip’s death, however, shatter the playwright’s ability to tell his own story straight. Similarly, after becoming terminally ill, Merlo refuses to be looked at by Williams, and eventually usurps the playwright’s role as voyeur. The autobiography is thus haunted by that which it rejects. When facing the queerness of his own corporeality, Williams frequently spasms and vomits. Such moments of abject repudiation—often accompanied by temporal shifts and narrative incoherencies that fragment the text—give shape to the autobiography. Only after properly mourning Merlo is Williams able to stay the narrative retching of Memoirs. This chapter scrutinizes the various bodies—including Williams’s own—of the autobiography by turning the readers’ gaze onto the corporeality of the text, and examines the playwright’s investment in, and inadvertent undermining of, the gendered ideals of mid-twentieth century American masculinity.
Queer Crowds

The tension between Williams’s desire for singularity and his need for societal approval runs throughout Memoirs. As a seventeen-year-old, the young man went on his first transatlantic trip with his grandfather. While abroad in Europe, however, he develops a “phobia about thought processes” (21). Williams becomes horrified by the “nature of cerebration,” because it separated him from other people (23). Because his thoughts could never be fully communicated, quiet contemplation represented social alienation for the young man. This phobia continues to plague him throughout the trip until he visits a cathedral in Cologne, where he remembers being touched by the impalpable “hand of our Lord Jesus” (21). As Williams tells it, God’s mercy frees him from the fear that nearly brought him to the point of madness. This reprieve, however, is only temporary, as his phobia returns within several days. With no other alternatives, the panicked Williams composes a poem as a way to understand his dread:

Strangers pass me on the street
in endless throngs: their marching feet,
sound with a sameness in my ears
that dulls my senses, soothes my fears,
I hear their laughter and their sighs,
I look into their myriad eyes:
then all at once my hot woe
cools like a cinder dropped on snow. (22)

The act of writing helps Williams extinguish his aversion to thought—his “hot woe”—and allows him to enjoy the final leg of his European tour. After composing the verse, he
realizes that he is only “a member of multiple humanity with its multiple needs, problems and emotions, not a unique creature but one, only one among the multitude of its fellows” (22). While the hand of God emphasized for Williams the distinction of his “solitary anguished head” (22), his art unites him with the multitudes. Even though it is the speaker of the poem who perceives the “endless throngs,” he is also one of them. His senses unite him with the crowd. He is the active subject who “looks,” but it is into other gazing eyes/I’s that he stares. The reciprocity of the gaze draws him into the masses, making him a member of the many. Like the regular meter of the poem, the crowd’s “marching feet” soothe the speaker with its repetitive rhythms and “sameness.” The act of writing thus effaces Williams’s eccentricities and allows him to feel normal. By observing others, the speaker comes to see himself as “a single head on a street thronged with many” (22). He willingly surrenders his singularity for the sake of normalcy.

Like the poem, Memoirs also connects Williams to larger crowds. The playwright, however, does not aspire to be a part of every multitude. Indeed, much of the autobiography is devoted to separating the playwright from undesirable groups. As a conclusion to the anecdote of his European trip, Williams declares that he has always been a believer in God, but then emphatically reminds us not to compare him “with Mary Pickford, who was the authoress of a work called Why Not Try God?” (23). The playwright insists upon the manliness of his devotion. Unlike Pickford, he is no spinster who has turned to God in her old age. Williams then closes the chapter by stating, “I am old enough to have been in love with Miss Pickford, if that’s a relevant point” (23). The point, of course, is only relevant insofar as it emphasizes his masculinity and taste for beautiful women. Williams may desire feminine figures, but he is nothing like them. The
playwright tries to prove to his readers that he is capable of identifying with the masculine ideal despite his homosexuality. He covets “sameness” with privileged groups and refuses to be disempowered because of his sexuality.

Williams repeatedly affirms his own straight-acting masculinity in *Memoirs* by distinguishing himself from the “swishy” and “campy” gays of New York. For the playwright, gay men who are “obvious types” overdramatize their rejection of mainstream culture. Unlike his friend Antoine, who would walk around with a bottle of smelling salts (which Williams describes as a “counteractive vial” [50]) to turn away women and announce his queerness, the playwright insists upon the virtues of integrating into straight society. He attempts to align himself with the hegemonic cultural discourse by repudiating the “counteractive” gay subjects who challenge dominant ideology:

> Of course, ‘swish’ and ‘camp’ are products of self-mockery, imposed upon homosexuals by our society. The obnoxious forms of it will rapidly disappear as Gay Lib begins to succeed in its serious crusade to assert, for its genuinely misunderstood and persecuted minority, a free position in society which will permit them to respect themselves, at least to the extent that, individually, they deserve respect. (50)

To be masculine, according to Williams, is to be free. Instead of challenging existing power structures, the playwright reproduces the gender hierarchies that his society endorses. Although he aptly recognizes exaggerated feminine behavior (“swish” and “camp”) to be socially constructed, he is unable to appreciate the artificiality of his own masculinist worldview. Williams’s conception of “Gay Lib” maintains the binary relationship between dominant and nondominant force. Rather than deconstruct the
heterosexist system that designates masculine men as “good” and feminine men as “bad,”
Williams reinforces it, advocating for the masculinization of gay men. As opposed to
interrogating his society’s valorization of masculinity, and de-centering the male subject,
the playwright aspires to lift the “respectable” gay man out of his marginal status by
fitting him into the culturally legitimated centre (“a free position in society”). A gay man,
in this respect, would have few differences from a straight one. Like the term “queer,”
which according to Leo Bersani de-sexualizes and thus “de-gays” homosexuality,
Williams endeavors to de-stigmatize homosexual identity through a suppression of its
differences. Instead of exploiting the subversive qualities of what Bersani calls “homo-
ness,” the playwright instead clings to the gendered roles of the heterosexist system.44 As
Williams himself acknowledges, “My thing is revolution, personal and artistic, . . . but
not militant and not underground” (107). He longs for a cultural revolution, yet demands
the acceptance of mainstream society. His refusal to be subterranean aligns his political
concerns with those of other privileged men. Rather than transforming the ways society
produces its “good subjects,” Williams instead looks to reform the “bad” ones. But as Lee
Edelman points out, “those of us inhabiting the place of the queer may be able to cast off
that queerness and enter the properly political sphere, but only by shifting the figural
burden of queerness to someone else. The structural position of queerness, after all, and
the need to fill it remains” (27). By separating himself from the swishy supporting

44 In Homos, Bersani argues that “Homosexual desire is less liable to be immobilized
than heterosexual desire in that, structurally, it occupies several positions. Its privileging
of sameness has, as its condition of possibility, an indeterminate identity. Homosexual
desire is desire for the same from the perspective of a self already identified as different
from itself” (58-59). Unlike Bersani’s notion of “homo-ness,” which is predicated on
unity founded on differences, Williams’s call for “sameness” requires the erasure of
difference between homosexual and heterosexual identities.
characters of his life (the “bad subjects”), Williams ends up exiling both his lovers as well as the anti-social aspects of himself to a structural space of discipline and punishment.45

Lovers are narratively expelled and punished so that Williams’s masculine identity might exist. On the narrative level, Memoirs adheres to standard definitions of a masculine or paternal autobiography: it focuses on the playwright’s public persona, career, and conquests—both professional (public) and sexual (private). Williams states his personal tragedies matter-of-factly, and refuses to dwell on emotions. Even his lovers’ deaths are treated as hurdles to overcome—the exception being Frank Merlo, whom I will discuss later in the chapter. In order to distinguish himself from the many queer supporting characters of the autobiography, Williams frequently uses the motif of the gaze; he leers at, scrutinizes, and controls his feminine lovers by consigning them to their bodies—treating them as erotic objects for his penetrative gazes.

Eyeing Kip

As a creator of theatre and film, the playwright was certainly aware of the power dynamics associated with spectatorship. Indeed, the autobiography often depicts Williams watching his beaus like an audience member viewing a play. Even Kip, his “first great male” lover (52), is converted into an objet d’art by the playwright’s glances: “No light was turned on or off as Kip removed his clothes. Dimly, he stood there naked with his back to me” (55). In this portrait of their first intimate night together, Kip is

45 Williams acknowledges that despite his own penchant for “flair,” he generally favored straight-acting men for intimate friendships: “my closest friends, though as capable of camp as I was, then, were not the ‘obvious’ types” (50).
already stripped of his agency. His back, statuesque in its contoured musculature, is presented for both Williams and the reader as a magnificent figure of beauty. We have no access to Kip’s face because it is beside the point—it is as if the “boy” were only an orifice to be penetrated. The dimness of the room, furthermore, like the darkness in a theatre, creates a voyeuristic separation between Williams and his spectacle. Kip’s naked back is unable to return the playwright’s desirous gazes. The text describes the younger man in erotic detail:

He was wearing dungarees, skin-tight, and my good eye was hooked like a fish. He was too preoccupied by the chowder-cooking to more than glance over his shoulder and say “hello.” . . . Kip was into modern dancing. And when he turned from the stove, I might have thought, had I been but a little bit crazier, that I was looking at the young Nijinsky. Later he was to tell me, with a charmingly Narcissan pride, that he had almost the same bodily dimensions of Nijinsky, as well as a phenomenal facial resemblance. He had slightly slanted lettuce-green eyes, high cheekbones, and a lovely mouth. But I will never forget the first look I had at him, standing with his back to me at the two-burner stove, the wide and powerful shoulders and the callipygian ass such as I’d never seen before! He didn’t talk much. I think he felt my vibes and was intimidated by their intensity. (54-55)

Williams privileges the ocular, stating that it is his “look” at the boy that he would never forget. He meticulously evaluates Kip’s physical assets, relegating the younger man to his comely corporeality. Although Kip’s body is robust and Herculean, Williams reminds the
reader that it is not “the wide and powerful shoulders” that fascinate him. Rather, through the sequencing of the blazon, we know that it is “the callipygian ass such as I’d never seen before” that ultimately captures Williams’s imagination.

The playwright visually sodomizes the dancer, and encourages the readers to do the same. Williams pictures Kip as little more than discrete body parts. Through his gaze, the playwright transforms the younger man into a silent and “passive partner.” In large part because of Laura Mulvey’s work on cinematic spectatorship, it is now virtually commonplace to associate the male gaze with spectatorial violence and sadism. And yet the act of looking does not necessarily provide control or power to the spectator. As a way to further explicate the complex function of Williams’s gaze in Memoirs, this section will examine Mulvey’s seminal essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” as well as consider Gaylyn Studlar’s masochistic model of the looking-subject. According to George W. Crandell, the “cinematic techniques that Williams learned enabled him to go beyond the limits of conventional theatre” (2).

It is my contention that the playwright’s Memoirs also employs filmic techniques, transforming its reader into a kind of cinematic spectator. Because Williams’s gaze is rarely straightforwardly sadistic, as he eventually comes to take perverse pleasure in the relinquishment of narrative control, my analysis of the looking-relations within the autobiography necessarily deals with both the sadism and the masochism that animate the text.

In “Visual Pleasure,” Mulvey observes that there are two sources of cinematic pleasure in classical narrative cinema: 1) the scopophilic disavowal of the female object;

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46 See also John Timpane’s “Gaze and Resistance in the Plays of Tennessee Williams” and George Brandt’s “Cinematic Structure in the Work of Tennessee Williams” for discussions of the filmic techniques the playwright employed in his dramatic work.
and 2) the narcissistic identification with the male subject of the film. In the first, the
viewer is said to exercise “mastery,” bestowing upon the female character a “to-be-
looked-at-ness” (11). The male voyeur gains satisfaction from “watching, in an active
controlling sense, an objectified other” (9). Female characters are the bearers of meaning,
according to Mulvey; they are passive and have little purpose other than to provide
pleasure for both the male characters of the film and the male spectators of the audience,
the ideal viewers. But in this matrix of visual desire, pleasure is always laced with
“unpleasure,” since women also represent lack. To the male viewer, women are constant
reminders of castration: “She also connotes something that the look continually circles
around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence
unpleasure” (13). As such, while the female object provides voyeuristic pleasure for the
cinematic spectator, she is also a harbinger of male vulnerability, and a reminder of the
subject’s castration anxieties. It is for this reason, Mulvey claims, that men’s gazes are
sadistic. Within narrative film, they must either punish or save the female object as a way
to reassert their sense of control over her threatening presence. Another avenue the male
spectator can take to disavow the castration complex is to fetishize the female
character—extracting her from the action of the text. Within this path, the male subject
focuses intensely on the physical beauty of a feminine figure, and in this way, he
transforms her into a reassuring replacement of the phallus.

While Williams is openly gay in his autobiography, and his lovers are generally
male, he is nonetheless unable to bear the burden of sexual objectification and actively
distinguishes himself from passive lovers like Kip. Memoirs presents the dancer as an
erotic object for both Williams’s and the readers’ dominant male gazes. The fact that the
younger man is biologically male makes Williams’s sadistic gaze even more urgent, as
the power differentiation between two gay lovers is not socially prescribed. Since both
partners in a homosexual relationship are of the same sex, it is less clear who is meant to
be the more “active”/masculine partner. Consequently, Williams repeatedly and
conspicuously disavows the passivity that the boy represents. He candidly admits in an
interview with Playboy that he takes no pleasure in being dominated or penetrated, and
much prefers the pleasures that come from a position of power: “I had a very attractive
ass and people kept wanting to fuck me that way, but I can’t stand it. I’m not built for it
and I have no anal eroticism” (229). Williams insists on being physically “built”
differently from those of his passive lovers—that he is somehow biologically more
masculine than men like Kip. He presents himself as the subject who “fucks,” while his
boyfriends “stand it” with perverse pleasure. Indeed, Williams literally punishes Kip
sexually—so that the dancer may “know what is meant by beautiful pain”—and in so
doing, becomes the controlling partner (Memoirs 55). The playwright, therefore,
dominates the younger man both narratively and visually.

It is this position of dominance that Memoirs offers to its readers. The narrative
urges the reader to identify narcissistically with Williams’s autobiographical eye/“I,” as
the text depicts the playwright as the agent that “forward[s] the story, making things
happen” (Mulvey 12). The readers’ voyeurism, constructed by the narrative of the text,
connects us with “the more perfect, more complete, more powerful, ideal ego conceived
in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror” (12). We come to identify
with the playwright through our simultaneous “eyeing” of the boy. Kip is thus coded as
the “female” object of Williams’s gaze, so that the playwright and the reader—regardless of our own personal sexual orientations—may pass as the straight male subject.

But even though Kip is the main spectacle within the text, he never fully reifies Williams’s fantasied mastery. Like Williams, Kip also drives the narrative of which he is a part. He actively participates in the action even when it is the playwright who is conspicuously looking; the dancer consciously draws Williams’s attention to his physical beauty by comparing his own face to the countenance of Nijinsky, the celebrated Russian ballerino. Furthermore, in their initial encounter, Kip coyly “glance[s] over his shoulder,” so as barely to acknowledge his curious suitor. To return the gaze fully would be to reciprocate Williams’s desire. Instead, Kip maintains an indifferent posture as a way of coquettishly withholding affection. The “heterosexual division of labor” that Mulvey sees as typical of most narrative films, then, does not adequately encapsulate the complex psychical structures that organize Williams’s gaze (12). Despite his leering eye, the playwright never fully dominates his “passive partner.” We are told, after all, that his good eye “was hooked like a fish” by Kip’s charm.

In other words, power is constantly in flux in Memoirs. Williams’s gaze does not simply give him control over the spectacles before him; nor does he wholly submit himself to his many lovers. Rather, as a spectator, the playwright occupies positions of both mastery and submission. In “Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of Cinema” (1984), Gaylyn Studlar argues for an alternative to Mulvey’s sadistic model of spectatorship. Her essay, which draws on Gilles Deleuze’s work on masochism, states

47 While Mulvey briefly acknowledges that “in the reverse formation [of scopophilia], there is pleasure in being looked at,” she never fully interrogates the politics of exhibitionism (8).
that while the gaze is indeed pleasurable, it is a pleasure that is not predicated on Oedipal anxieties: “the masochistic aesthetic opens the entirety of film to the existence of spectatorial pleasures divorced from issues of castration, sexual difference, and female lack. Current theory ignores the pleasure in submission that is phylogenetically older than the pleasure of mastery—for both sexes” (782). The cinematic gaze often returns the viewer to a stage prior to individuation and the Lacanian mirror stage. Studlar contends that spectatorial pleasure originates from an anarchic stage in child psychology—a return to the pre-Oedipal / pre-genital stage of plentitude and wholeness. Visual pleasure, in this formulation, does not require the disempowerment or disavowal of an “other.”

“[M]asochistic desire,” Studlar argues, “challenges the notion that male scopic pleasure must center around control—never identification with or submission” to the “other” (778). In Studlar’s masochistic conception of cinema, visual pleasure is predicated on the submission of the viewer to an all-powerful (and feminine) being. Indeed, film viewers (both male and female) have little control over the events that take place onscreen. They sit passively in a darkened room, and watch the narrative unfold without any power over how the action will transpire. Like the film viewer whose imagination is to a certain extent delimited by the images on the screen, readers must also submit themselves to the words on the page. In this way, our gaze—whether cinematic, theatrical, or readerly—is continually directed by the “objects” before us. 48

As the object of Williams’s gaze, Kip is neither as passive nor as powerless as the playwright would have his readers believe. It is the dancer, for instance, who takes charge and invites Williams into his bedroom (55). Furthermore, it is Kip who breaks up with

48 For an extended discussion of spectatorial masochism, see Chapter 4 of this dissertation.
Williams, going so far as to marry a woman in order to shed the passive role that “violated his being in a way that was unacceptable to him” (56). The playwright, however, refuses to relinquish his masculine and active persona even during the dissolution of the relationship. Following the breakup, Williams immediately flies to Mexico as a distraction from his grief. The narrative then digresses into an anecdote about the misadventures of a young Mexican man and his prostitute-bride. *Memoirs’s* narrative sequencing and abbreviation of the breakup minimize Williams’s emotional devastation, and make the event seem almost incidental. He further reduces the significance of this episode by declaring that “even when love did come, work was still the primary concern” (53). The playwright’s deliberate diminishment of his distress becomes even clearer when the account of the breakup in *Memoirs* is juxtaposed with other representations of the same event. In a letter to Donald Windham written in 1940, Williams describes the breakup with far more anguish and emotional urgency:

> The fact of the matter is I have been going through the most difficult period of my life so far and I must ask those who are my friends to bear with me for a while till things straighten out a bit. . . . You don’t realize quite what an awful state I was in or how hopeless I felt when I left New York. I actually hoped that my bad cough was tuberculosis or that some convenient accident would occur on the road and I would be relieved of the tedious problem of remaining alive. (12-13)

Williams admits to weakness here, and presents himself as emotionally frail and suicidal. He even requests that Windham “be careful with [his letters]. It’s only for people like us who have gone beyond shame!” (10). For the playwright, what is suitable for personal
correspondences is not always appropriate for autobiographical storytelling. He carefully censors himself in *Memoirs* so as to retain a semblance of control over the events of his life.

**Theatre of the Abject**

Kip reappears in Williams’s life years later—not as a young lover, but as a dying acquaintance. By recounting this event, the playwright comes close to asserting his agency over his former lover once and for all. Williams again visits Kip in his room, but this time it is within an infirmary. The playwright depicts the hospitalized and bed-ridden man in a hyperbolized state of stupor. We are told that the dying man’s “mind seemed as clear as his Slavic blue eyes” (60). Unlike their initial night together, Kip is not even physically able to return Williams’s gaze, as his “vision was limited” by the malignant growth (60). It is this image of a sightless, immobile, and dying Kip that the playwright remembers most fondly, as he tells the reader that despite the cancer, Kip “had never looked more beautiful” (60). In this gruesome *tableau mourant*, where the gaze is cruel and sadistic, Williams disturbingly depicts himself as the ultimate voyeur.49

Narrative inconsistencies, however, trouble the coherency of this scene. Kip’s eyes inexplicably change from the “lettuce-green” of their initial encounter to “Slavic blue” (60). Williams struggles to retell this event. Torn between two competing allegiances, he must navigate between the desire to bolster the public self—through a narrative punishment of the dying man—and the demands of emotional accountability.

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49 There are moments in the autobiography where Williams and his one “good eye” resemble a typical character from Edgar Allan Poe’s stories. This scene revises Poe’s infamous claim that “The death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (19).
The playwright is so overwhelmed by the dying man’s presence that he cannot get his facts straight. The muted dancer makes his voice heard through the incoherencies of the narrative. Even though Kip does not speak much and cannot actually see, he nonetheless asks Williams to “sit there in the corner so I can see you” (60). His eyes, we are told, “kept saying things to [Williams] that controverted the undignified prattle” of his actual words (60). In this scene, the ex-lover’s unbearable presence makes claims on Williams’s life story, shattering the playwright’s ability to fictionalize. It is at this point that Williams slips into an almost elegiac tone: “Well, Kip, you live in my leftover heart. How gentle and kind you were when you drove out to the beach at P-town, and told me to sit on the handle-bars and let you drive me home and on the way, how gently and honestly gently, you told me that our love-affair was finished, now, since it was turning you homo” (60-61). For a brief instant, the struggle between Williams and Kip becomes explicit. Neither could bear the burden of being labelled “homo.” And it is Kip who gets the last word in their relationship. The dancer’s agency, however, passes quickly in the autobiography. After this uncharacteristic moment, when Williams borders on acknowledging his and Kip’s “sameness,” the narrative abruptly changes course, ending the story of the dancer with an inscrutable ellipsis.

These momentary slips in the narrative fracture the integrity of Memoirs, exposing Williams’s inability to repress the queerness that “live[s] in [his] leftover heart.” Despite the playwright’s efforts to construct a rugged and macho persona, with a simple “glance,” the concealed layers of his personality would emerge, causing “the school maiden imprisoned in [his] hidden self” to tremble and reveal herself (17). So horrifying are these moments for Williams that they literally sicken him. Many of the
anecdotes in *Memoirs* depict the playwright reacting with violent illness whenever his masculine identity is undermined. He vomits, for instance, when his first sexual encounter with a woman is interrupted by impotence: “I rushed into the bathroom and puked, came out with a towel around me, hangdog with shame over my failed test of virility” (43). Similarly, after Kip ends their relationship, the playwright almost immediately “come[s] down with a terrible cough and was spitting up blood” (57). Williams would even get queasy during the performances of his plays: “I remember one night I was in my room [after a showing of *Glass Menagerie*]. Audrey Wood, Bill Liebling, and Mother were there and I felt so tired that I stretched out on a sofa. Then suddenly I felt nauseated and I rushed to the bathroom to vomit” (92). But perhaps the most graphic account of his retching takes place during an eye operation, when Williams’s penetrative gaze is turned on him by doctors: “The patient [Williams] is now in position, apply the straps. . . . Eyelids secured against blinking, pupil anesthetized now. The needle is now about to penetrate the iris. It is now into the iris. It has now penetrated the lens” (74). As an object of medical observation, Williams is immobilized and stripped of all bodily agency. His eye, which had hitherto been active, is here literally perforated. “The eye of horror works both ways,” Carol Clover observes. “It may penetrate, but it is also penetrated: so the plethora of images of eyeballs gouged out or pierced with knives, 50

50 Nowhere is Williams’s aversion to being observed more conspicuous than in the theatre. Although it is his work that is being watched, the playwright imagines himself to be the main attraction. His plays become an extension of his life and body: “Shall I attempt to entertain you, now, with my theatre or my life, assuming that there is much difference between them?” (177). Under public scrutiny, according to the playwright, an artist “dies two deaths. . . . [N]ot only his own as a physical being but that of his creative power, it dies with him” (242). *Memoirs* describes critics as a voyeuristic and almost sadistic mob waiting to desecrate his plays. Reviewers “put [his plays] down with a vengeance, and with a vengeance that shattered [him] and sent [him] to” psychoanalysts (173).
ice picks, and the hypodermic needles . . . The opening eye of horror is far more often an eye on the defense than an eye on the offense” (191). That is to say, the gaze is perpetually threatened by the possibility of violent reciprocation. During the cataract surgery, we are given a look into this “eye of horror.” Significantly, it is at the moment of puncture, while anesthetized and vulnerable, that Williams becomes nauseous, “and nearly choke[s] on the vomit, which [he] had no choice but to swallow” (74).

When read individually, these scenes appear to be no more than self-indulgent and grotesque malingering; however, when read in conjunction, they expose a pattern: Williams’s violent nausea almost always follows events that deprive him of control—whether over his body, his art, or his lovers. His retching is perhaps best described in terms of Kristeva’s concept of abjection. The abject is connected with the “horrors” and contradictions of our psyche that are banished or repressed for the sake of a coherent and meaningful ego/self. But despite the compulsive need to elide these anti-social elements from our everyday lives, we are unable to exclude them with any finality: “from its place of banishment,” Kristeva posits, “the abject does not cease challenging its master” (2). Consequently, when encountering certain objects and events that remind us of our precarious hold on identity, we spasm and vomit, so as to externalize our shame: abjection is the “repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise” (2). Abject vomiting,

51 In a 1976 essay for the New York Times, Gore Vidal charges Williams of feigning illness in the press as a way forestall unfavorable reviews: “In the old days before a play opened on Broadway, the author [Williams] would be asked to write a piece for the Sunday New York Times drama section. Tennessee’s pieces were always thrilling; sometimes horrendous. He would reveal how that very morning he had coughed up blood with his sputum. But, valiantly, he had gone on writing, knowing the new play would be his last work, ever. . . By the time the Bird had finished working us over, only Kronenberger at Time had the heart to attack him” (“Selected Memories”).
therefore, separates us from the elements within ourselves that threaten our coherent identities. Elizabeth Grosz further suggests that “abjection is the body’s acknowledgement that the boundaries and limits imposed on it are really social projections—effects of desire, not nature. It testifies to the precarious grasp of the subject on its own identity, an assertion that the subject may slide back into the impure chaos out of which it was formed. It is, in other words, a movement of undoing identity” (90). Williams’s lack of control over the objects of his desire mortifies him, causing him to involuntarily retch. While these spasms split the playwright as a subject, separating him from the queer elements of his own identity, they simultaneously act as visceral reminders of Williams’s repressed “shame.”

Such violent and ego-disruptive moments stretch to breaking not only the playwright’s physical body, but also the very fabric of the autobiography.52 The abject manifests itself in Memoirs as altered facts, disjointed time, and splintered narratives. No life story is ever wholly factual. Significant people, places, and events of an autobiographer’s memories are routinely fictionalized, diminished, and sometimes even elided altogether as a way of fashioning a meaningful (and ideological) life. These deformations of personal experiences inevitably leave marks and gaps—sometimes years-long in the case of the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin—in the structure of the autobiography, alerting the reader to the fictions that punctuate the text.

52 Williams often describes and treats Memoirs as an extension of his dysfunctional and nauseous body. Like those who feel alienated by their physical form, the playwright repeatedly refers to his autobiography as a “thing.” As Dennis D. Waskul and Pamela van der Riet observe, disfigured patients who find it difficult to contain their leaky and unruly bodies frequently detach themselves from their corporeality, employing impersonal terms like “it” or “thing” to describe the foreignness of their physical self. Detachment helps the sick cope with the disjuncture between idealized images of the body and their actual physical reality (495).
Autobiographical Mendacity

But as Blanche sings in *Streetcar,* “Say, it’s only a paper moon, Sailing over the cardboard sea. / —But it wouldn’t be make-believe / If you believed in me!” (530). Given the proper circumstances (and lighting), truths can be constructed out of fictions. Indeed, the generative force of lies would eventually become a theme that permeates much of the playwright’s writing and drama. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* for instance, Maggie the Cat, who is aligned with candor throughout most of the play, ultimately uses a fiction to save her marriage and her husband Brick. Like Williams, Maggie hopes to realize her dreams by performing traditional and gendered roles. She is desperate for a child (and an inheritance); however, her attempts to conceive are frustrated by her husband, who can no longer stand the idea of “bedding” her. Brick’s latent homosexuality is hinted at throughout *Cat,* but the “truth” of his sexuality is never revealed. Instead, fictions prevail in the final moments of the play. In the conclusion of *Cat,* Maggie tells her in-laws that she is pregnant. While neither Gooper nor Sister Mae find this believable, Big Mama, the matriarch of the Pollitt dynasty, willingly accepts the lie. In the end, the Pollitt matriarch would rather believe in a lie than accept her favorite son as an alcoholic and sterile “fairy.” In the play, “mendacity” and fiction are necessary for “healthy” heterosexual relationships to flourish. In the original ending of *Cat,* Maggie takes Brick into their room and holds his drink for ransom, declaring that she would return the liquor to him only after they “make the lie true” (975).

But such fictions, even if perfectly performed, are ultimately impoverished substitutions for the cultural demand for natural, coherent, and unified subjects. As David Savran aptly posits in *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers,* Brick’s acquiescence to...
Despite Williams’s career-long preoccupation with fiction and lies, his contemporary readers nonetheless expected the playwright to tell the truth straight when composing *Memoirs*. As Ben Yogoda points out, “autobiography, more than any other genre, trades on its authenticity and credibility. If those qualities are understood to be lacking in a memoir, why would anyone possibly take it seriously or even bother to read it? At the same time, the temptation to exaggerate for effect or a good story or to prove a point is always present” (*Memoir: A History*). But for Williams truth and verifiable facts are rarely synonymous. When cataloging the different virtues he hoped to inherit from his grandfather, for instance, the playwright claims that chief among them are “total honesty and total truth, as he [Williams’s grandfather] saw it, in his dealings with others” (13). According to his statement, however, “total honesty and total truth,” are in fact not “total” at all, but instead contingent upon subjective perceptions (“as he saw it”). Even his own autobiography is subject to the myriad interpretations of his readers. Indeed, the playwright explicitly acknowledges the reader’s role in the production of autobiographical “truth”: “Truth is the bird we hope to catch in ‘this thing’ [*Memoirs*],” Williams maintains, but “this ‘thing,’ as I have come to call it, will need your interpretation. I have to ask you to remember what you can of the history of the man who wrote it” (Williams 173, xviii). Even though *Memoirs* concerns the “history of the man,”

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Maggie and the potentially “successful impregnation of his wife in the bed of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello [a dead gay couple whose room Brick and Maggie are using] would ironically attest less to the sudden and timely triumph of a ‘natural’ heterosexuality than to the perpetuation of a homosexual economy” that haunts straight genealogy (109).

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54 Many of *Memoirs*’s contemporary reviews criticized Williams for his evasiveness and dishonesty. Critics saw the book’s prurience as a calculated diversion from the writer’s emotional life and proof of its insincerity and “deliberate obfuscation” (Spoto 308). Allean Hale famously panned *Memoirs* in his review, reporting that “if [Williams] has not exactly opened his heart, he has opened his fly” (253).
the playwright is very much aware that the meaning of his text (and life) is subject to the biases of the reader, and thus imposed, to a certain extent, externally. 55

Autobiography and its contingent truths, then, come dangerously close to converging with fiction. Partially as a way to preserve the generic integrity of autobiography, Lejeune famously defines autobiography as a contract that binds the life writer to truth claims. The autobiographer’s signature or “proper name,” Lejeune posits, enters him into an “autobiographical pact” with his audience, and thus ensures honorable intentions. Through his signature, the autobiographical “I” becomes a substitute for the man himself. Even though the life writer can no longer exist within the text—in the sense that all writing necessarily points to the absence of its subject—his signature provides a stand-in for the physical author, a process Paul de Man calls “tropological substitution” (922). Autobiography, then, distinguishes itself from fiction through a linguistic restoration of the author. It is at the moment of subscription—when the proper name is signed—that fiction becomes truth. Authority and credibility, therefore, are constructed through a linguistic sleight of hand. The proper name, by obscuring that which is absent within the autobiography—the actual life or bios of the author, what Williams calls the “history of the man”—is itself a kind of fiction that is necessary for the production of a coherent subject. 56

55 Autobiographies are, according to Sidonie Smith, perpetually tainted by an external presence; readers, who “are themselves heterogeneous collectives that can solicit conflicted effects in the autobiographical subject” (“Performativity” 110), wrest control from the writer and alter the meaning of the text to suit their own purposes.

56 For de Man autobiographical discourse willfully obscures the absence/death of the author, and in doing so denies its readers their connection to death and alterity: “As soon as we understand the rhetorical function of prosopopeia as positing voice or face by means of language, we also understand that what we are deprived of is not life but the shape and sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding” (930).
It is my contention that Williams’s eye surgery ruptures the narrative of the “I” in ways that alert the reader to the many fictions of *Memoirs*. In this way, the operation allegorizes the problematic of the Lejeunian proper name and the impossibility of autobiography as a genre. While anaesthetized, the playwright is relegated from the role of an active observer to a passive object of study: “I consented to have it [the operation] performed before a class of student ophthalmologists, seated all about the operating table, while the surgeon-teacher delivered a lecture on what he was doing, the whole theatrical procedure” (Williams 74). Despite Williams’s usual anxiety over being watched, he here makes the uncharacteristic decision to have his immobile and passive body put on display for medical observation. Although he is utterly inactive, the playwright continues to cling to the notion that he had “consented” to the procedure, attempting to portray himself as an active participant in the operation. His consent, like the proper name of an autobiography, posits presence and authority when none can be found. As Elaine Scarry describes in “Consent and the Body,”

The surgeon’s obligation to secure our consent in an operation leads us down a path where resonant concepts like sovereignty, citizenship, rights emerge, an affirmation of the sanctity of personhood, of the *robustness* of the sanctity of personhood; yet . . . this is occurring at a time when the ground of personhood is most in jeopardy, most fragile, most passive—so passive that the person may be ill (with the cognitive and perceptual disturbances often entailed in illness), or asleep, or anesthetized, or even dead. (880-1)
There is no doubt that, while on the operating table, it is the playwright who is the passive agent. It is he who is examined, acted upon, and penetrated. The fate of his body is ultimately dictated by external forces completely outside of his authority. By consenting to the operation, however, the playwright obscures this loss of autonomy. Williams’s consent conceals the moments when the “ground of personhood is most in jeopardy, most fragile, most passive”—when he as a self-sufficient subject is fundamentally absent. Paralysis masquerades as agency. Autobiographical discourse, notions of consent, and the gaze, therefore, constellate in this scene to undermine the very possibility of a coherent and controlling “I”/eye.

Mourning Frank Merlo

Although Kip’s dying body fractures the coherency of Memoirs, recollections of Frank Merlo’s death—though equally traumatic—eventually help the playwright put the fragments of his autobiography back together. Williams at first resists recounting his lover’s death, for fear that the memories would plunge him in another depression: “It is difficult to write about a period of profound, virtually clinical depression, because when you are in that state, everything is observed through a dark glass which not only shadows but distorts all that is seen. It’s also hazardous to write about it, since the germ of it still lingers in your system and it could be activated again by thinking back on it” (202). And yet Merlo remains obstinately alive within the playwright’s personal narrative. Memories of the younger man refuse to fade. Williams is thus finally unable to exorcise the ghost of his deceased lover. It is only after acknowledging the permanent place Merlo has in
Williams’s life story—by embracing the inextricability of their morbid attachment—that the playwright is finally able to bring closure to his autobiography.

Williams remembers descending “into a seven-year depression” after his “most long-lasting lover” succumbed to lung cancer (194, 132). But before Merlo’s illness, the playwright regarded the younger man as he did all his other lovers—as an object whose sole purpose was to be devoted to his pleasure. Williams depicts their first encounter with his usual relish: “Frank Merlo . . . leaned smoking against the porch rail and he was wearing Levis and I looked and looked at him” (133). During their long relationship, the younger man played the role of Williams’s obedient attendant: when the playwright was shy around Anna Magnani, Merlo acted as the “intermediary” and helped them become friends (163); when Williams refused to entertain Mr. and Mrs. John Steinbeck, “Frankie . . . served them drinks and explained [Williams’s] nature to them” (167); when Jack Warner pointedly asked Merlo “What do you do, young man?” the latter simply replied, “I sleep with Mr. Williams” (168). Until his battle with lung cancer, Merlo played the part of the submissive spouse perfectly. But their relationship would significantly shift after the diagnosis of cancer. Williams remembers becoming unattracted to his lover after “Frankie began to lose his vitality and turn moody” (183). Their love, according to the playwright, “had gone sick” (189). His once fetishizing and erotic gaze turns into a look of horror and disgust. The playwright transforms the younger man into an uncanny figure of himself—a surrogate and sickly self he would eventually seek to expel. Merlo,
however, refuses to accept this new gaze, as he “didn’t want a witness to his decline” (191).

It is during this period that Merlo began reciprocating Williams’s penetrative looks. Following the dying man’s “decline,” the playwright had affairs with multiple men. He would occasionally even bring his new lovers home, where the dying man could see: Merlo “sat in a corner of the living room, looking drugged, his great eyes fastened balefully upon [the other man] and me. We made conversation as best we could under Frankie’s fierce scrutiny” (185). Merlo’s threatening gaze literally silences the playwright and his companion. Williams theatrically plants himself before Merlo, inviting the latter’s gaze. The two ex-lovers’ roles reverse. Just as Williams would lock himself in his bedroom after a bad New York opening, so Merlo eventually turned to the solitude of his chamber to conceal his own deterioration. And yet the playwright could not see parallels between the two: “Did he, poor child, suppose that I would still be apt to follow him in there and use his skeletal body again for sexual pleasure? That hardly seems conceivable. But why did he bolt the door, then?” (191). Merlo’s body, made repulsive by disease, becomes a second self for Williams—a vessel onto which the playwright could project his anxieties. Williams reduces the cancer-ridden ex-lover to a figure of his own failing corporeality. Unsurprisingly, then, Merlo’s death came as a “relief” for Williams, since the dying man had come to embody all of the playwright’s psychic “tortures” (194).

Williams’s respite from suffering is brief, however, as memories of Merlo continue to haunt him well after the younger man’s death. Thoughts of his ex-lover not

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57 After accepting the imminence of his own death, Merlo resigned himself to the scrutiny of others. While in the hospital, although Williams “begged him not to stay in that ward but to take a private room,” the dying man refused to change locations, stating simply, “It doesn’t matter at all to me now, I think I like being with them” (193).
only diminish the playwright’s sexual drive, but they also deprive Williams of his ability “to talk to people,” a regression that recalls his eleven-year-old self. As a kind of self-protecting mechanism, *Memoirs* frequently shifts into the present moment whenever Williams contemplates this traumatic time. While considering Merlo’s self-imposed isolation, for example, Williams suggests that “it [bolting the door] was a thing he did automatically: perhaps it was death that he thought he was locking out” (192). At this point, perhaps as his own involuntary “locking out” of death, the playwright abruptly interrupts the narrative, and switches to a conversation about his career: “Today was one of possible great significance in my professional life...” (192). As the playwright himself acknowledges, “Somehow I cannot adhere as I should to chronology” (19).

Merlo, a figure of abjection, reminds Williams of his own mortality and punctures the flow of the text even before he is a part of the narrative proper. Even early on in the autobiography, while lamenting the negative reviews of *Summer and Smoke*, Williams cannot help but mention Merlo’s parenthetical presence: “Well, I was not in the mood for comfort or for pity, which is really not comforting, much... so I told Frank Merlo (who will appear later in this book; I lived with him for a long, long time) to cut the Mozart off and see Carson to a cab before I got out of bed” (109). Although the dead lover’s role in the narrative is minimal at this point, his presence has already interrupted, and, as we have seen, will later dominate the very structure of *Memoirs*.

The ghostly figure of Merlo refuses to be suppressed despite Williams’s wish to stay his memories and keep his depression at bay. It is only after the playwright confronts his memories of Merlo that the autobiography’s temporal fragmentation begins to diminish: “Now time past and time present have come to a point of convergence in this
thing” (243). Through the writing of Memoirs, Williams comes to mourn Merlo not as an “other,” but as a constitutive part of himself: “As long as Frank was well, I was happy. He had a gift for creating a life and, when he ceased to be alive, I couldn’t create a life for myself” (194). Merlo makes claims and imposes himself on Williams’s life narrative. Though he remains at the margins of the playwright’s consciousness, the ex-lover nonetheless shatters the playwright’s claim to solitary subjecthood. “When we lose certain people, . . . we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved,” Butler observes. “But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us” (Precarious 22). Only by accepting his deceased queer lover (and thus queerness and death) as integral to his own identity is Williams able to curb the structural retching of Memoirs.

Catching the Bird

“Tennessee [Williams] tells us a great deal about his sex life,” Gore Vidal remarks in his contemporary review of Memoirs, “which is one way of saying nothing about oneself” (“Selected Memories”). Indeed, many reviews of the autobiography focused almost entirely on Williams’s inordinate preoccupation with sex and what the playwright calls “homophile erotica” (Memoirs 133). It did not help that Williams confessed to writing his life story for mercenary reasons in a Playboy interview published three years prior to the book’s release. By the time Memoirs was in print, Williams had already been abandoned by his public, and regarded as a has-been, celebrated more for
his sexual exploits than for his artistic output. To many of his contemporary readers, the book was a lurid tell-all that lacked artistic merit, and proved again that Williams had outlived his talent.

Although the text is still largely ignored in critical studies of Williams’s work, several scholars have come to appreciate it as more than a mercenary exercise in vulgarity. In his 1977 reevaluation of *Memoirs*, Victor A. Kramer lauds the playwright’s honest “self-indictment”; like many reviewers before him, however, the critic considered the “disjointed” form of the autobiography to be a failure of execution: “If, therefore, we read these *Memoirs* as the product of free associations, not wishing that its author had written a more finished book, it takes on a poignant significance” (664).\(^{58}\) While the structure of *Memoirs* is awkward and perhaps even contrived, simply to overlook the book’s form or regard it as a distraction—which is precisely what the majority of reviewers have done—evades our obligation to examine the source of *Memoirs*’s much ballyhooed shortcomings.\(^{59}\)

As I have suggested, the fragmentary structure of *Memoirs* vividly manifests Williams’s ambivalence towards the gendered roles he felt obligated to play. Kramer

\(^{58}\) For an extended discussion of *Memoirs*’s complex genre, see Terri Smith Ruckel’s “‘Giggling, silly, bitchy, voluptuary’: Tennessee Williams’s *Memoirs* as Apologia Pro Vita Sua.”

\(^{59}\) Vidal posits that Williams pilfered the structure of *Memoirs* from *Two Sisters*, the younger novelist’s roman à clef: “At the time Tennessee found *Two Sisters* interesting because he figured in it. He must also have found it technically interesting because he has serenely appropriated my form and has now no doubt forgotten just how the idea first came to him to describe the day-to-day life of a famous beleaguered playwright acting in an off-Broadway production of the failing play *Small Craft Warnings* while, in alternating sections, he recalls the early days not only of Tennessee Williams but of one Thomas Lanier Williams, who bears only a faint familial resemblance to the playwright we all know from a thousand and one altogether too candid interviews” (“Selected Memories”).
aptly asserts that “Williams’[s] lonely recollections are ultimately not just a self-indictment but also an indictment of the culture as a whole. His story is but an extreme version of many” (674). Despite the playwright’s personal discomfort with the exhibition of his dysfunctional corporeality, he nonetheless exposes much of himself. In the end, I believe the fractures of Memoirs direct its readers’ gaze onto the queer and trembling “school maiden” that resides in us all. Perhaps this is why so many critics have averted their eyes from the book. There is no reason to believe that Williams did not “catch” the truth he so desperately sought in his autobiography (173). While factual errors permeate the text, Memoirs ultimately ensnares a personal truth, a pervasive anxiety, more profound than any verifiable fact ever could. And in this way, I cannot help but disagree with Vidal’s claim that the description of one’s sex life and body exposes “nothing about oneself.”
But you killed him, Nathan. 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!

—Philip Roth, Zuckerman Unbound

When creating fictional heroines, Mary Allen famously avers, Philip Roth “projects his enormous rage and disappointment with womankind” (96). Despite such criticism, the author has persisted obstinately in writing treacherous, facile, and often unlikeable women. In The Human Stain, the author depicts the French feminist Delphine Roux as an insecure and sex-starved shrew whose lies destroy the life of the upstanding Coleman Silk. With The Humbling, Roth’s thirtieth novel, readers are again up in arms about the writer’s recycling of “garden-variety sexism” (Roiphe 8). The novel’s flat female characters and homophobia have inspired a slew of vitriolic reviews: “The women in Simon’s [the protagonist’s] life are all female caricatures,” writes Michiko Kakutani, “devoid of any nuance or inner life” (C.25). Although Roth has had at best an ambivalent relationship with feminism, and while he has certainly received his share of bad press, I will argue that his depiction of women and his relationship to the maternal warrants reconsideration. Even though Roth’s autobiographical writing has been read, for the most part, as participating in a masculinist tradition that privileges the singularity of the self, this chapter challenges his investment in such individualism by investigating the “subterranean” presence of women in The Facts: A Novelist’s

Refusing to acknowledge the validity of such criticism, Roth has responded with typical disdain: “Don’t elevate [such criticism] by calling it a ‘feminist’ attack,” he remarks in a 1984 interview for Paris Review. “That’s just stupid reading” (Reading 130).
Autobiography and Patrimony.\textsuperscript{61} Through an analysis of the women who haunt the novelist’s two instances of life writings, I chart the evolution of Roth’s autobiographical “I”: while The Facts mourns the impossibility of a self uncontaminated by others, Patrimony comes to revel in Roth’s entanglement with alterity. Using Kristeva’s concept of “abjection” as a lens, this chapter explores the ways borders containing Roth’s autobiographical self are established and then destabilized.\textsuperscript{62} Many critics have focused on the postmodernist elements of Roth’s fictional writing, arguing that the author “contrives to blur the boundaries of both fiction and autobiography as a narrative strategy” (Smith, “Turning Up the Flame” 99-100).\textsuperscript{63} I believe, however, that the diminishment of borders in The Facts and Patrimony represents instead Roth’s

\textsuperscript{61} That is, unlike “feminine” autobiographies, which, according to theorists like Susan Stanford Friedman, favor communal experiences, Roth is frequently charged with a solipsistic obsession with the self. Derek Parker Royal writes, for instance, that Roth’s “postmodern narrative play,” when decontextualized, can be misinterpreted as an aesthetic “solipsism that is disengaged not only from the immediate unwritten world but also from history itself” (428).

\textsuperscript{62} As noted in Chapter 2, “abjection” is the process by which the individual expels phenomena that threaten his subjective borders and identity: “‘I’ want none of that element, sign of their [the mother and father’s] desire; ‘I’ do not want to listen, ‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it” (Kristeva Powers 3).

\textsuperscript{63} In “Roth’s Counterlife: Destabilizing The Facts,” Brian Finney considers the blurring of boundaries in The Facts as a self-reflexive commentary on the nature of fact and fiction: “Intertextuality also operates between different portions of the book. Zuckerman’s long letter at the end deconstructs the rest of the book, recasts The Facts as meta-autobiography, forcing the reader to think back over the main portion of the book and reflect on its inadequacies as a record of the facts concerning Roth’s life. The concluding letter compels the reader to acknowledge the necessity of employing fictional and fictive devices in all forms of autobiography” (384). See also Richard Tuerk’s “Caught Between The Facts and Deception” for a discussion of The Facts’s deconstruction of “fiction and reality,” and the way the autobiography “blurs the distinction between the two” (138).
experimentation with relational identity: by opening himself to the encroachment of others, the author posits a self that is notpredicated on the expulsion of the feminine.

In both autobiographies, Roth’s identity coalesces with the women around him. In *The Facts*, the writer describes a “colossal bond” between his childhood self and his mother, but then quickly relegates Bessie to a marginal role so that he may assert his adult independence (18). His first wife Josie, however, comes to take on his mother’s lost power. The maternal presence that these two women represent ultimately dominates the writer and threatens his singularity. His father even comments in *Patrimony* that “Philip is like a mother to me” (181). Like his father, Roth initially resists identifying with the feminine. Both men desire to be hard, masculine, and self-sufficient. The writer, however, eventually accepts the influence of the maternal on his life, realizing that it is precisely the violation of the singular self that facilitates compassion. Yet *The Facts* never quite realizes the potential of such intersubjectivity, as Roth persists in purging those that undermine his personal boundaries even by the end of the text. It is only in *Patrimony* that Roth comes to aestheticize and transmute the abject other, revising the classic narrative of abjection (a story of expulsion).

Rather than feel threatened by his feminization—as conventional interpretations have had it—Roth comes to luxuriate in the immanence of the maternal. The novelist’s memories of Bessie catalyze his self-dissolution; by accepting the mother’s influence over both him and his art, Roth eventually breaks down the borders that segregated him in *The Facts*. Although Harold Bloom has famously argued that all poets experience the anxiety of influence in relationship to their artistic forefathers—an aesthetic form of the *Oedipus Complex*—*The Facts* and *Patrimony* illustrate that this anxiety extends to an
influence of the maternal as well. Concentrating on the intervention of the mother in Roth’s life writings, this chapter argues that the writer comes to encounter the abject without violence or expulsion, and consequently develops an ethical relationship with alterity. For Lévinas, ethical relations are always “double”: they are “simultaneously fusion and distinction,” freedom and responsibility (270, 271). Roth learns to relinquish the “maximum personal freedom” (Facts 88) that defined him in the Facts by accepting his bond with abjection. By abandoning isolating notions of the self in Patrimony, the author comes to take pleasure in the collapse of his subjective borders, and in so doing, discovers freedom—a liberation of the self from its ego—in his responsibility to others.

Separating The Facts from Fiction

The Facts begins with a letter from Roth to Nathan Zuckerman, the fictional focal agent of two of the author’s trilogies. In the correspondence, Roth relates his

64 A common practice in life writing is to include a letter that details the autobiography’s raison d’être. Frederick Douglass uses the letters of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips—prominent white abolitionists—as proof of his life narrative’s authenticity. Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography opens with a letter to his illegitimate son in order to reveal his life as one worthy of imitation. The Facts begins with Roth writing a letter to Zuckerman, asking him to review the manuscript of the autobiography, and inquiring whether he should publish it. The reader is then given a straight presentation of Roth’s life from childhood to the publishing of Portnoy’s Complaint (1969). After this extended narration, Zuckerman again returns, but this time he is given a voice, as the letter that Zuckerman writes to Roth is presented in its entirety (over thirty pages of the autobiography). In the letter, Zuckerman declares emphatically that the manuscript should not be published, because of its deceptiveness. The manuscript, according to Zuckerman, is “such an extraordinarily, relentlessly coherent narrative” (190) that it utterly elides the “bad boy” elements of Roth’s persona, and thus is a fictional account of his life. As Zuckerman points out to Roth, “Your medium for the really merciless self-evisceration, your medium for genuine self-confrontation, is me” (185). Although such prefatory letters conventionally act as obligatory declarations of an autobiography’s veracity—especially in the case of slave narratives—Zuckerman’s correspondence with Roth serves instead to emphasize the fictionality of The Facts.
motivations for documenting his life in its “original, prefictionalized factuality” (3). In 1987, the author underwent minor knee surgery, which “turned into a prolonged physical ordeal that led to an extreme depression that carried me right to the edge of emotional and mental dissolution” (*Facts* 5). In putting together his autobiography, he had hoped to return to his “pre-crack-up existence,” before the loss of his mental equilibrium (*Facts* 7). *The Facts* was Roth’s way of “getting back what [he]’d lost, a means of recovery and a way to strength” (7). The autobiographical process also comforted Roth, because it allowed him to reassign himself “to a point in life when the grief that may issue from the death of parents needn’t be contended with” (9). His “crack-up,” while explicitly linked with his botched knee surgery, had to a certain extent already begun by 1981, after the sudden death of his beloved mother Bessie. *The Facts* was written, Roth concludes, “not only as a spontaneous therapeutic response to [his] crack-up but also as a palliative for the loss of a mother” (8).

Just as he did in his youth, the middle-aged Roth turns to his mother for stability and comfort. In the autobiography, Bessie is portrayed as a “genius” in the kitchen (92) and “the ideal housewife” (105). She made sure everything ran smoothly within the home, and as Zuckerman observes at the end of *The Facts*, was the epitome of “an utterly refined, Jewish Florence Nightingale” (168). She was a constant source of solace for her son. As a child, Roth reveled in the physical and psychological intimacy he had with both his parents. His connection with his mother, however, was especially intense:

the link to my father was never so voluptuously tangible as the colossal bond to my mother’s flesh, whose metamorphosed incarnation was a sleek black sealskin coat into which I, the younger, the privileged, the pampered
papoose, blissfully wormed myself . . . : the unnameable animal-me
bearing her dead father’s name, the protoplasm-me, boy-baby, and body-
burrower-in-training, joined by every nerve ending to her smile and her
sealskin coat. (18)

Because Roth was named after his maternal grandfather Philip, the author sees his young self as a part of his mother’s lineage. The mother-son relationship takes on an almost circular and symbiotic quality: the young boy is both Bessie’s child and an echo of her father. The two fulfill each other’s needs and desires completely. In relation to his mother, however, the young boy is unformed (“protoplasm-me,” “boy-baby,” “in-training”), and thus unequivocally submits himself to her. He takes pleasure in their rhapsodic union, basking in a state of passivity. Bessie is thus a figure of identification for Roth during this “preadult” period (87). As Elizabeth Grosz posits in Volatile Bodies, children “attribute to the mother a position in which she holds the power of life and death. The phallic mother is the fantasy of the mother who is able to grant the child everything, to be its object of desire” (60).65 Roth attains a sense of potency through his alliance with the “phallic” mother. Bessie’s dominance is both tangible and absolute: her body’s plentitude asserts a protective presence over her young son. But this idyllic portrait of maternal abundance does not last forever. In order to construct his own discrete identity, the child eventually distinguishes himself from the protective mother by banishing her, relegating her to a position of alterity.

The “colossal bond” Roth had with his mother is conspicuously absent in The Facts after the writer enters college: “[L]ook at how you begin this thing,” asks Roth’s

65 For a Lacanian reading of Bessie Roth in The Facts, see James M. Mellard’s “Death, Mourning, and Besse’s [sic] Ghost: From Philip Roth’s The Facts to Sabbath’s Theater.”
alter ego, Zuckerman, “The little marsupial in his mother’s sealskin pouch. No wonder you suddenly display a secret passion to be universally coddled. But where, by the way, is the mother after that?” (167-68). Bessie recedes into the background, and takes on a silent role after the writer decides to escape the insulating strictures of his Newark home. Unlike Roth’s father Herman, who competes with his college-bound son for dominance in the household (“I returned to Bucknell a shell-shocked son, freshly evacuated from the Oedipal battlefield” [47]), Bessie covets harmony above all else, and willingly plays the part of a loving “peacemaker” (47). While Herman and his son are like “two raging belligerents” (47), “[Bessie] was really no problem. . . . [S]he had relaxed the exacting, sometimes overly fastidious strictures that had governed our early upbringing and began to be mildly intimidated by our airs of maturity; in a way she fell in love with us all over again, like a shy schoolgirl this time, hoping for a date” (38). During Roth’s adolescence, Bessie’s status shifts from phallic to castrated. She is submissive within the family dynamic, and cannot help but consent to her sons’ independence. They separate themselves from her, and thrust her into the role of the supportive other. In his juvenile fantasy, Roth blurs the erotic border between mother and son. Bessie becomes an obsequious “schoolgirl” so that her boys may become men. Roth envisions himself as a replacement for his father—the man his mother most desires. Within this Oedipal drama, Roth moves from dependence to independence, boyhood to manhood. He shores up his identity through the subjection of his mother and the usurpation of his father. The identity that he constructs in his early adulthood is thus predicated on separation and disavowal.

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Roth’s mother literally has no dialogue in The Facts.
In writing *The Facts*, Roth partially recovers the loss of the generative and all-powerful mother he had disavowed in his youth. Bessie’s influence over her son pervades the autobiography. For instance, the “artistry practiced within [Bessie’s] kitchen” can be seen as no less a model for Roth’s writing than the “sensuous accuracy of *Madame Bovary*” (92). While in college, however, it is not Bessie to whom Roth clings. Rather, it is Josie, his first wife—another generative and powerful female figure— who threatens to overwhelm the young man’s independence. His bond to Josie would, like the botched knee surgery, push him “right to the edge of emotional and mental dissolution” (5). When Roth first meets Josie in 1954, he is mesmerized by her history of victimhood: she had been mistreated “first as an only child raised from her earliest years as the not entirely welcome guest . . . in the house of her Grandfather and Stepgrandmother Hebert and then at the hands of the high school sweetheart whom she’d married and whom she had reason, she told me, to despise forever” (93). Roth is captivated by how different her life is from his. By being romantically involved with Josie, he felt that he could save her. Despite her non-Jewishness, the writer saw himself as the “parfit Jewish knight dispatched to save one of their own from the worst of the gentile dragons” (94). The writer fastens himself to Josie, whom he initially regarded as lacking in all the gifts his mother possessed, in order to escape the protective strictures of his insular Newark existence: “our seemingly incompatible backgrounds attested to my freedom from the

67 The aural parallel between the pseudonym Roth chooses for Margaret Martinson (“Josie”), the writer’s first wife, and his mother’s given name (“Bessie”), I believe, encourages the reader to compare the two women.

68 “The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from . . . castration anxiety,” according to Laura Mulvey, “preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object” (13). For an extended discussion of Mulvey’s work on cinematic spectatorship, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.
pressure of convention and my complete emancipation from the constraining boundaries protecting my preadult life. I was not only a man, I was a free man” (86-87). His first wife represented for him all that his family was not. Indeed, both the writer and his mother felt that Josie “bore no resemblance to Polly or Gayle [his previous girlfriends], and certainly none to her [Bessie]” (105). By attaching himself to Josie’s difference, the writer believed he could escape his family and become “a free man” (87).

Roth, however, soon detects the instability of Josie’s alterity, as she slowly transforms into him through impersonation. He paranoiacally interprets all of her actions as an impingement on his autonomy. Josie’s first pregnancy, for instance, is terminated at the writer’s insistence, since he did not want to be tied down. As a token of his appreciation, and to celebrate their “great good luck,” Roth brings the hospitalized Josie “a bunch of flowers and a bottle of domestic champagne” (94-95). But his celebratory mood is short-lived, as Roth is horrified to find a rabbi by her bedside. He wryly observes that “if I was Jewish she was Jewish, if I lived in Manhattan she lived in Manhattan, if I was a writer she was a writer, or would at least ‘work’ with writers” (97). The boundaries between the two dissolve; because Josie had no relatives or career in New York, she would insinuate herself into every part of Roth’s life. The writer is so disturbed by this encroachment that he “would sometimes wind up out on the street wandering around alone for hours as though it were my life that had hit bottom [and not Josie’s]” (97). Roth witnesses impotently as her life merges with his. But perhaps what appalls him the most is Josie’s belief that she had “edited” several of his Commentary and Paris Review stories. Despite his categorical denial of the claim (“I corrected her and said that though she certainly read them and told me what she thought, that was not what was meant by
‘editing’ [97]), the writer would eventually see in his wife a rival creator of fictions and a “master of fabrication” (111).

In Roth’s estimation, the “single great imaginative feat” that made Josie “a literary rival of audacious flair” was her second pregnancy, which proved to be pure fiction: “What Josie came up with, altogether on her own, was a little gem of treacherous invention, economical, lurid, obvious, degrading, deluded, almost comically simple, and best of all, magically effective” (107). Josie would eventually confess to having “inveigled” a pregnant black woman in Tompkins Square Park into selling her a urine sample (108). Roth recounts having obligingly proposed marriage—though, ironically, on the condition that Josie have a second abortion. For the writer, Josie manifested her artistry most brilliantly in her attention to details. By fabricating a pregnancy at Tompkins Square Park, a place where Roth “so enjoyed [his] solitude,” his soon-to-be wife had showcased her “nose for acerbic irony” (110). Where better to end Roth’s freedom and bachelorhood than at a place where the writer “felt perfectly at home” (109)? Indeed, it was her choice of setting that ended her “fantasied role as [his] editor” and transformed her into a masterful conjurer of fictions:

had she gone anywhere other than Tompkins Square Park, she wouldn’t have been the woman whose imagination’s claim on my own may well have been what accounted for her inexplicable power over a supremely independent, self-assured, and enterprising young man, a stalwart competitor with a stubborn sense of determination and a strong desire to have his own way. (110)
Roth is so overcome by the ingenuity of Josie’s fictions that he cannot help but submit himself to her, even though he is simultaneously repulsed by her “inexplicable power” (110). He repeatedly describes his wife as the voluptuous excess that he must resist. But as a “half-formed, fledgling novelist,” he is no match for her and her “overbrimming talent for brazen self-invention” (111). The writer recognizes the effect Josie has on his psyche. The section devoted to her, after all, is entitled “Girl of My Dreams.” She tormented him while she was alive, and continues to plague his memories, thoughts, and even his writing after her death: “For years afterward I was to think and brood and fictionalize obsessively about how I made Josie happen to me,” the writer acknowledges, “And it’s become apparent, while writing this, that I’m all too capable of thinking about it still” (139). Yet despite his antipathy towards Josie, Roth remains bonded to her in both psychological and legal senses. Because of “antiquated divorce laws,” he bitterly notes, “if [Josie] continued to prefer it that way, I would legally remain her husband forever” (141). The writer cannot “separate” himself from her, and “with Josie,” Zuckerman points out, “you regress, shamelessly and dangerously. She undoes you where ordinarily you do up everyone else. You take them up and you do them up and when you’ve done them up you leave them. But she undoes you and undoes you and undoes you” (180).

When facing his wife, Roth regresses to a child-like state, yearning to merge with her; he is shapeless in relation to Josie, and is once again “the protoplasm-me, boy-baby, and body-burrower-in-training” (14). Josie dominates her husband and his world. He is enraptured by her: “in the middle of the night there had been . . . fantasy-ridden, entangled couplings in which we had somehow slaked our anger and, somnambulistically, eased the physical hunger aroused by the warm bed and the pitch-
black room and the discovery of an identityless human form among the disheveled bedclothes” (103). During their furious trysts, the pleasure of submission overwhelms the writer’s will to dominate. He and his wife are “entangled” and merge almost unconsciously (“fantasy-ridden,” “somnambulistically”). They fuse in the darkness of the evening, blurring each other’s boundaries. Even though Roth self-identifies as “a supremely independent, self-assured, and enterprising young man” (110), he is nonetheless exhilarated by the momentary “undoing” of his identity—a “self-shattering” that Leo Bersani identifies with the concept of jouissance. Roth takes pleasure in fusing with and being dominated by Josie. With her, his will to dominate is overwhelmed by masochistic pleasure. As Bersani posits, we derive a “masochistic thrill” from “being invaded by a world we have not yet learned to master . . . This, in any case, is what Freud appears to be moving toward as a definition of the sexual: an aptitude for the defeat of power by pleasure, the human subject’s potential for a jouissance in which the subject is momentarily undone” (100). The disavowal of power and the erasure of protective boundaries are often met with an intense, albeit brief, pleasure. For many people, however, the appeal of self-renunciation is only temporary. We feel the seduction of annihilation, but disavow it, opting for self-mastery and possession.

In The Facts, Roth depicts the seductive draw of masochistic pleasure, but eventually rejects it, as the anguish he experiences from the dissolution of his ego exceeds the momentary pleasure that it produces (“I was nearly as ripe for hospitalization

69 Unlike “plaisir” or pleasure, which is comforting, ego-reassuring, and legitimated culturally, “jouissance” (which has no English equivalent) is shocking, ego-disruptive, and unrecognized by mainstream culture. The terms, however, are coextensive, and should not be regarded as antithetical. According to Jane Gallop, “The difference between jouissance and pleasure is generally understood to be one of degree” (114). That is, jouissance troubles even the border that separates itself from pleasure.
as she [Josie] was, my basement apartment having all but become a psychiatric ward with café curtains” [102]). While the autobiography oscillates between the thrill of self-shattering and the comfort of discrete subjective boundaries, in the end, Roth ensconces himself in the solace of ego coherence. *The Facts* concludes with a reestablishment of Roth’s phallic powers. He publishes *Portnoy’s Complaint* after an ejaculatory “burst of hard work” (156), and liberates his writing “from an apprentice’s literary models, particularly from the awesome graduate-school authority of Henry James” (157). While the publication of the novel, which was “imprinted with a style and a subject that were, at last, distinctively my own” (159), simply distances the author from literary masters like Henry James and Gustave Flaubert, Josie, “the greatest creative-writing teacher of them all, specialist par excellence in the aesthetics of extremist fiction” (112), is literally killed off. In a *deus ex machina* that uncannily echoes the convenient death of Charlotte Haze from Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Josie is suddenly and inexplicably killed in an automobile accident.

Josie is annihilated so that Roth may be free. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom characterizes the phase he calls “*askesis,*” in which a poet consciously separates himself from literary precursors, as “a movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude” (15). “[I]n his purgatorial *askesis,*” according to Bloom, “the strong poet knows only himself and the Other he must at last destroy, his precursor.” *Askesis,* he goes on to suggest, “is the contest proper, the match-to-the-death with the dead” (121-22). In this phase, the poet perceives himself to be original, and disavows the imprint of the past. He considers his work to be uninfluenced by those that came before him, and thus frees himself from the weight of his poetic forebears. This separation takes place in
both the poet’s psyche and also his poetry, and is a violent purging of the poetic self as other. This other, however, is a constitutive component of the self; *askesis*, in this sense, bifurcates poetic genius into a self/other dyad, and constructs artistic solitude through an expulsion of self as other (“self-purgation”).

Roth protects his individual talent by rejecting the (artistic) claims others make on him. He portrays Josie as his imbalanced “nemesis” and “antagonist” so that “the violent dissolution of the enshackling marriage” would be more narratively meaningful (159). Although he does not kill Josie himself, the positioning of the event within the narrative (right before the completion of *Portnoy’s Complaint*) suggests that she was purged so that his individual talent would survive. Josie’s death becomes the vehicle through which Roth’s artistry is established. *The Facts* transforms his ex-wife from a muse and rival to an abject and unwieldy character that is ultimately contained by the text through purgation. The discrete and coherent identity with which Roth ends his life narrative is thus predicated on the expulsion of the feminine other: “I was determined to be an absolutely independent, self-sufficient man—to recapture, in other words, twelve years on, at age thirty-five, that exhilarating, adventurous sense of personal freedom” (160).

The conclusion of the autobiography articulates the writer’s quest for artistic and personal independence. The form of *The Facts*, however, challenges the possibility of such a project. The “self” that is constructed through the autobiography is perpetually tainted by external presences and intertexts. As critics like Brian Finney have aptly noted, “Roth makes extensive use of intertextuality both in the titles of [*The Facts*] and of its individual sections, in its epigraph (from *The Counterlife*), and throughout the main body of the text” (383). But the irony of separating from literary “masters” like James and
Flaubert only to be enmeshed in “low-brow” intertexts like “All in the Family” and “Dragnet,” I believe, does not escape Roth. To a certain extent, the pastiche and intertexts within The Facts partially satisfy the writer’s ambivalent desire to submit to a larger entity.

While the narrative of his personal history leads him to despair, the intertextuality—heterogeneous and fragmentary—is the optimistic counterweight to the writer’s impossible wish for singularity. This promise, however, is unfulfilled in The Facts, as the text maintains the boundaries that separated the writer from his supporting characters even by the end. Although Elaine M. Kauvar claims that the autobiography “interweaves facts with fiction, intermingling facticity and fantasy” (432), I would argue that even this “intermingling” is compartmentalized and clearly demarcated (since it mostly takes place between Roth and Zuckerman). The autobiography’s experimental form, according to Ross Posnock, is yet another instance of “Roth’s signature of aesthetic freedom” (79). Self-reflexivity cannot ultimately exonerate the text for its narrative purgation of the maternal. Although Roth gives the fictional elements of the autobiography a privileged position in the book (Zuckerman literally frames The Facts), the writer still clings to the notion of artistic control. After all, he publishes the autobiography despite Zuckerman’s advice. Even as Roth recognizes that borders are permeable and tenuous, he cannot finally forgo them in the autobiography. There is thus a tension within The Facts: in the end, Roth’s need for singularity undermines the potential subversiveness of the form. It is the mature artist, Bloom posits, who finally escapes the

70 The formal playfulness of The Facts is conspicuously absent in Patrimony. According to David Gooblar, this is because “the shock and significance of a father’s death trumps all such writerly games” (35).
purgation of *askesis*: “the strong poet peers in the mirror of his fallen precursor and beholds neither the precursor nor himself but a Gnostic double, the dark otherness or antithesis that both he and the precursor longed to be, yet feared to become” (147). Not until *Patrimony*, Roth’s second explicit undertaking of life writing, does the author realize the potential that he proffers in the form of *The Facts*. The writer comes to relinquish the boundaries that separated him from his father through an artistic adaptation of the abject. By forming a “Gnostic double” with Herman *and* Bessie, Roth finally comes to maturity in *Patrimony*.

**Ethical Betrayal in *Patrimony***

*Patrimony*, Roth’s autobiographical account of his father’s battle with brain cancer and slow decline into death, is ostensibly a document concerned with the father-son relationship. And yet Roth’s mother crucially and conspicuously structures the narrative. Even though Bessie only speaks a few lines in the memoir, her sway over the family is nonetheless clear. Unlike Herman, who “had nothing to do” in the home, Bessie “had everything to do” with the family’s domestic life (*Patrimony* 37). She was for all intents and purposes the head of the household—a fact that greatly unsettled Herman after his retirement from Metropolitan Life: “‘You know what I am now?’ he told [his son] sadly on his sixty-fifth birthday. ‘I’m Bessie’s husband’” (37). Her strength was so threatening to Herman that he would frequently silence her as a way to reassert his power: “‘He doesn’t listen to what I say,’ [Bessie] said. ‘He interrupts all the time to talk about something else. When we’re out that’s the worst. Then he won’t let me speak at all. If I start to, he just shuts me up. In front of everyone. As though I don’t exist’” (38).
Despite being made virtually invisible by her husband, Bessie appears the stronger of the two. She knew that she could contradict her husband or even divorce him at any time, yet refused to do so because “He’s not like me. He couldn’t take it, Philip. He would crumble up. It would kill him” (38).

Because of Bessie’s scant appearances in *Patrimony*, critics have wondered, “What is the mother’s story?” (Miller, *Bequest* 34). “Bessie is never granted an autonomous voice which transcends the domestic sphere,” Michael Rothberg points out, “The mother is notably absent from (although one wonders if she has taken) the family photograph . . . which adorns *Patrimony*’s cover” (678).\(^{71}\) Certainly, Bessie’s voice and physical presence are limited in the memoir; however, Roth’s diminishment of his mother is not a simple repetition of his father’s dismissive behavior. The writer is aware of and acknowledges the immense influence his mother had on the household. He even attests that he is as much a product of Bessie as he is of his father: “People don’t always realize what good girls we [Roth and his brother] grew up as, . . . the little sons suckled and gurgled by mothers as adroit as my own in the skills of nurturing domesticity” (38).\(^{72}\) By relegating Bessie to the margins of the memoir, Roth paradoxically bestows onto her an inscrutable pervasiveness; his mother usurps the “remote and mythological” quality that Herman once possessed when he was away at work (38). Bessie’s ghostly presence fuels Roth’s imagination, transmuting him into her “little son” and “her good girl.”

The remainder of this chapter argues that within *Patrimony*, the maternal

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\(^{71}\) Parenthetically, Rothberg makes the interesting point that it is perhaps Bessie’s invisible presence—her role behind the camera—that makes the all-male photograph (and the memoir) possible.

\(^{72}\) As James M. Mellard aptly points out, “If, in Roth’s words, his mother is ‘subterraneanly’ present in *The Facts*, she is similarly present in *Patrimony*” (118).
functions in two ways that parallel Lévinas’s concept of the “Woman” as a conduit for ethical encounters: in the first, just as she did in *The Facts*, Bessie plays the role of peacemaker. She is, as Lévinas would describe it, the “gentleness that spreads over the face of things”; Roth’s mother establishes “the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation” (Lévinas 155). That is, Bessie’s domestic gifts—her seductiveness, malleability, and conciliatory personality—silently and invisibly make possible the father-son relationship in *Patrimony*. While Nancy K. Miller posits that in *Patrimony* “[m]other is body, father is story” (34), I would argue that, like in *The Facts*, Bessie is also aligned with Roth’s creative faculties: “my mother,” according to the writer, “was one of those devoted daughters of Jewish immigrants who raised housekeeping in America to a great art” (*Patrimony* 37; emphasis added). She elevates and transforms with her “skills of nurturing domesticity” just as her son does with his writing and imagination (32). It is the mother’s connection with art that brings us to the second function of the maternal in *Patrimony*. In the memoir, Roth imagines himself as a mother for both Herman and himself. By coalescing with the maternal, Roth is, as Lévinas would put it, “held hostage by the other,” and comes to recognize his own alterity. It is my contention that in *Patrimony*, the mother’s absent-presence, a force intimately connected with Kristeva’s notion of the abject, is the very precondition that allows for an ethical relation with the other.

By exposing our own lives, we inevitably uncover our relations with others. Can

73 According to Kathryn Bevis, Lévinas characterizes the Woman as “a condition for the ethical encounter, as the primary hospitable welcome into a home which governs the subject’s relations with the world” (322). Bevis adds, “We might say, then, that she allows the male subject to play at being with the Other” (322). It is this figure of the Woman, therefore, that makes ethical relations between self and other possible.
we ethically write about ourselves, then, if we must also expose the private lives of those surrounding us? In *Patrimony*, Roth is confronted with this very dilemma. In chronicling Herman’s final months, few details are spared. The dying man’s facial paralysis, his limp, and even his penis are reported in *Patrimony* with intimate exactitude. Herman is described as a “gruesomely transformed” (12), “slack and lifeless” shell of a man (10). Roth describes his father as vulnerable, frightened, petty and sometimes even cruel. Because *Patrimony* is as much a portrait of the son as it is of the father, one has to ask whether the memoirist has exceeded his ethical bounds by depicting his father in such a fragile and weakened state. Much has been written on the ethical complexities of *Patrimony*. Paul John Eakin argues, for instance, that Roth “demonstrates [in *Patrimony*] that transgression of privacy is not incompatible with the most profound respect for the integrity of the person” (182). Conversely, Miller claims that “even in a work that takes vulnerability as its theme, there’s something troubling about” Roth’s exhibition of his dying father (32). Both Eakin and Miller, despite their different opinions on privacy, examine a highly charged scene in *Patrimony* where Herman is in his son’s bathroom, helpless and completely soiled; because of his stubborn independence, the old man had refused his son’s help, and as a result finds himself prostrate on the floor of the bathroom, covered in shit and tears. The writer cleans up the mess, and dutifully promises Herman that “I won’t tell anyone” (173). But this vow comes after Roth meticulously describes the horror of the scene:

The shit was everywhere, smeared underfoot on the bathmat, running over

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74 Critics like David Gooblar note that Roth’s autobiographical writing showcase “a renewed concern with the responsibilities of writing about others, and with the differing, often conflicting claims that aesthetics and ethics can exert upon the writer” (35).
the toilet bowl edge and, at the foot of the bowl, in a pile on the floor. It was splattered across the glass of the shower stall from which he’d just emerged, and the clothes discarded in the hallway were clotted with it. It was on the corner of the towel he had started to dry himself with. In this smallish bathroom, which was ordinarily his mess alone, but as he was nearly blind and just up out of a hospital bed, in undressing himself and getting into the shower he had managed to spread the shit over everything. I saw that it was even on the tips of the bristles of my toothbrush hanging in the holder over the sink. (172)

Miller and Eakin examine the ethical questions with which the life writer contends. “Patrimony gets written in the space between two contradictory injunctions,” Miller writes, “not to forget and not to tell” (28). Similarly, Eakin observes that “Roth not only persists in publishing these private things, but even seeks to put an obedient face on this act of disobedience. Thus for the paternal command—‘don’t tell’—he substitutes another of his own—‘You must not forget anything’” (185). Both critics acknowledge the complexities of privacy. Miller, however, ultimately regards Patrimony as a “betrayal,” because “[t]orn between two biblical commands—to bear witness and to not violate a father’s sense of privacy—[Roth] choose[s] to bear witness.” While she acknowledges, “To mark off your difference through betrayal—you may be the father, I’m the writer—is the confirmation of both separation and relation,” Miller concludes that the autobiographer’s compulsion to “separate” is finally more paramount than his desire to acknowledge familial ties (124).

Although I agree that all life writing is, to a certain extent, an act of exposure and
thus betrayal, Miller’s claim that Roth separates himself from Herman in an attempt to reinforce his own identity does not fully take into account the mother’s influence on Roth’s relationship with his father. In *Patrimony*, Roth does not finally establish a self-other relation; nor does he expel or separate himself from his father or even the shit—what Kristeva would call the “dung [that] signifies the other side of the border” (3). It is Herman who is horrified by the feces, not his son. The father sees in his own mess a harbinger of his death and loss of bodily control. As Kristeva posits, we live by thrusting our own defilement aside; that is, “[s]uch wastes drop so that I might live” (*Powers* 3). Shit, a representation of death, is expelled as a way to proclaim our vivacity. We are alive because we are not shit. The shit came from me, but is repudiated as something external. However, the border that is constructed through the process of expulsion—an act of abjection—must be perpetually policed; we repeatedly abjure ourselves as a way to banish that which reminds us of our precarious claim to identity.

As Kristeva suggests, “The abject confronts us . . . within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity” (13). Herman’s desire for autonomy, then, is closely related to the infantile anxiety over the mother’s unruly power. He, like his son from *The Facts*, desires to maintain a sense of control and self-sufficiency. But as the above scene demonstrates, defilement is not so readily kept at bay. We, like the dying man, cannot help but pollute ourselves; our borders are bombarded and encroached. Our kinship to otherness, like Herman’s excrement, “run[s] over the toilet bowl edge,” refusing to be contained. The shit we want to keep out of sight lurks in the crevasses of our existence and makes claims on our autonomy. After soiling himself thoroughly, the borders Herman had policed so
vigilantly in the past collapse almost all at once. The singular self is polluted by dependence on the other—his son. Herman’s wish to “extricate himself from his mess alone,” fails miserably and results in a muck that engulfs everything in sight. Roth tells his father matter-of-factly that the old man’s determination to clean up after himself is a “no-win situation,” and that, as his son, he would have to intervene (172). The language of the scene betrays the paradox of his predicament. The more Herman wishes to be “alone” and by “himself,” the more entrenched he is in corporeal waste. After all, it is his original rejection of his son’s offer of help—a feeble declaration of independence—that catalyzes his fall. The act of “extrication” ironically mires Herman further in shit. Herman’s “mess alone” becomes an almost omnipresent defilement. Father and son share the same mess. The bathroom (“which was ordinarily mine”), whose main function is to contain and expel one’s waste, now attests to the two men’s squalid enmeshment.

But unlike his father, Roth does not dread the abject, nor does he seek to purge himself of it. After tending to his father’s incontinence, and finding himself alone in his feces-covered lavatory, the novelist briefly considers fleeing the situation: “I would just as soon have nailed the door shut and forgotten that bathroom forever. ‘It’s like writing a book,’ I thought—‘I have no idea where to begin’” (173). For Roth, the cleaning of shit and the production of literature are similar processes. Through art, the author is able to confront the abject, and convert it into something endurable. Herman, however, unlike his novelist son who is driven by imagination and art, is stuck with his own tragedies untransformed.75 Like the disillusioned Zuckerman in The Human Stain, Herman must

75 In Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud identifies art as a compensation for suffering: “happiness in life is sought first and foremost in the enjoyment of beauty, wherever it is to be found by our senses and our judgment, the beauty of human forms and movements,
experience the world “as is. Sans language, shape, structure, meaning—sans the unities, the catharsis, sans everything” (Stain 170). Roth sees his father as “the vernacular, unpoetic and expressive and pointblank, with all the vernacular’s glaring limitations and all its durable force” (Patrimony 181). For the writer, the dying man’s artlessness bespeaks the “brutal” realities of human existence. Herman, according to Roth, did not flinch from the plain truths of life: “Never in [Herman’s] life, as far as I knew, had he been one to try to elude the force of a dreadful blow” (33).

Herman’s lack of poetry forces him to deal with adversity unmediated. After Bessie unexpectedly dies, for instance, his family finds the widower “throwing everything [that had once belonged to her] out” (31). “It was my father’s primitivism that stunned me,” the writer observes. “[H]e seemed driven by some instinct that might be natural to a wild beast or an aboriginal tribesman but ran counter to just about every mourning rite that had evolved in civilized societies” (32). Roth sees the rest of the family’s sentimental hoarding of his mother’s possessions as a refusal to accept the facticity of death. In contrast, Herman’s “instinctive” drive to purge his wife’s belongings is described as a “pitilessly realistic determination to acknowledge . . . that symbolic relics were no substitute for the real companion of fifty-five years” (33). The writer continues, “It seemed to me that it was not out of fear of her things and their ghostlike power that he wanted to rid the apartment of them without delay . . . but because he refused to sidestep the most brutal of all facts” (33). According to Roth, Herman could not conceive of the world beyond the realm of “facts.” Art does not act as a consolation of natural objects, of landscapes, of artistic and even scientific creations. As a goal in life this aesthetic attitude offers little protection against the menace of suffering, but it is able to compensate for a great deal. (35-6).
for Herman as it does for his son. While the rest of the family regards Bessie’s possessions—her relics—as “symbolic” and somehow significant, Herman only sees them as insufficient reminders of his late wife. Because he is unable to transform remnants of her past into something meaningful through fiction and art, he must confront Bessie’s death directly. For Herman, these artifacts of the past, like Bessie’s corpse, represent nothing. Without art, Herman cannot “sidestep” the materiality of his wife’s death. Consequently, he is also incapable of facing his wife’s dead body: “on the evening of [Bessie’s] death he had fled from her corpse” (33). Herman runs from his wife’s body, because, like her possessions, it is no longer the woman he remembers and loved. Bessie’s remains, which once pulsed with life, are now a “thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything” (Kristeva Powers 4). She is abject. Her corpse does not “match” the person to which it was once connected, and cannot “signify anything.” It only represents death—the epitome of absence, nothingness.

Because of his profession as a writer, Roth is able to transform tragedies into art. Rather than run away from Herman and his feces, the writer aestheticizes the abject. As Bersani asserts, “pain may be a signal that tells us to flee a stimulus threatening to the body’s or the ego’s integrity. . . . Pain is the organism’s protection against self-dissolution” (94). A masochist, however, can bypass this pain, because he possesses a “passion for pleasure so intense that extreme pain is momentarily tolerated (rather loved for its own sake) as necessary to bring the masochist to the biochemical threshold where painful stimuli begin to produce pleasurable internal substances” (93-94). Roth’s art, like the masochist’s “passion for pleasure,” neutralizes the suffering associated with abjection. The son is able to abandon his earlier notions of freedom and remain enmeshed
in his father’s mess, because of his writing. Herman’s abjection, therefore, becomes tolerable only after it is transformed by the aesthetic processes of art. The writer’s aestheticization of the abject, however, is unlike the process of purification that Kristeva describes. The “cleansing” that takes place in *Patrimony* is not directed inwards. Roth does not purify himself through the expulsion of the other, nor does the memoir “set in motion the persecuting machine in which I assume the place of the victim” (Kristeva, *Powers* 112). The writer does not break away from the abject in order to affirm himself as he did in *The Facts*. Rather, what is overcome is the horror he feels when confronting the abject. As Andrew Gordon provocatively posits, “Roth perhaps even sees himself as his father’s shit” (54).

By handling his father’s excrement, the author comes to feel closer to Herman than ever before: “in the aftermath of cleaning it up, everything that’s there to feel is felt as it never was before. It wasn’t the first time that I’d understood this either: once you sidestep disgust and ignore nausea and plunge past those phobias that are fortified like taboos, there’s an awful lot of life to cherish” (175). Roth comes to see his father’s decaying body as familiar rather than foreign or alien. By the time the narrative of the memoir begins, Herman’s body had already declined to the point of being virtually unrecognizable: “What had looked like him the day before,” the writer muses, “now looked like nobody” (10). But rather than feel repulsed by his father’s decay, Roth comes to embrace it. After taking Herman’s dentures in his own hands, the author finds himself astonished by the comfort with which he is able to handle them:

Far from feeling squeamish or repelled, . . . I was amused by the rightness of it, as though we’d now officially become partners in a comical duo—as
though I’d assumed the role of straight man to a clown whose ill-fitting false teeth invariably brought the house down, a joke on par with Durante’s nose or Eddie Cantor’s eyes. By taking the dentures, slimy saliva and all, and dumping them in my pocket, I had, quite inadvertently, stepped across the divide of physical estrangement that, not so unnaturally, had opened up between us once I’d stopped being a boy. (152)

The passage blurs the separation between the linguistic subject and object. “Him” (Herman) and “I” (Roth) converge to become a “we.” The self that is constructed in *Patrimony*—unlike the autobiographical “I” in *The Facts*—is not predicated on corporeal or psychic separation. Roth and his father are interlocked and become a “duo.” Although the writer is the “straight man” to Herman’s “clown,” the two are nonetheless conceived of as a single unit—a binary that is inextricably tied. Herman’s false teeth “brought the house down” in two ways: in the more obvious sense, Roth is referring to the comedy of errors that is old age. Instead of regarding Herman’s senescence as a source of tragedy, he emphasizes the humor of the situation. The expression “brought the house down,” however, has a double meaning in the context of this scene. The house, a trope for the body, commonly insulates and guards the homeowner from others. By laughing about the situation, Roth refuses to respect the isolating borders of the body, and collapses the boundaries (“the divide of physical estrangement”) that separated his adolescent self from his father.76

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76 As a college student, the burgeoning writer desperately wanted to separate himself from the lack of formal education that his father represented. But despite his efforts, the young Roth frequently felt his identity converge with his father’s: “for many months there was nothing my reasonable self could do to shake off the sense of merging with him that overcame me in the library and in the classroom and at my dormitory desk, the
After caring for his father, Roth’s relationship with Herman comes to resemble the dyadic bond he and his mother shared in *The Facts*. Yet, in the above scene, it is Roth who is the figure of plentitude and comfort. It is apt, therefore, that when describing his helplessness and reliance on his son, Herman states that “Philip is like a mother to me” (*Patrimony* 181). By taking on the role of the “mother” imaginatively, the borders that divide Roth and his surroundings become permeable again. He plays the role of father, mother, and son. Furthermore, like a child who has yet to experience what Lacan calls the mirror stage, the author conceptualizes the world in fragments: Herman becomes a gaping mouth, Jimmy Durante a protruding nose, and Eddie Cantor a pair of rolling eyes. Self and other are entangled within this scene, as the body itself loses its unity and discrete borders.

Roth’s art, which Bessie helped cultivate, facilitates his capacity to confront both Herman’s and his own abject body; writing makes him feel “more at one with [his] father” than ever before (225). In the midst of his father’s cancer treatments, Roth himself undergoes an emergency quintuple bypass. After the surgery, the writer observes that “not since college, when I used to smuggle him [Herman] secretly into class with me, . . . had our lives been, if not identical, so intermeshed and spookily interchangeable. Helpless at the center of this little medical hubbub, I confronted, with a clarifying shock, the inevitability in which, for him, every second of existence was awash now” (225). Not only does Roth feel “intermeshed” with his father because of the surgery, but through his own declining body, the writer even starts to converge with his dead mother. While

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impassioned, if crazy, conviction that I was somehow inhabited by him and quickening his intellect right along with mine” (*Patrimony* 160). The anxiety brought on by this experience caused the adolescent Roth to feel imprisoned by his “clan.”
convalescing on the hospital bed, he envisions his “heart as a tiny infant suckling itself on this blood coursing unobstructed now through the newly attached arteries borrowed from my leg” (225). The heart surgery literally punctures Roth’s corporeal boundaries and forces him to jettison his pretensions of self-mastery. The writer transforms into Bessie, the phallic mother, and nurses himself as a defective heart. This image of Roth-as-mother liberates him from the divisive borders of “masculine” corporeality.77 Instead of feeling anxiety over the weakening of his subjective borders, as he did as an adolescent, Roth comes to relish his entanglement with Bessie: “the thought that I was giving suck to my own newborn heart provided hours of the most intense pleasure, sessions during which I did not have to use any imagination at all to feel myself androgynously partaking of the most delirious maternal joy” (226). The pain of self-dissolution is again masochistically converted into “the most intense pleasure” through Roth’s imagination.78 While the young writer in The Facts separates himself from his family as a proclamation of artistic integrity, in Patrimony, Roth comes to merge with his family aesthetically.

Roth Unbound

After Herman’s death, Roth lays his father to rest in a traditional shroud, since that was “how Jews were buried traditionally” (234). He immediately, however, second-

77 In the Kafkaesque novella The Breast (1972), after David Kepesh inexplicably transforms into a female breast, he asks the doctor “Did fiction do this to me?” (637).

78 This scene is further complicated, because the convergence between the writer and his mother parallels the relationship Herman had with Roth’s paternal grandmother: “my father, slumped in front of his supper tray, his food-stained hospital gown ineptly tied at the back, his teeth out and half his face down the drain, looked like a small old lady—and the small old lady he looked like was his mother, Bertha Zahnstecher Roth, as I remembered her in the hospital near the end of her life” (163). Roth’s abject body transforms him into “a family of four” (226).
guesses his decision. After all, Herman “wasn’t Orthodox and his sons weren’t religious at all” (234). As a result of his decision, Roth ends up having an uneasy dream that he recounts at the conclusion of *Patrimony*. The vision manifests Roth’s anxieties over his filial responsibility. “I should have been dressed in a suit,” Herman chastises his son in the dream that follows his death. “You did the wrong thing” (237). Roth awakens screaming, realizing that his father was not referring to the funereal shroud at all, but instead “had been alluding to this book [*Patrimony*], which, in keeping with the unseemliness of [his] profession, [he] had been writing all the while [Herman] was ill and dying” (237). In this self-reflexive moment, Roth acknowledges the invasion of privacy that writing about others involves. He brings attention to his betrayal of his father’s confidence, and ends *Patrimony* with the acknowledgement that “if not in my books or in my life, at least in my dreams I would live perennially as his little son, with the conscience of a little son” (238). The memoir never fully liberates Roth from his father’s authority or judgment. The question this scene leaves the reader with, then, is why would Roth choose to publish *Patrimony* at all. If these intimate observations, which were written throughout the duration of his father’s battle with cancer, were made for solely therapeutic purposes, then Roth could simply have kept them in a private collection.

While Herman’s mantra, “You must not forget anything,” explains the writer’s decision to write the memoir to a certain extent, we are still left to speculate why the author is compelled to chronicle his father’s story so publicly. *Patrimony*, according to Miller, reminds Roth and the reader “that who he is, what he is, is before all the writer” (33). David Gooblar similarly contends that the book establishes the primacy of Roth’s writing: the memoir, he asserts, “grant[s] [his father’s life] narrative meaning. It is this
narrative meaning that Roth trades his father’s privacy for” (38). While Roth’s aestheticization of his father’s decline certainly does provide “narrative meaning” to the incoherence of human existence and death, I would suggest that “the unseemliness of [the writer’s] profession” (*Patrimony* 237) does not finally contradict Roth’s duties as a son.

The ethical project of *Patrimony*, I believe, coalesces in another dream sequence that is documented in the text, where the writer envisions his father as a disabled warship in Newark. In the dream, Roth finds himself in a pier near Port Newark during the 1940s, where he is one in a “group of unescorted children who may or may not have been waiting to be evacuated” (234). During this vision, the writer is “reminded that Newark was a coastal city” and muses about the “geographical vastness that you couldn’t imagine while playing stoop ball with your little pals on our cozy, clannish street of two-and-a-half-family houses” (235). Roth overlooks the Atlantic Ocean in the dream, and on the water he sees

some sort of old American warship stripped of its armaments and wholly disabled, floated imperceptibly toward the shore. I was expecting my father to be on the ship, . . . but there was no life on board and no sign anywhere of anyone in command. . . . Ultimately the dream became unbearable and I woke up, despondent and frightened and sad—whereupon I understood that it wasn’t that my father was aboard the ship but that my father *was* the ship. And to be evacuated was physiologically just that: to be expelled, to be ejected, to be born. (235-36)

This dream could be interpreted as a manifestation of Roth’s unconscious (albeit ambivalent) desire to be “evacuated” from his father’s paternal authority—a wish “to be
expelled, to be ejected, to be born” as an autonomous and independent subject. I contend, however, that the vision instead instructs Roth on how to approach his father’s decay without abjection. Through the processes of dream-making, which are fundamentally linked to the creation of a literary text, Roth is able to neutralize the horror of his father’s dying body and imminent death. In the dream, Herman’s body is transfigured into a “battle-gray boat” and Roth himself regresses to a childlike state. The shock of watching his father die, a reminder for Roth of his own death, is curbed through the transformation of his father’s physical body. The literal dream-thoughts are reshaped by what Freud calls “dream displacement.” In *On Dreams*, Freud claims that

> We assume as a matter of course that the most distinct element in the manifest content of a dream is the most important one; but in fact [owing to the displacement that has occurred] it is often an *indistinct* element which turns out to be the most direct derivative of the essential dream thought. (34; brackets in the original)

While Roth provides a reading of his own vision, what he never interprets directly is the context—that is, the “indistinct element”—of this scene. The context of Newark as a coastal city governs the logic of this vision and gives meaning to the dream. The city, the writer recollects, “opened in the distance to the Statue of Liberty and the Atlantic”

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79 Freud believes that the poet “forces us to become aware of our own inner selves” (*Interpretation* 256). As he notes in the “Preface” to the third German edition of *Interpretation of Dreams*, “Dream-interpretation must seek a closer union with the rich material of poetry, myth, and popular idiom” (10). Kristeva makes a similar claim by dubbing literature the “privileged signifier” that “represents the ultimate coding of our [unconscious] crises, of our most intimate and most serious apocalypses” (*Powers* 208).

80 Freud posits that “only the context can furnish the correct meaning” of a dream symbol (*Interpretation* 335).
Although the father-son relationship is the most “distinct” element in the vision (and of the memoir), the “geographic vastness” of Newark, the city where Roth was born and raised, and the Atlantic Ocean, are the maternal backdrop that silently enables the paternal relationship to exist. The coastal city, whose immensity “you couldn’t imagine” (235), conjures images of the plentitude Roth experiences when connected to his mother. In this dream, the Oedipal fantasy of separation is overridden by the wish to return to a maternal state of totality. Both father and son submit to the Atlantic’s current. This backward glance at Roth’s birthplace manifests the writer’s nostalgia for a time before he needed to escape his family, and returns him to when “the death of parents needn’t be contended with” (Facts 9). Roth would repeatedly revisit his childhood home through his fiction as a way to recover the familial harmony he once knew. Newark proffers a freedom, as symbolized by the Statue of Liberty, that is engulfed by the unconstrained torrents of the ocean. Roth’s childhood memories, which his mother permeates, liberate him from his isolated ego and provide him with a simultaneous feeling of communion with and distinction from his father. The dream, therefore, does not prescribe evacuation, ejection, or expulsion; rather, they are options that the dreamer comes to reject.

By acknowledging his relationship with the abject, the boundaries that isolate Roth begin to dissolve. Just as a maternal presence shapes Roth’s dream, so too does the mother structure the logic of Patrimony. The “betrayal” and separation that Miller

81 In Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud describes the regressive desire for a union with the phallic mother as “a feeling of something limitless, unbounded—as it were ‘oceanic’” (251).

82 In The Facts, the section that describes 1940s Newark is entitled “Safe At Home.”
regards as constitutive of all memoirs is thus subsumed by a larger pre-Oedipal drama in the text. By exposing the private details of Herman’s final days, Roth does indeed “betray” his father’s right to privacy. This betrayal, however, does not unbind the author from his father; rather, it services a larger ethical project. Right before Herman’s death, while in the hospital, Roth’s father is at first irritated with an old Asian man who “kept gagging wretchedly,” because “the Chinaman kept everybody up” (162). Herman and this stranger are confined in the hospital room together, where there is no privacy or partition separating the two. Through their mutual suffering, however, Roth’s father comes to feel compassion for his dying roommate: “once, when I [Roth] happened to be in the hall outside the living room, . . . I heard him [Herman] muttering something that turned out not to be about his own misery at all. ‘That poor Chinaman,’ he was saying” (168). And while the Chinese man could not speak English, “it probably wouldn’t even have been inappropriate,” Roth supposes, “for that poor Chinaman lying in his bed and choking on his tube to think, in passing about [his] father, ‘That poor Jew’” (170). The two sick men are forced to acknowledge each other’s suffering through a common loss of privacy—a reciprocal encroachment. By publishing a memoir of his father’s decline and eventual death, Roth similarly implicates himself in his father’s suffering. Although the author would mostly keep to himself when administering to his father in the hospital, “From time to time, the Oriental woman [the daughter of the “Chinaman” who was placed beside his father] and I looked at each other tending our fathers and smiled” (Patrimony 162). While in The Facts, Roth hires a “petite Hong Kong pro” as a way to symbolically proclaim the end his relationship with his girlfriend May (159), in Patrimony, the writer comes to sympathize and connect with an “Oriental woman,” because of their similar
enmeshment with the abject. In *Patrimony*, through a masochistic retreat into the maternal, Roth is able to encounter alterity—whether in the form of his father, a Chinese woman, or even a taxi driver—without the hostility he felt in *The Facts*. No longer are the Josies in his world expelled or annihilated.

This is not to say, however, that by writing his memoir, Roth abandons all prejudices and interpersonal boundaries. After all, throughout *Patrimony*, Herman continues to play the unsophisticated vernacular to the writer’s poetic language. The dying Asian is still a “Chinaman.” Nonetheless, Roth’s autobiographical treatment of death and decay helps relieve the author from a proprietary and individualistic relationship with the body. Like the evacuee child in his vision of Newark, Roth could remain in an illusory dream of autonomy, as he did in *The Facts*, ejecting himself from his family; or he could awaken—as I believe he begins to do in *Patrimony*—opening his eyes to the vastness of a self bound inextricably to others.
The Dying “I” in Julian Schnabel’s The Diving Bell and the Butterfly

...because on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am merely a thinking thing and not an extended thing, and because on the other hand I have a distinct idea of a body, insofar as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.

—René Descartes

In the film The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, Julian Schnabel adapts the autobiography of Jean-Dominique Bauby, the former editor of French Elle. After suffering a massive and paralyzing stroke in 1995, Bauby declares, “Other than my eye, two things aren’t paralyzed”: “my imagination and my memory” (330). As a way to escape his physical immobility, he begins to daydream about a life unencumbered by illness or corporeal limitations. Bauby triumphantly announces in a voiceover: “I can imagine anything, anyone, anywhere” (330). His visions are so vivid that they even begin to tamper with his memories: “And now I want to remember myself as I was. Handsome, debonair, glamorous. And devilishly attractive” (331). The former editor, however, suddenly stops short, as he realizes that his fantastical description had turned into a portrait not of himself, but rather of Marlon Brando. In this whimsical moment, the film unravels its own generic integrity: the scene, which has no corollary in the written text, self-consciously points to the unstable boundaries that separate autobiography and biopic.84

83 Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from the film are taken from Ronald Harwood’s adapted screenplay.

84 For an art assignment, Julian Schnabel’s third-grade teacher asked everyone in her class to draw their own self-portraits. Because the young Schnabel’s artistic talents were well-known to his classmates, he found himself commissioned by the other students to sketch their “self”-portraits for them. Schnabel’s approach to portraiture has remained more or less consistent since these childhood days. As a filmmaker, he has re-imagined
In *Diving Bell*’s original written form, there is no question about its autobiographical status. The memoir recounts Bauby’s life from his point of view and in his own words. Schnabel’s adaptation, however, conflates the lives of its director and protagonist. The filmmaker has provocatively revealed in interviews that *Diving Bell* is “probably the most autobiographical film that I’ve made” (Schnabel NYFF). It is no secret that Schnabel exercises much artistic license in his re-telling of Bauby’s life. The film’s final credits acknowledge that “While this picture is based on a true story . . . certain characters have been changed, some main characters have been composited or invented, and a number of incidences fictionalized.” The director suffuses the film with many of his own biographical details. For instance, Papinou (Bauby’s father), is depicted as a decrepit man of ninety-two (the same age as Schnabel’s father before his death),

the life stories of Jean-Michel Basquiat (*Basquiat*), Reinaldo Arenas (*Before Night Falls*), and Jean-Dominique Bauby (*Diving Bell and the Butterfly*), again acting as an instrument for his subjects’ self-fashioning. Although *Basquiat* is technically a biopic and not an adaptation of an autobiography, Schnabel notoriously repaints the artwork of Jean-Michel Basquiat—including loose reproductions of the deceased artist’s self-portraits.
even though Bauby’s actual father was really only in his eighties during his son’s hospitalization. Moreover, the skeletal images shown in the opening credits are based on French x-rays, taken in 1911 (the year the senior Schnabel was born). Photographs of Schnabel’s father were also scattered throughout the film. The director pluralizes the “self” (or the “auto-”) of the film by overlaying his own life details onto his protagonist’s memories. In this way, the director’s authorship shatters the singularity of Bauby’s story.

What does it mean, this chapter asks, to describe Diving Bell as “autobiographical,” when individual experience is so radically compromised? What responsibility, furthermore, does a film like Diving Bell have towards factual

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85 For a discussion of the ethics of factual transformation in Diving Bell, see Craig, “Locked In” (152-54).

86 In the widely cited “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” the Belgian critic Georges Gusdorf argues that the autobiographical act is one that “reconstruct[s] the unity of a life across time” (37). That is, while memories and experiences may be multivalent and sometimes even contradictory, an autobiography will actively construct a coherent and singular subject. See also Weintraub’s The Value of the Individual and Pascal’s Design and Truth in Autobiography for a discussion on autobiography and the “individual” self.
accountability? Even though the theorist Sarah J. Heidt makes the important point that “film adaptation now constitutes a crucial possible stage in an autobiography’s or memoir’s cultural life” (127), allowing for the possibility of what she calls an autobiographical “multitext,” she nonetheless takes issue with Schnabel’s audacious disregard for facts: “The case of the filmed Diving Bell and the Butterfly illustrates the emotional and ethical complexities of weaving composited characters and fictionalized incidences into a film offering such impressive effects of immediacy and reality, such vivid evocations of an autobiographical subject’s experience” (135). While Heidt claims that her “analysis of The Diving Bell and the Butterfly is not strictly about the film’s fidelity (or lack thereof) to Bauby’s memoir” (128), her critique of Schnabel’s adaptation, I believe, exposes her unwitting participation in what is commonly referred to as “fidelity criticism” in adaptation theory:

Schnabel sought to create Jean-Do on screen in such a way that audiences might see not only into Bauby’s inner life but even beyond his experience, finding in that experience some sort of universal and universalizing truth. Yet the cumulative effect of his creation is to tantalize us with just how extraordinary it would be to enter into another’s mind . . . and then, through his work’s own shortcomings, to remind us of just how fleeting (and possibly even how solely fantasized) such enterings and joinings are and how strangely, poignantly impermeable our encasements in individual bodies and their perspectives can be, whether those bodies are human, textual, or cinematic. (143)
Heidt equates Schnabel’s transformation of Bauby’s biography with the filmmaker’s “shortcomings” as an adapter. The director’s “autobiographical reading” and personalization of Bauby’s memoir, according to Heidt, nearly “toppl[e] into narcissism” (143). It makes sense, of course, for Heidt to be troubled by the factual changes and what she calls “misrepresentations” that take place in Schnabel’s film (144). *Diving Bell*, after all, is ostensibly about Bauby’s life. The film adaptation, consequently, could be construed as a form of autobiographical colonization since the director appropriates his subject’s experiences and vicariously lives through them. The film, however, never fully collapses the distinction between self and other—even as it teeters dangerously close. Bauby as a character asserts his autonomy when he announces: “Ça c’est pas moi, c’est Marlon Brando! Ça c’est moi” (331). While *Diving Bell* celebrates the interconnectedness of people, it simultaneously warns against the desire to completely lose oneself in another. Even though our imaginations can liberate us from our isolating diving bells—connecting us to the lives of others—when divorced from the corporeal self, these fantasies can rob us of our personal identities.

Heidt’s reading is ultimately based on the assumption that the sharing of experiences can only exist within the realm of the mind. I contend, however, that by the end of the film, Bauby’s mind is no longer the instrument that connects him with his surroundings. Rather, as his death scene illustrates, it is his abject corporeality that

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87 Linda Hutcheon takes the opposite stance on fidelity in adaptation: “Perhaps one way to think about unsuccessful adaptations is not in terms of fidelity to a prior text, but in terms of a lack of the creativity and skill to make the text one’s own and thus autonomous” (20). Crucially, Schnabel’s film neither submits to the singular authority of Bauby’s memoir, nor does it fully “make the text [its] own.” Indeed, *Diving Bell* questions the very possibility of separate selfhood.

88 “That isn’t me, that’s Marlon Brando! This is me.” (Translation mine).
merges the protagonist with his environment. This chapter focuses specifically on three scenes—Laurent’s visit at the hospital, Bauby’s final death sequence, and the closing credits—in order to demonstrate how Schnabel invites the viewer to identify with Bauby, the dying subject, and eventually the “inanimate” environment that envelops him.

Although the beginning of Schnabel’s *Diving Bell* depicts Bauby as depressed and remote from those around him, he eventually comes to connect with the objects of his gaze—as symbolized by the reconstituting glacier that ends the film. This visual shift parallels a larger movement in phenomenology, away from Husserl’s early focus on “pure essence” to Merleau-Ponty’s more situated subject.\(^8^9\) This visual and phenomenological shift, I argue, captures the very politics of Schnabel’s autobiographical project. The film initially captures only Bauby’s limited first-person point of view, but

\(^8^9\) I have chosen Husserl, the “founding father” of phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty as representative figures of this philosophical shift partly because of their contentious roles within the history of film theory. Husserl’s early writings on transcendental phenomenology was famously critiqued by cinema scholars like Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz who saw the philosopher’s focus on the “transcendental ego” as ideologically suspect. Husserl wanted to reveal the “essence” of objects dispassionately through the narrowing of human perceptions. He saw phenomenology as a corrective to the distortions of the prevailing sciences of his day, which he believed naturalized and concealed the filtering processes of human consciousness. As a methodology, phenomenology would set aside or “bracket” the invisible presuppositions and mental processes (whether historical, cultural, or “scientific”) that were often mistaken as natural performances. By bracketing these naturalized prejudices, Husserl believed, phenomenology could strip the subject of his contingent relations, and thus help him attain a “pure” consciousness or “transcendental” ego. The phenomenological reduction of the subject to the point of purity, however, was challenged by many subsequent philosophers (including Husserl himself). Merleau-Ponty suggested that “the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction. . . . If we were absolute mind, the reduction would present no problem. But since, on the contrary, we are in the world,” the desire to be absolutely free from presuppositions was outside the realm of human possibility (*Phenomenology of Perception* xv). In the last two decades, phenomenology has regained popularity through Merleau-Ponty’s amendments to Husserl’s “first philosophy.” Film theorists like Kaja Silverman and Vivian Sobchack have written expertly on Merleau-Ponty’s work, applying “existential phenomenology” to their own theories of film spectatorship.
then shifts to a perspective that couples its protagonist’s consciousness with a third-person vantage point in a cinematic form of free indirect discourse. With this change of perspective, *Diving Bell* manifests the evolution of Bauby’s point of view. The gaze that Bauby comes to adopt is one that joins the weight of his paralyzed body with the levity of imagination—the titular diving bell and the butterfly. The boundaries that separate first and third-person, subject and object, come to blur under this new way of looking. Just as the x-rays in the film’s opening strip the human body of its opacity, so too does Schnabel’s film reveal the permeability of all mortal flesh. All bodies will at some point decay and dissolve into the landscape. It is precisely “our encasements in individual bodies,” then, that connect us to the world outside of ourselves. By adapting *Diving Bell*, Schnabel transmutes Bauby’s locked-in syndrome—what the film refers to as the “harsh light of disaster”—into the means by which the heterogeneity of identity is articulated.

The Detached “I” in Bauby’s Memoir

Throughout the written memoir, Bauby describes memory and vision in explicitly cinematic terms. The editor affectionately refers to his past as “my own personal movie theatre” (53). As his stay in the hospital lingers, however, his memories begin to fade: “I watch my past recede. My old life still burns within me, but more and more of it is reduced to the ashes of memory” (85). The blurring of his memories is so disconcerting that while lying in an ambulance headed towards Paris for only the second time after his hospitalization, Bauby finds himself unmoved by the visual splendors of the city where he used to work as an editor for *Elle*. Although he was moved to tears the first time he returned to the capital after his coma, during this excursion Bauby gazes at Paris from an
emotional remove. In the written memoir, he strikingly compares his vision of Paris to the rear screen projections of Hitchcock films:

The streets were decked out in summery finery, but for me it was still winter, and what I saw through the ambulance windows was just a movie background. Film-makers call the process a rear screen projection, with the hero’s car speeding along a road which unrolls behind him on a studio wall. . . . My own crossing of Paris left me indifferent. Yet nothing was missing. . . . Nothing was missing, except me. I was elsewhere. (86-87)

On this visit to Paris, Bauby is literally unable to see his old workplace: the ambulance separates him from the rest of the world, making the editor both physically and emotionally removed from the city. Unlike a passionate cinephile excited to see the film before him, imagining what lies beyond the frame, Bauby is here unable to move past the framing of the city, detached from the viewing experience. He sees himself as the foreground to the “movie background” of Paris. Because he could only look through the small ambulance window directly in front of him, Bauby sees the cityscape as unbelievable as the backdrops in the movies of his youth. Although he had favorably compared the “deserted terrace” of the Berck hospital to Rome’s Cinecittà, bestowing onto the landscape the “offbeat charm of a movie set” (37), Paris is here reduced to cinematic trickery. The city is “just a movie background,” and its landmarks merely “a rear screen projection.”

Because of his paralysis, Bauby cannot help but privilege his vision. His single eye becomes synecdochic of his entire being. His detached vantage point, however, leaves Bauby emotionally “indifferent” and skeptical of the outside world. As Husserl
argues, “I am subject to an illusion or hallucination. The perception is not then ‘genuine.’

But if it is, if, that is, we can ‘confirm’ its presence in the actual context of experience,
. . . then the perceived thing is real and itself really given” (115). The former editor
cannot “confirm” Paris’s reality, because he is physically unable to touch the city; and so
he rejects the visual pleasures of his old home. Paris becomes in Husserlian terms “mere
appearance” (115) for Bauby. Nevertheless, what prevents him from fully perceiving
Paris is his own self-imposed exile. His wintry disposition mutes the metropolis’s beauty,
as he projects his discontent onto the urban landscape. In the ambulance, Bauby sees the
French capital as a reflection of his own grotesque body: Paris, the editor writes, “that
monster with a hundred mouths and a thousand ears, which knows nothing but says
everything, had written me off” (89-90).90

Bauby gazes at the city from an emotional distance, unlike Merleau-Ponty’s
situated viewer, who is immersed in the world that he looks upon:

I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is identically passivity—
which is the second and more profound sense of the narcissism: not to see
within the outside, as the others see it, the contour of a body one inhabits,
but especially to be seen by the outside, to exist in it, to emigrate into it, to
be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the
visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and
which is seen. (“Intertwining” 139)

Two contradictory forms of narcissism, according to Merleau-Ponty, exist within
looking-relations. The first kind, which limits one’s vision, causes the spectator to see

90 Bauby describes his “condition” as “monstrous, iniquitous, revolting, horrible” (79).
only himself in the world. This type of narcissism is caused by the seer’s detachment from the spectacle. The subject who attempts to divorce himself from his environment, however, because he cannot apprehend its details from afar, neither perceives himself nor the world in which he resides. He does not see himself in relation to his surroundings and instead projects himself onto it. Such a spectator is, therefore, blind to his surroundings, and never really sees beyond himself. Contrarily, the “second and more profound sense of narcissism” couples the spectator with the image he beholds. This second type of vision allows the looking-subject to apprehend the world more fully, because he is “situated” within it. He thus has no need to replicate himself. True vision demands “perspective,” but gaining perspective is often mistakenly confused with a detached vantage point. According to Merleau-Ponty, the seer must instead be simultaneously discrete from and united with “the visible”; he must distinguish himself from the world before him—so as to not only falsely duplicate himself—while acknowledging his inseparability from the universe that envelops him. This dual vision maintains the distinctiveness of the individual, even as it blurs the subjective divisions between self and other.

Bauby detaches himself from Paris, preferring instead the enclosure of his hospital room. After his stroke, the medical world engulfs Bauby’s life. Not only does his “locked-in” syndrome trap him within his immobile body, but his paralysis also ensures that he is perpetually “cocooned” by protective figures and spaces. Throughout the memoir, the editor is tended to by a harem of loving nurses (and nurse-like women), transported from one cramped hospital room to another, and, in general, shielded from the world outside. The ambulance becomes yet another insulating space; it is for all
intents and purposes a mobile version of his hospital room at Berck, guarding the editor from the bustle of the outside world. Instead of a television screen, which was a staple in his hospital room, the ambulance provides a window for Bauby to peer through safely. Despite his wish to be free from his “cocoon,” the editor takes solace in the insularity of his post-stroke existence: “I even derive a guilty pleasure from this total lapse into infancy” (24).

These feelings of alienation are worsened by his inability to remember his past life in Paris. While in the ambulance, the editor realizes that he could no longer recall the specific details of his old workplace. It is partly for this reason that he relies so heavily on his vision—his gaze supplements his fading memories of Paris. Although he periodically references the smells of food or the tunes of Charles Trenet, it is his sight that dominates the memoir. The fact that he is able to see, that he still possesses “a window to [his] cell, the one tiny opening of [his] cocoon,” proves to the editor that he is still alive (61). Due to his dependence on sight, it is no accident that *Diving Bell* invokes cinema as a controlling metaphor. While in the ambulance, Bauby casts himself in two filmic roles: an actor who cannot see the “movie background . . . unroll[ing] behind him on a studio wall,” and a film viewer who sees Paris, but is skeptical of the images in front of him.

Even though Bauby is only able to see the metropolis from the limited frame of an ambulance window—much like a film viewer—the monstrosity of the city is in part a result of his impersonal and detached perspective. As Merleau-Ponty avers, “He who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at” (“Intertwining” 134). While Bauby’s vantage point is indeed limited by the aperture before him, his position is perhaps only an exaggeration of a “normal” human point of view. Ultimately, objects
appear perspectivally to all people, and are never apprehended in their totality. Whether the seer is in an ambulance or a movie theatre, what he perceives is only a partial presentation of the object seen.

Bauby’s detachment from the city is of course literally a result of his physical immobility. His “bracketed” vision, however, exacerbates his condition. In the ambulance, Bauby looks only with his eyes and is consequently blinded when Paris is obstructed by the window frame. He does not allow his other senses to inform his vision. As Sobchack posits, “we do not experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium” (Carnal 59). Even though Bauby is paralyzed and can no longer touch, “the full history and carnal knowledge of [his] acculturated sensorium” would have allowed him to perceive the city in ways that his eye alone cannot. Even as he is anchored by his paralysis, and can only watch the world as it passes him by, Sobchack suggests that “even in the most objectively passive mode, the gaze or stare of cinema is . . . subjectively busy: at work prospecting its world, actively making . . . the visual choice to situate its gaze again and again in the same place” (“The Active Eye” 24). The immobile viewer of cinema creates the world by constituting and situating the images on the screen. The viewer is, then, “less motionless than intently engaged in the constant work of arresting [his] gaze” (24). All spectators, in this way, are authors of “the visible.” Bauby acknowledges that Paris had not changed (“nothing was missing”). It is he who is elsewhere. By disconnecting himself from the metropolis, the former editor transforms his old home into an uncanny and abject reflection of how he sees his own body. Despite his paralysis, then, Bauby is not simply a victim of the
external world. Even in the ambulance, it is he who “prospects” and produces the alienating world before him.

Yet, unlike the skeptical film viewer he compares himself to in the ambulance, at Cinecittà (the terrace of the hospital), Bauby acknowledges his agency as an auteur:

I could spend whole days at Cinecittà. There, I am the greatest director of all time. On the town side, I reshoot the close-ups for *Touch of Evil*. Down at the beach I rework the dolly shots for *Stagecoach*, and offshore I recreate the storm rocking the smugglers of *Moonfleet*. Or else I dissolve into the landscape and there is nothing more to connect me to the world than a friendly hand stroking my numb fingers. (37)

Bauby is completely paralyzed on the terrace, just as he is in the ambulance. In Cinecittà, however, he actively engages with the landscape. He cannot move his fingers or operate a camera, but his creative faculties—his memories and his imagination—allow him to connect with the environment that surrounds him: he “reshoots,” “reworks” and “recreates” the landscape. Like a filmmaker, Bauby only has the capacity to re-present the physical world through his vision. Nonetheless, he immerses himself in the spectacle. Because Bauby does not restrict his creative faculties at Cinecittà, despite the literal numbness of his fingers, he is still able to touch the landscape.⁹¹

What the cinematic metaphor in these two scenes reveals is that our vision has the dual capacity to isolate us from the world or bring us closer to it. Bauby is “the greatest director of all time” in Cinecittà because he does not separate himself from the spectacles

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⁹¹ According to Sobchack, “Once we understand that vision is informed by and informs our other senses in a dynamic structure that is not necessarily or always sensually hierarchical, it is no longer metaphorical to say that we ‘touch’ a film or that we are ‘touched’ by it” (*Carnal* 80).
before him. He deconstructs the border that separates the creator of a film and its viewer, and opens up the possibilities of film spectatorship. In other words, even the immobile viewer can be an *auteur* of a cinematic text, but for this to happen, his eyes must be informed by his creative faculties. At Cinecittà, Bauby’s imagination and memories implicate him in the things he sees and transmutes his earlier myopia into a fuller, more interconnected vision.

The Cinematic Self in Schnabel’s Adaptation

Although Bauby’s original written memoir invites the reader to see through its words, the text-based reading experience is ultimately incommensurate with the embodied looking-relations that *Diving Bell* privileges. The reader can only relate to the memoir on an imaginative and disembodied plane. This is to say, we do not physically see the pictorial images that are described on the page, and are thus mostly free to imagine whatever we want. In both versions of *Diving Bell*, the editor’s body keeps his imagination in check. Even within the written memoir, Bauby is frequently reminded of his own embodiment: “Reflected in the glass I saw the head of a man who seemed to have emerged from a vat of formaldehyde. . . . One eye was sewn shut, the other goggled like the doomed eye of Cain. For a moment I stared at that dilated pupil before I realized it was only mine” (Bauby 32-33). Despite his wish to be free from corporeal limitations, the text repeatedly turns Bauby’s gaze back onto his broken body. Yet we as the reader are never confronted with our own “goggled” and monstrous eye. The reader’s vision, like Bauby’s unseeing eye, is “sewn shut” by the reading experience and replaced with a disembodied imagination. Conversely, by watching Schnabel’s film, we are continually
reminded of our own “doomed eye.” We, like Bauby, are restricted by our field of vision. Both he and the cinematic spectator are connected by our mutual physical limitations: we sit motionless, gazing at the moving images before us. The film viewer, therefore, must look corporeally and imaginatively in order to see through Bauby’s eyes. Even though both the written memoir and Schnabel’s adaptation insist upon an imaginative and active spectatorship, it is the film that comes closest to reproducing the viewing experience that ultimately frees Bauby from his paralysis: one that intertwines the corporeality of human existence—a bodily experience that is inhibited when we read—with the imagination.

Memories are constituted by our physical senses. We recall the color of someone’s skin, the timbre of his voice, and the texture of his hair, only after having seen, heard and touched the person of our memories. Such perceptual data, however, are fragmentary and incoherent. The memories that we describe are often a complex combination of sensorial information and imagination. It is our imagination that gives our memories their personal meaning and narrative form. And yet, according to the psychologist Martin A. Conway, “recalling [sensorial data] give rise to recollective experience which convinces the rememberer that the event in mind did in reality occur” (1381). The imagination alone cannot provide an individual with a coherent history of self. Only through an interweaving of perceptual data (body) and imagination (mind) can the notion of “a self in the past” emerge (1375).

After Bauby gains consciousness for the first time after his stroke, his caretakers ask him whether he remembers the events that led to his paralysis. Still disoriented from the coma, he is only able to recall the experience in fragments. His post-stroke memories are depicted in a series of “quick flashes” (301). When trying to recall the moments prior
to the stroke, all Bauby (and the viewer) can see is “The face of a young boy (THÉOPHILE) seated in the front beside the driver (unseen), terrified” (301). Despite having experienced the stroke first-hand, Bauby’s memory is still occluded. Nevertheless, he must remember the site of trauma and reconstruct his past in order to move beyond it. That is, he must transform perceptual data into autobiographical memory. What he cannot remember, he must imaginatively supplement. But within the logic of the film, imagination is not merely auxiliary to memory. Indeed, *Diving Bell* culminates when these two faculties converge. The film makes the intimacy of memory and imagination explicit after Céline’s first visit. After she leaves the hospital, Bauby imagines the mother of his children standing before the Berck train station on a platform, silently mourning; simultaneously, on the opposite platform, we see his memories of himself as a child holding onto his father’s hand. Bauby’s voiceover glosses this scene: “I can picture it right now. It’s [the train station] the most depressing place on Earth. Well, it certainly was when I had my holidays here as a child. Berck, the end of summer. Waiting with my father for the Paris train. It was desolate then and it must be worse now” (316). Without his memories, Bauby would not have been able to imagine Céline outside of his immediate vision. To remember, however, is also an imaginative act where loose fragmentary elements are pieced together into a coherent narrative.

At the end of the film, Bauby recollects the moments leading up to his stroke through the combination of vision, memory, and imagination. Indeed, Bauby’s journey culminates with the transformation and enlargement of his perspective. Even though the editor finds his memories fading—just as he does in the written text—instead of gazing at Paris with incredulity and detachment, he comes to reconstitute his vision. Through the
ambulance window, Bauby sees a palimpsest of Paris and himself: the image of the outside city is superimposed onto his own reflection. His vision of Paris, although hazy, arouses personal memories. Time breaks down in this sequence as past and present merge. Through a flashback, the editor remembers driving his convertible while listening to music, picking up Théophile for a night on the town, and even chatting with the boy about adolescence and the awkwardness of pubic hair growth. Right before meeting his son, the editor revels in the beauty of Paris as he drives, taking in the splendor of the urban space. The audience witnesses the relish with which Bauby remembers the famed city.

Yet this flashback is not purely his own. During this sequence, Bauby conflates his own memories of Paris with the opening sequence of François Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows*: in both films, the Eiffel Tower and other marvels of French architecture loom over the camera. In the opening of *The 400 Blows*, a non-subjective and third-person

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92 Schnabel points out in his commentary that this scene quotes extensively from Truffaut’s New Wave classic. This is made explicit by the music that plays in the
camera anonymously captures a shot of the Eiffel Tower from a distance, and as if by compulsion moves towards the structure slowly, until the viewer is almost directly underneath the iconic tower. Although Barbara Mennel argues that “[t]he beginning of [The 400 Blows] favors the city over the individual in an extended sequence showing Paris,” the sequence in fact de-hierarchizes the self and its environment. The Eiffel Tower, while a part of the city, is simultaneously an emblem of the individual in the film. Even though the opening shots of the Tower are faraway and not as vivid as the buildings in the foreground, it is nonetheless centered in the frame. As the tracking shots move closer towards the Eiffel Tower, the audience comes to recognize it as something more than a mere backdrop. The tower stands above the rest of Paris—even as it is immersed in the city—asserting its singularity. Like the Eiffel Tower that stands in the background, Diving Bell maintains its individuality amidst the tissue of intertexts. By quoting The 400 Blows, Schnabel conflates self (first-person) and other (third-person) as Bauby’s personal experiences converge with the cinematic creations of past artists.

Moreover, while the tracking shots in the father-son driving scene conjure the opening credits in The 400 Blows, they also re-imagine another classic from the New Wave era: Jean-Luc Godard’s Breathless. Both Diving Bell’s Bauby and Breathless’s Michel drive through rural France in their cars on a journey towards downtown Paris. In the two films, the directors free their cameras from the limited mobility of the track, opting instead for the roughness of handheld cameras. In Diving Bell, however, the movement of the camera is motivated by Bauby’s subjective point of view. The immobile editor, who is lying down in the ambulance, sees Paris in an inverted perspective. His background: the exuberance of Bauby’s car ride overlaps with Jean Constantin’s score for the earlier film.
corresponding memories of the city initially conform to this distorted point of view. In his flashback of the moments before the stroke, Bauby at first sees the city upside down because of his physical position on the ambulance bed. But then, through his cinematic memory, the editor reorients his perspective. The camera releases itself from Bauby’s immediate perspective, and takes on the gaze of Godard’s camera. By merging his individual view from the ambulance with the films of Truffaut and Godard, Bauby is able to reconstruct his memories of the stroke. His personal history is thus recollected through the art of others. Like Michel in Breathless, Bauby is shaped by the films that he sees. His fragmentary and inverted vision of Paris, therefore, is made whole by his creative faculties.

In this way, Diving Bell practices intersubjectivity on both diegetic and discursive levels. The film, like its subject-author, assumes the multiple identities of its cinematic

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93 In addition to the visual references made to various films, like Fred Zinnemann’s From Here to Eternity (in one of Bauby’s fantasy sequences), Alfred Hitchcock’s Rear Window (during the Cinecittà scenes), and the aforementioned Breathless and 400 Blows intertexts, the music from films like Stanley Kubrick’s Lolita also add to the allusive quality of the film.
predecessors. As Schnabel points out in his memoir:

> We are all stained. More and more each day these stains configure into our personalities, become our character, make us recognize and search for one another. The artist’s communion with already existing materials makes it possible to commandeer prior topographical meanings for a communion of psychological ones. We are then using the physical to get at an invisible communal which is about the sameness of the viewer and the artist, not about their differences. I want to be invisible. But I want you to know I’m out there. (*CVJ* 206)

Like his paintings, Schnabel’s adaptation of *Diving Bell* renders his authorship simultaneously visible and invisible. As Kristeva posits, individuals, like written texts, are “constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (*Desire* 66). Schnabel is connected to both Bauby and the viewers of his film. Instead of the broken shards of ceramic in his famous plate paintings, the “existing materials” of his cinema are the life-stories that he adapts. Just as Bauby’s autobiography “stains” Schnabel’s life, so too does the director’s adaptation of the text color the original source material.

Dissolving into the Landscape

Yet the identification with the other—an “invisible communal” that pushes us “out there”—is not always a pleasant experience. Indeed, much of *Diving Bell’s* claustrophobic effect is created by the subjective and first-person perspective (POV shots) that Schnabel and his cinematographer Janusz Kaminski use to coalesce the
viewer’s and Bauby’s points of view. Kaminski, for instance, employed wide lenses (35mm and wider) in order to create an organic and distorted perspective that reflects Bauby’s post-coma stupor. The shutter angle also varies during the film’s opening sequences as a way to depict Bauby’s hazy point of view. These effects, according to Schnabel, bring the viewer closer to the protagonist: “You feel like it’s the actor breathing, like it’s real vision you’re seeing” (qtd. in Thomson 22). Through optically subjective shots, the audience is shown exactly what Bauby sees.

   Immersed in the spectacles before us, we become all-eye, but not all-seeing. Neither Bauby nor the viewer has control over what is onscreen. Not only is Bauby’s range of view limited by his immobility (“Talk to him like this. Straight at him. Here he can’t see you. Here neither” [314]), but his vision is also perpetually directed by the medical staff around him (“Now, open your eyes wide . . . try to keep them open . . . good man . . . That’s it, very good. Now follow the light. That’s it” [301]). Beyond closing his eye to the world, Bauby has no say about what he sees or what he does not. For instance, when Marie, his physiotherapist, presents him with a hand mirror, he is revolted by his own countenance (“No mirror. Not that face” [319]), but is confronted with it anyway. By identifying with the “locked-in” Bauby, the viewer comes to witness the limitations of what Husserl calls the transcendental gaze—a look that is “bracketed” and stripped of its creative faculties, and thus disconnected from the perceived object.

Bauby’s experience with his physiotherapist is analogous to the audience’s experience when watching Diving Bell. Like the editor, we are asked to identify with a body that differs from our own self-image. Marie places the mirror in front of her own

94 For an extended discussion of Kaminski’s cinematographic techniques in Diving Bell, see Patricia Thomson’s “A Body Fails, a Mind Adapts.”
face so that Bauby may see his countenance in hers. To promote physical rehabilitation, she encourages her patient to imagine her movements as his. In this scene, Marie plays the Lacanian “prop” who helps facilitate an illusion of self-mastery. However, both Bauby’s own deformed corporeality and Marie’s body alienate him. Bauby is unable to visualize his own unity after witnessing his reflection. Unlike the drama of the mirror stage, there is no move from “a fragmented image of the body to . . . an ‘orthopedic’ form of its totality” (Lacan 78). After Marie tells Bauby that she will help him move his head, the patient looks at his reflection, then at her, and declares in a voiceover, “You’re doing all the work, you know” (320). What Bauby sees in the mirror contradicts his internalized self-image, and so he refuses to look, even though he cannot avert his eye. Bauby restrains his imagination during this exchange. The “illusion of autonomy” cannot be forged, because the former editor is unable to put his “faith to the ego’s constitutive misrecognitions” (Lacan 80). In other words, Bauby rejects what John Forrester calls the “universal function of deception and displacement” in human development (121).

Figure 5: Marie places a mirror between herself and Bauby in order to encourage physical rehabilitation.
“Animals and man,” Forrester suggests, “have a common propensity to become ensnared by an image” (121). But to be “ensnared” and “deceived” is not necessarily a negative experience—in some cases, deception can catalyze emotional and physical growth through the subject’s identification with the other. This identification, however, cannot simply be the remodeling of the other as self—a flattening of difference—that Kaja Silverman refers to as “idiopathic identification,” “an incorporative model, constituting the self at the expense of the other who is in effect ‘swallowed’” (Male Subjectivity 205). Rather, the kind of self-shattering identification that Diving Bell endorses is akin to Silverman’s “heteropathic identification,” a form of self-other relationship that demands the subject to “live, suffer, and experience pleasure through the other” (205). Unlike the cannibalistic desire to absorb the other within the self that characterizes idiopathic identification, its obverse, heteropathic identification, requires the subject to release his pre-conceptions of self, in order to identify with the perceived other, and thus be transformed by his misrecognition.

Diving Bell perpetually points to the corporeal imprisonment that all humans share. Pierre Roussin, the terrorist captive, Bauby’s father (Papinou), who because of his old age can no longer leave his apartment, and even Céline, the mother of Bauby’s children who cannot stop loving him, are all hostages in their own ways. So when Roussin asks Bauby to “Hold fast to the human inside of you” (322), it is both our imaginations and our individual “diving bells” to which he refers. Despite the doctors’ constant reiteration in the film, Bauby’s predicament is not, in fact, “extremely rare” (305). What Diving Bell asks the viewer to do is to find the commonality between ourselves and others; by recognizing the precariousness of life, and the vulnerabilities of
our own bodies, we can locate the interconnection of all human existence. As Schnabel muses in his memoir, “We will all face it. Those who are young and strong and eat well, who . . . have no aches and pains, and have been touched by sincere words, who have been beautiful, and . . . have trusted themselves because they were loved when they were young (and still are) and are still subject to this routine death” (215). We are all united by the imminent cessation of our bodies. But in order to discover this unity and escape our isolating diving bells, we must willingly imagine outside of ourselves, and in a way misrecognize the self through the other.

This escape, however, does not come easily for Bauby. It is not until Laurent’s visit to the hospital that Bauby starts to broaden his perspective and imagination. Prior to his friend’s visit, he could only understand his situation within the parameters of his locked-in syndrome. Like his vision, Bauby’s perspective on life had understandably become distorted by his predicament. When told by his doctor that modern medicine could prolong his life, for instance, the editor silently grumbles “This is life? This is life?” (304). Laurent’s presence reminds his friend of the man that he used to be before

Figure 6: The first half hour of the film is shot almost entirely from Bauby's limited first-person perspective. That is, we see exactly what Bauby sees.
the stroke. Bauby comes to laugh internally, as he witnesses Laurent’s frustrated attempts at following the speech therapist’s detailed instructions. Through his inaudible laughter, Bauby is able to step outside of his own body. Not only does he laugh at Laurent’s incompetence, but he also comes to see the absurdity and humor of his own situation. When he is told that his old friends now call him a “vegetable,” Bauby wittily responds “Did they say what sort of vegetable? A carrot, a potato, a pickle?” (327). The joke that Bauby makes at his own expense, one that only he can hear, manifests a new perspective on his condition.

Until this scene, the film is almost entirely shot in Bauby’s limited first-person perspective. For the first thirty minutes of the film, we see exactly what Bauby’s restricted vision allows him to see. Then after his self-deprecating joke, the camera untethers itself from the editor’s limited vision, and takes on a seemingly third-person perspective. For the first time, the viewer sees Bauby from behind, peering over the terrace of the hospital—a view that would have been physically impossible for the editor. Yet this is not to be understood as a dissociation from Bauby’s perspective, but rather as
a transformation in the state of his vision, in his own mode of seeing. As Schnabel points out in his commentary on *Diving Bell*, “There’s this total subjectivity about the film. I think it was very important for us to feel like we were inside of Jean-Do’s body.” Despite the seemingly detached point of view that results from Bauby’s silent laughter, the film continues to provide the viewer with its protagonist’s “total subjectivity.” After Laurent’s visit, Bauby adopts a wider perspective by combining his corporeal vision with his imagination—a shift in knowledge that *Diving Bell*’s cinematography reflects.

Following Laurent’s visit, the film takes on what is best described as a free indirect style or discourse (FID). While FID is most often applied in narrative and literary discourse, the technique can also be found within the visual arts and cinema. In a written text, FID comes in the form of a narrator conflating his or her “indirect” report with a character’s grammatical traits and voice. Third-person narration and first-person perspective are, therefore, integrated within this style. Where the written form of FID incorporates the colloquialisms specific to a character within third-person narration, a film, because of its privileging of the visual and general avoidance of long, sustained voiceovers, often establishes its focalizer through a visual grammar. “The classic assumption,” Bruce F. Kawin posits, “is that all film narration is third person” (xi); yet, he adds, “it is possible to encode the image in such a way that it gives the impression of

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95 Jonah Corne locates the first shift in the film’s perspective after Bauby’s “acknowledgment of Henriette’s gift of language” (226). Although he is right to observe a perspectival change, I would disagree with his conclusion that this moment “breaks with Bauby’s point of view” (226). The editor’s subjectivity, I contend, permeates the entire film.

96 In “The Cinema of Poetry,” Pier Paolo Pasolini argues that “[t]he fundamental characteristic” of a cinematic free indirect discourse is “not of a linguistic nature, but of a stylistic one” (552).
being perceived or generated by a consciousness” (xi). That is, even shots that are not optically POV can still be “subjective.” The fact that Bauby (the internal focalizer of the film’s first thirty minutes) is here represented onscreen, and made a part of the focalized object, makes clear that there is a shift in perspective. This shift, however, exists within Bauby rather than between multiple focalizers. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes, FID “is a dramatic way of expressing a divided self” (207). The long shot of this scene seemingly contradicts Bauby’s first-person voiceover: “Today it seems to me that my whole life was nothing but a string of small near misses” (328; emphasis mine). But at this moment, the editor is at once an individual self and the heterogeneous world before him. His self is cleaved by heteropathic identification.

It is at this point that the film cuts to the arresting image of a glacier collapsing. Clearly, the editor does not physically see this natural event take place. He is still in the hospital, lying in bed, with the television set turned to a channel that is no longer broadcasting. Nonetheless, the viewer recognizes the stamp of Bauby’s subjectivity—what Gates, Jr. refers to as his “speakerliness”—in this scene. Although the screenplay

Figure 8: A shot of the collapsing glacier, which would have been impossible for Bauby to see physically.
specifically calls for “stock footage,” the glacier, like Bauby’s memories of his family, is
infused with a cinematic quality. Even though the flashbacks of Théophile and his
daughters, which are set off by the photographs on the wall, are distorted with effects that
eminate photographic over- and multiple exposure, the shot of the glacier is similarly
abstracted from normal reality and made filmic through cinematographic interventions
such as slow motion, jump cuts, and missing frames (a technique that creates the
flickering light that punctuates the scene). Bauby’s imagination colors the entire
sequence. Unlike literary FID, which imposes the grammar of the focalizer onto the
narration, this scene overlays Bauby’s cinematic vision onto the third-person and
“objective” stock footage.

This glacier sequence contrasts with the many interior shots of the hospital. While
Schnabel shot on location for most of the hospital scenes, Bauby’s personal room, where
three weeks of the 44-day shoot took place, was meticulously fashioned by the
filmmakers: the walls were curved, Kaminski reveals, so that “[y]ou lose your sense of
derspective. . . . There are no sharp edges, so you don’t know where the walls end” (qtd.

Figure 9: Photographic effects like over-exposure endow the stock footage of the
glacier with a cinematic quality.
in Thomson 24). Furthermore, the mise-en-scène was given a watery palette (black and green linoleum floors, blue pajamas, and turquoise walls), as a way to provide both the viewer and Bauby with a false sense of comfort: “The water is like a womb in some way,” Schnabel explains. “At first, the whole thing feels claustrophobic; later, you kind of like being in there” (24-26). Sublime outdoor sequences, like the glacier scene, however, break up the insularity of the hospital set. The viewer comes to recognize the watery color scheme of Bauby’s room to be artificial when compared to the vastness of nature’s physical reality. The closed sets reflect Bauby’s internal state-of-mind, as they extend the diving bell metaphor. Just as he is trapped within his own body, so too is he imprisoned by the medical environment that hopes to rehabilitate him. Removed from the external world, this cocoon-like room virtually becomes Bauby’s world were it not for the moments when he is given glimpses of the outside world: moments like when the editor is at Cinecittà, “a perpetually deserted terrace, a vast series of balconies that open onto a landscape heavy with the poetic and off-beat charm of a movie set” (337); or at the beach with his family on Father’s Day; or even when he imaginatively experiences the crumbling glacier. These interludes introduce a world incompatible with the solace of the hospital’s enclosure. We are jolted by the photographed beauty of Berck-sur-Mer, and are alerted to the impoverishment of the hospital’s insularity. The transformation of Bauby’s autobiographical “I”/eye culminates with the closing images of the glacier. Not only does he come to merge with those around him through vision, but it is clear by this final sequence that he is also connected with his environment.
The Dying “I”

The preceding sections of this chapter have traced and interpreted the cinematic gaze as it is graphically manifested in both the “original” written text and the filmic adaptation of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. Partly because of the texts’ overt alignment of imagination with the symbol of the butterfly (a common personification of the soul or Psyche), my own reading of the texts has necessarily employed the very metaphors that seemingly reinstate the Cartesian duality of mind (butterfly) and body (diving bell). Nonetheless, this chapter’s emphasis on the “freedom” of living imaginatively—the stepping outside of oneself that Silverman refers to as “heteropathic identification”—is not a disparagement of or objection to corporeal existence. Quite the contrary: as mentioned earlier, it is the vulnerable corporeality of our species that binds us to one another, animate or otherwise. As Paul John Eakin aptly points out, even when speaking about the mind, vision, and human perceptions, “we must deal as well with the ‘corporeality’ of the ‘inside’ or ‘psychical interior,’ the structure of the brain” (12). Critics must now rethink “the relations between the inside and the outside of the subject,” Elizabeth Grosz avers, “its psychical interior and its corporeal exterior, by showing not their fundamental identity or reducibility but the torsion of the one into the other” (xii).

There is no escaping the body. What we can be liberated from, however, is the isolation of singular identity. It is this freedom that Schnabel most covets. The lingering question, then, is how does the “I”/eye of life writing become a “we” without separating the individual subject from his body? Moreover, can this “we” that is produced through autobiographical writing simultaneously be an “I”—that is to ask, how does autobiography emphasize relationality without evacuating personality?
This final section broaches these questions, offering a new approach to reading and writing autobiography that helps push the autobiographical “I” to its subjective limit—just before the boundaries between self and other collapse. In adapting the phenomenon of death, Schnabel’s *Diving Bell* approaches the universal through the individual and vice versa. As Heidegger once wrote, “In the dying of the Other we can experience that remarkable phenomenon of Being” (238). But, according to the philosopher, “The dying of Others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just ‘there alongside’” (239), because “*No one can take the Other’s dying away from him*” (original emphasis, 240). Death gives our “being” its “totality,” because prior to it, our lives are still incomplete and constantly under construction. In this sense, death completes life, bringing closure and permanence to the individual’s identity. And so, because death belongs to the individual unequivocally, according to Piotr Hoffman, “the emergence of death as totalizing my life must appear from within *my own* first-person standpoint,” a catch-22 if there ever was one, since “this requirement seems impossible to satisfy, for as long as I envision things from my standpoint, I have *not yet* reached my totality, and, conversely, when I *have* reached my totality, there is no standpoint of mine from which to gain the experience of that totality” (Hoffman 197). The writer can document experience up until the moment of his departure, but will always be eluded by the event itself. However, what if one were to approach death—this totalizing experience that renders the self complete—without the proprietary attitude that Heideggerian existentialism encourages? What if the death of others were to become the very vehicle by which we understand our own mortality/humanity?
While Bauby dedicates his written memoir to his two children (Théophile and Céleste) and to his editor (Claude Mendibil), Schnabel’s *Diving Bell* was made in the memory of his deceased father, Jack Schnabel. The director wanted to capture his father’s point of view right before the old man died: “I thought maybe he [Schnabel’s father] could see me. We were very close. So what I tried to show [in the final shots of the film] was what my father was seeing when he was dying, not what I was seeing when I was looking at him. The fear that he had was something that I thought if somebody could have a tool to look into their interior life, to find peace in that, to feel that they could accept the transition. He just wasn’t prepared in any way” (*CanMag*). Schnabel’s adaptation of Bauby’s final moments in *Diving Bell* becomes the “tool” with which the viewer peers into his own “interior life.” Bauby’s death scene, because of the “total subjectivity” of the POV shots, transports us into a confused and hallucinatory state. People become figural as they merge (visually and sonically) with one another: “At this point,” Patricia Thomson explains, “he’s [Bauby] in a dreamlike state, and various figures enter the frame and address him one last time, overlapping and dissolving into one another” (24). This layering effect was created with a hand-cranked camera, which allowed Kaminski “to change camera speed, wind forward and backward, and double-expose the negative” (24). While this scene is at first disorienting, after a certain amount of sensitization, it begins to lull the viewer. The pulsing heartbeat in the background, the blurring of voices and visual boundaries come together to create a somnolent effect: jump cuts and “ghosting” fragment the individual characters who later blend graphically into other people. During this scene, the viewer’s confusion and panic give way to a relinquishment of control. The glare of Bauby’s thought is muted, as both he and the
viewer are caressed by the soft touch of intellectual cessation. The experience washes over us in a way that resists linearity and narrative logic. As Kaminski reveals, the scene “makes no sense in terms of continuity, but I found it emotionally right for the movie” (24).

By filming Bauby’s dying moments, Schnabel encourages us to contemplate our own mortality in terms of relationality. Although “No one can take the Other’s dying away from him,” Schnabel nonetheless pushes the viewer to the brink of Bauby’s death—the cusp between life and its termination—so as to erode the boundaries between self and other. In other words, the director emphasizes the interconnectedness of death rather than what Heidegger calls its “mineness.” In this way, the director prepares us for our own inevitable departure. In his recollection of his father’s final moments, what troubles Schnabel is the distance death had placed between him and the dying man. In filming death, the director hoped to bridge the gap between the living and the dead, and in so doing diminish the viewer’s fear of dying. “When my father died, he was terrified of death,” Schnabel remembers. “I felt like I had failed him because I couldn’t help him through that. I really made this movie, I think, as a self-help device. . . . I couldn’t help my dad, but I thought I could help somebody else” (NYFF). As a way to conquer this fear, Schnabel forces the viewer to confront it directly. The director refuses to avert the camera’s gaze from Bauby’s final moments. He does not, as Sobchack accuses conventional cinema of doing, merely depict mortality by pointing towards it, leaving “the terminus of its [death’s] indexical sign forever offscreen, forever out of sight” (Carnal 234). Even though an image of a corpse (“a thing of flesh unintended, inanimate, static” [236]) would sufficiently convey the fact of Bauby’s death, such symbolism
would also alienate the viewer from the film’s protagonist. To depict death with only physical signifiers would encourage the viewer to contrast Bauby’s inanimation with our own “live” bodies. Instead of approaching death obliquely, Schnabel penetrates the very subjectivity of non-being. The final sequences of *Diving Bell* connect the viewer to a radically non-thinking—an almost all-body—Bauby. As a result, the film immerses the audience in the transports of death, encouraging us to identify with the corpse and to thereby assume a subjectivity of non-being.

After Bauby dies, his point of view is torn from the camera. The first-person perspective that focalizes the entire film prior to this moment is replaced by an impersonal third-person perspective. No discernible consciousness colors the shot. The final image of Bauby is an unobtrusive straight-on (if slightly canted) close-up of the dead man’s face: his eye is open, but completely still. At this point, the earlier image of the crumbling glacier returns—but this time in reverse. The camera now captures the icy mass reconstituting itself: “I like the idea that the glaciers would come back out of the sea and form again,” Schnabel reflects in the film commentary, “and so the credits are really like the end where he becomes a part of everything again and somehow death is acceptable.” After his death, Bauby is incorporated into the world before him. As a corpse that will eventually decompose, the former editor literally “dissolve[s] into the landscape” (Bauby 37). It is through death, then, that he attains both an interconnected and an embodied existence.

The conventional binary of (human) subject and (inhuman) object collapses, like the earlier shot of the glacier, in the film’s final sequence. Because Bauby’s voiceover had hitherto represented his thoughts and memories, the total absence of narration during
This sequence signals yet another shift in *Diving Bell*’s focalization. In this scene, the backwards-moving glacier is shot from a virtually objective point of view; other than the reverse photography, a vivid depiction of Bauby’s reintegration with the wholeness of nature, there is no other perceivable cinematographic technique that adorns the stock footage. But even though Bauby no longer focalizes this shot, he is nonetheless present. Through editing, Schnabel creates a visual collision between the shots of Bauby’s corpse and the reconstituting glacier. The cinematic juxtaposition of the two images integrates them dialectically. Through its movement onscreen, the glacier takes on a subjective agency usually reserved for animate, sentient beings. Bauby’s death diffuses his consciousness onto the natural world, and frees him from the partial perspective of his locked-in syndrome. The “total” vantage point that Bauby acquires, however, would be lost without the intermediary of the other (that is, the viewer), since he is no longer “there” to articulate this shift in consciousness. What Heidegger calls the “remarkable phenomenon of Being” dissipates at the moment of death—unless death itself is experienced vicariously. At the moment of transition, after the individual takes on a position of total corporeality, divisions between subject and object no longer make sense. The image of Bauby as a subject-object, therefore, forces the viewer to interrogate his own claims to “subjectivity.”

“I don’t know what the glaciers mean,” Schnabel confesses, “but they are key to the film for me” (Director’s Commentary). I would contend that the glacier sequences function in two distinct but interconnected ways within the film. In its initial appearance, the crumbling mass is limited to the diegesis of *Diving Bell*, as it represents the internal processes of Bauby’s mind. It acts as the fulcrum to the interconnection between Bauby
and the viewer: we see the editor’s literal thoughts, and come to identify with him. In its second iteration during the credit sequence, however, the glacier no longer resides within the psyche of the protagonist—Bauby becomes the glacier. Its second appearance, therefore, liberates the film from its own diegesis. While the glacier initially pointed inwards into *Diving Bell*’s narrative space (Bauby’s life-story and mind), the glacier that concludes the film signifies beyond the “text,” and into the “real” world. Schnabel corporealizes the glacier—as he did with his giant paintings—through its sheer magnitude: “As I got bigger, the paintings became bigger. They had weight. They satisfied a need for some kind of bulkiness, a thing that was like another body” (*CVJ* 158). The viewer peers into “reality” (another physical entity) when looking at the glacial mound. Because of our gaze and prior identification with the protagonist, we too come to integrate with this massive body of ice. Film space (signifier) and lived space (signified), then, converge by the end of the *Diving Bell*.

The glacial reconstitution that concludes the film embodies the adaptive and collaborative process that created the film. Both Schnabel and the viewer are the receivers—what Barthes calls “the destination”—of Bauby’s memoir. But at the same time, as the intermediary, we are also given the responsibility of ghost writing *Diving Bell*. After all, the dead do not speak. Death shatters notions of singular personhood not only in the sense that one ceases to exist after dying, but also in that our understanding of it can only come second-hand. We articulate what Bauby cannot (his death), and in doing so, intuitively experience our own.

Through his adaptation, Schnabel fills in for Claude Mendibil, Bauby’s editor. In the scene immediately preceding Bauby’s death, we see Mendibil reading the dying
man’s memoir to him—overlaying her voice on top of his memories. Indeed, it is Mendibil herself who reads aloud the memoir’s dedication, which ends with a special tribute to her: “All my thanks to Claude Mendibil, whose all-important contribution to these pages will become clear as my story unfolds” (382). “You realize the baton had been passed onto her [Claude Mendibil],” Schnabel points out in his commentary, “and so he doesn’t die.” Bauby lives on, because his memoir takes on a life of its own. He is revivified through his readers/viewers. Although it is Mendibil who transcribed Bauby’s memoir, painstakingly translating his blinks into letters of the alphabet, Schnabel continues where she leaves off. Like Mendibil, who “[a]ll of a sudden . . . was completely joined with the mind of the person sitting opposite me, in silence” (Mendibil 37), Schnabel and the viewer merge with Bauby through a cinematic act of ventriloquism. Significantly, the film credits (and thus the multiple authors/readers) of Diving Bell are graphically superimposed onto the final shot of the glacier. The heterogeneity of the text is poignantly emphasized at the very moment Bauby and the viewer converge with the cinematic image. The viewer, then, collaborates in the creation/adaptation of Diving Bell. Like Bauby himself, we are immersed in the spectacle before us. By re-imagining the life narratives of dying others, the adapter is able to confront his own life (and death) with greater understanding. The adapter of a dying man’s autobiography, who is both the author of his own life story and a reader of someone else’s death, therefore, necessarily straddles the divide between life and its cessation. It is this liminal space that both Schnabel and the viewers of Diving Bell occupy.
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