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**Retellings and Counterfactual Narratives:
The Possibilities of Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century British Literature**

A Dissertation Presented

by

Emma Brinkmeyer

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

Stony Brook University

August 2016

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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This dissertation examines the counterfactual – the consideration of “what might have been” – as a key political, ethical, and aesthetic tool of the literature of modernism. As an imagining of other possibilities than what came to pass, the counterfactual unveils alternative spaces and times that lie outside of traditional narrative structure. I establish that counterfactual time is an empowering political and ethical space. Beginning with an extended discussion of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, I show how counterfactual thinking challenges the discursive power of historical narrative and thus enables the expression of marginalized or silenced histories and experiences. In doing so, I depart from a widespread critical assumption that an interest in the counterfactual characterizes only the postmodern era, and I chart an alternative genealogy of modernism that establishes the persistence of modernist counterfactual time through the twenty-first century. My subsequent chapters examine postwar and contemporary authors who draw upon this modernist practice in order to confront specific ethical and political challenges. For example, I consider how the authors Samuel Selvon and J. M. Coetzee respond to and transform modernist counterfactual time in order to address the creation of art in the era of decolonization. I argue that Graham Swift, Michael Ondaatje, Ian McEwan, and Julian Barnes use counterfactual time to challenge, as well as redress, ideologically weighted narratives of British dominance. I develop a politics and ethics of the counterfactual form, which I argue has become a key mode for responsible engagement with the complex political and cultural landscape of the twenty-first century. As such, my dissertation reroutes the critical conversation about modernist genealogies.

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INTRODUCTION

The Past, Present, and Future of the Counterfactual

As I sit here at my desk on May 3, 2016, the results from the Indiana primaries are but a few hours off, and barring any drastic upsets, the presidential nominees from both political parties will finally be decided. Presumably, by tomorrow morning, the Republican nominee will be Donald Trump, who was once a seemingly implausible candidate, and the Democratic nominee will be Hillary Clinton, the most plausible of candidates, who was expected to have a clear path to the nomination but who has had to fight unexpectedly hard against the grassroots support of Bernie Sanders. In these last hours before those results roll in, I am struck by how the counterfactual, or the consideration of alternative possibilities, has become a particularly salient way for the American public to try to understand an election season that has surprised us all. It is in these last moments of indeterminacy, before the options for the United States' future president narrow to two, that such counterfactual questions seem to hold even more weight. What if the political establishment took Trump seriously from the start? What if Bernie Sanders had begun to attack Hilary Clinton earlier on in his campaign? These questions are not idle distractions, for they engage people's hopes for America's future that may differ from the path that the country appears to be on.

I begin my dissertation on twentieth- and twenty-first-century British literature with a discussion of the 2016 presidential primaries to suggest that the counterfactual has become an established mode for thinking through political possibilities. Specifically, the counterfactual allows individuals, far removed from centers of power, to investigate narratives of political and cultural influence and to begin to imagine a path towards a more just future. As I will show throughout my dissertation, I am not alone in believing that the counterfactual can play this

important role. Take, for example, the work of Ross Douthat, op-ed columnist for *The New York Times*. In the seven years that Douthat has been with the *Times*, he has written multiple articles in which he uses counterfactual reasoning to navigate our complex political landscape. Douthat focuses on the question of plausibility, thus breaking down what may, in hindsight, look like the inevitability of certain outcomes. For example, in “Syria and the Risks of Intervention” from August 13, 2014, Douthat examines the counterfactual argument that the U.S. should have armed more moderate rebel groups to try to contain the rise of ISIS. Douthat follows the logic of this argument and other counterfactual scenarios, and ultimately concludes that if one wants to “make the case for [a] counterfactual... [y]ou need a plausible account” of how that counterfactual scenario “would have worked, how it could have been made effective enough to matter, and how its significant risks would have been contained.” This reasoning, with a focus on plausibility and the effectiveness of outcomes, is not unlike a moment in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in which Leopold Bloom pauses to consider the possibility of the return of the disgraced Irish politician, Charles Stuart Parnell. After careful consideration, Bloom decides that it is “[h]ighly unlikely, of course, [that] there was even a shadow of truth in the stories [of Parnell’s return] and, even supposing, he thought a return highly inadvisable, all things considered.”¹ Throughout the novel, Bloom is able to sustain the importance of the counterfactual’s openness while also being able to understand the potential consequences of its multiple possibilities. Ultimately, Bloom recognizes that Parnell can never be the leader for Ireland that he once was. Thus, a belief in his return is a regression for Irish politics, and so Bloom then chooses not to endorse a counterfactual alternative that would not help Ireland move towards independence. In the words

¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 649. All other references to this text will be to this edition and will include page numbers.

of Douthat, this counterfactual cannot be “made effective enough to matter” to Bloom’s (or Joyce’s) vision of Ireland.

As I argue in Chapter One during my extended discussion of this moment in *Ulysses*, Bloom’s consideration of both plausibility and outcome emphasizes the ethical and political weight of his negotiation of the counterfactual. Throughout my dissertation, I show that the consideration of a multiplicity of possibilities is a necessary first step, as it liberates the individual to creatively pursue what may seem impossible. However, ultimately one must also consider the social and political ramifications of such imaginings, if one’s aim is, as I argue it can be, a more just future. While the example of Douthat exhibits the counterfactual’s contemporary mainstream popularity, throughout my dissertation I argue that the use of the counterfactual as a particular type of political, ethical, and aesthetic tool is a key marker of the literature of modernism, and thus should be considered a key mode of modernist time. In doing so, I depart from the widespread critical assertion that an interest in the counterfactual characterizes only the postmodern era, which allows me to chart an alternative genealogy of modernism that asserts the persistence of modernist counterfactual time up through the twenty-first century.²

As an imagining of other possibilities than what came to pass, the counterfactual unveils alternative spaces and times that lie outside of a traditional linear structure of time. The counterfactual thus enables a recognition and navigation of history as an open textual field, and expands our understanding of history and causality by opposing determinism.³ The

² For example, Lubomír Doležel argues that the counterfactual fully emerges as a genre after 1945: “Its [the counterfactual’s] thriving in the age of postmodernism is probably connected with the general undermining or erasing of established ontological boundaries characteristic of the postmodern imagination.” See *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010), 105.

³ My understanding of the counterfactual is influenced by Catherine Gallagher’s discussion of the counterfactual as not an escape from history but an interrogation of it. See “Undoing,” in *Time and the Literary*, ed. by Karen

empowerment of this decentered perspective facilitates a political critique of the constructed nature of historical narrative through an exposure of the underlying values and belief systems that are used to legitimize and naturalize it.⁴ In tandem with its political potential is the counterfactual's ethical promise, for it also opens up an imaginative space for individuals' to consider what else might have been and what the future may bring.⁵ These moments of temporal break create a time and space within a narrative for the ethical imaginings of a more just future. Rather than considering the counterfactual as an apolitical postmodern technique, I argue that the counterfactual's political and ethical potential emerges during the modernist period in literature that challenges narratives of cultural and political power.

My central example of the origin of this process in the modernist period is James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). However, I do believe that other modernist texts engage with counterfactual thinking. Take, for example, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, a work in which Woolf imagines repeatedly how things might have been different for women authors. At one point, Woolf pauses to consider a counterfactual alternative: "Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say."⁶ Woolf's vision of the life of Judith Shakespeare becomes an opportunity to

Newman, Jay Clayton, and Marianne Hirsch (New York: Routledge, 2002): 11-30. I am also drawing from the historians Niall Ferguson and Geoffery Hawthorne's arguments in favor of the counterfactual. See Niall Ferguson, "Introduction," *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, ed. by Niall Ferguson (London: Macmillan, 1997); and Geoffery Hawthorne, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History in the Social Sciences*, (Cambridge UP, 1991).

⁴ I understand politics as the recognition of how power is created and asserted through linguistic structures, namely the power of narrative to construct and control reality.

⁵ Catherine Gallagher and Paul K. Saint-Amour have both argued that the counterfactual's navigation of alternatives can function as a form of reparation. For example, Gallagher examines how reparation laws are dependent upon the counterfactual, as they are exercises in imagining the future of an alternative past in which such discriminations never occurred. According to Gallagher, reparation laws also restore a fullness to the past, through a focus on moments of decision in which human agents are faced with various options, not just one. See Gallagher, "Undoing," 20-24, and Saint-Amour, "Counterfactual States of America: On Parallel Worlds and Longing for the Law," *Post45*, 20 Sept. 2011, Web, 29 Sept. 2011. www.post45.research.yale.edu/.

⁶ *A Room of One's Own* (San Deigo: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1989), 46.

imagine a space for women writers within a literary tradition dominated by men. While in my dissertation I do not treat other modernist works with the same attention as I do *Ulysses*, I believe that the counterfactual is a part of modernist literature's exploration of temporal forms that are politically and ethically charged, in particular those which interrupt linear sequencing and prioritize the individual experience of time.

My dissertation traces primarily the legacy of Joyce's implementation of the counterfactual, in both the fusing of the real and the imagined in his recreation of Dublin life in 1904 and as a solution to Stephen's struggles to forge a productive artistic relationship with the oppressive narratives of English dominance over Ireland. These counterfactual strategies harness the potential of the spatial and temporal disconnect between Irish everyday life and the distanced authority of English imperial power. This process reflects the diminishing power of "continuous" history as defined by Michel Foucault.⁷ Continuous history assumes a unification of time, in that it is a narrative that seamlessly unfolds, and a continuous identification between those who are the subjects of and to that history; thus, it carries a strong nationalist inflection. *Ulysses* disrupts both aspects of continuous history's unification: history opens up into a space of continual retellings that fuse the actual and the possible, and the discordance between English authority and historical dominance and the lives of the Irish subjects creates a space for heterogeneous histories and experiences to be expressed.

Luke Gibbons, in his article "Spaces of Time through Times of Space: Joyce, Ireland, and Colonial Modernity," argues against a dominant critical reading that *Ulysses* constructs an

⁷ Foucault writes, "Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject; the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity; the promise that one day the subject – in the form of historical consciousness – will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under its sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and to find in them what might be called his abode." *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 12.

experience of simultaneity through its spatial form. Instead, he argues that the novel actively resists synchronicity, the systemization of time and space produced through modern technology, as a resistance to England's imperial power. The imperial drive to synchronize in order to facilitate economic exchange creates "competing, unresolved, temporalities," which, Gibbons suggests, are characteristic of "the dislocations of colonial modernity."⁸ I argue further that the spatial and temporal discontinuities produced through the distance between imperial center and colonial sphere are precisely the conditions that generate Joyce's implementation of the counterfactual, and which precipitate further uses of the counterfactual over the course of the twentieth century. Thus, *Ulysses*' experimentation with the counterfactual originates as a strategy to politically and aesthetically resist imperial domination, a motivation that then underlies modernist literature's investigation of time.

Joyce's exploration of a counterfactual conception of time, of each moment containing many possible narrative paths, creates multiple retellings of history so as to encourage an imaginative resistance to dominant historical narratives. As I have stated, the spatial and temporal discontinuities of life on the margins of a dominant culture's sphere of influence are critical elements in the emergence and implementation of this temporal strategy. My dissertation traces the heritage and reactivation of this practice into the twenty-first century in key moments and locations in which such authors confront specific ethical and political challenges. In doing so, I align my argument with the recent critical turn to read literature of the later twentieth- and early twenty-first century in terms of its reworking of modernist practices. I survey the ways in which these authors, most of whom are writing from a marginalized position, empower themselves by drawing upon modernist strategies to construct alternative spaces and times in

⁸ Luke Gibbons, "Space of Time through Times of Space: Joyce, Ireland, and Colonial Modernity," *Field Day Review* 1 (May 2005): 71, 83. Gibbons shows that in Joyce's Dublin there were as many as four different time scales in operation.

their works so as to portray marginalized histories and experiences. Thus, I retrace the afterlife of modernism through the active element of the counterfactual, and I demonstrate that modernist time is rooted in a resistance to cultural, spatial, and temporal control.

The Changing Field of Modernist Studies

Over the last two decades, the field of modernist studies has grown spatially and temporally, away from the urban centers of Western Europe and America and beyond the traditionally accepted era of the early twentieth century. In their discussion of the state of the field, “The New Modernist Studies,” Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz term “expansion” as the key word of the transformation of modernist scholarship, and to such geographic and temporal shifts in study they add a “vertical” axis in which the boundaries between high art and low culture are being reconsidered.⁹ Yet the most influential theoretical development, as Mao, Walkowitz, and others see it, has been the transnational turn. David James and Urmila Seshagiri describe the emergence of this theoretical lens through modernist studies’ belated encounter in the early 1990s with postcolonial theory, thus encouraging the inclusion of aesthetic traditions outside of the Western urban centers and the consideration of economic, political, and cultural exchanges across national borders as structured by the imperial system.¹⁰ The influence of postcolonial thought is clearly present in the theorization of the term “geomodernisms” in Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel’s edited collection, *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (2005), in which they write that their aim is to “collapse the margin and center assumptions embedded in the term *modernism* by conjuring instead a web of twentieth-century literary

⁹ Mao and Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (May 2008): 738-9.

¹⁰ David James and Urmila Seshagiri, “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution,” *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (January 2014): 88.

practices, shaped by the circuitry of race, ethnicity, nativism, nationalism, and imperialism in modernity.”¹¹

Through the transnational framework, scholars have called for a redefinition of modernism itself; instead of solely an early twentieth-century phenomenon, there are multiple potential modernisms, as modernist aesthetic production occurs as a response to the entrance into the modern age. For example, Jessica Berman, in her influential work *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism*, defines modernism as “a dynamic set of relationships, problematics, or cultural responses to modernity rather than a static canon of works or a given set of formal devices.”¹² Berman’s project considers correspondences across a wide range of cultures over the course of the twentieth century in order to reconceive of modernist narrative “as a constellation of rhetorical actions, attitudes, or aesthetic occasions, motivated by the particular and varied situations of economic, social, and cultural modernity worldwide and shaped by the ethical and political demands of those situations.”¹³ The openness of this new conception of modernism has gone even farther than the edges of the twentieth century. For example, Susan Stanford Friedman, who writes that the framework of transnational modernism recognizes the “possibility for polycentric modernities and modernisms at different points of time and in different locations,” suggests both the ongoing emergence of modernism as well as what she terms as “early modernities” that formed pre-1500 and outside of the West, her

¹¹ *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, edited by Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005), 6.

¹² Jessica Berman, *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2011), 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

examples being the Tang Dynasty of China, the Abbasid Dynasty of the Muslim empire, and the Mongol Empire.¹⁴

While the motivation to challenge a Western-centered conception of modernism and modernity offers a reparative countermeasure to the skewed politics of canonization and periodization, to construct modernism as an infinitely flexible term risks a dehistoricization that can dull the connection between formal innovation and social and historical context.¹⁵ While I am sympathetic to the underlying cause of transnational modernism, I agree with James and Seshagiri that we should return to a period-specific definition of modernism that retains a historically and culturally specific referent to the art and culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While this claim may first appear as a conservative reaction to the expansion of the modernist field, such anxieties are misplaced. Instead, a period-specific definition of modernism enables a more historically inflected navigation of the ways in which modernism's aims and techniques have been engaged and responded to across cultures over the course of the twentieth century. Thus, rather than equating literature that utilizes modernist techniques in such a way that potentially disregards the distinctions of their historical and cultural contexts, here one can more clearly navigate the formation of modernism's heritage across space and time. Rather than an endless proliferation of an era, this conception of modernism offers an understanding of twentieth- and twenty-first century literature as a process of engagement with the forms and techniques of modernist aesthetics in order to further contemporary social and ethical goals.¹⁶

¹⁴ Susan Stanford Friedman, "Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies," *Modernism/modernity* 13, no. 3 (September 2006): 426, 433.

¹⁵ James and Seshagiri write: "But once *modernist* becomes an epithet for evaluating expressive reactions to modernity, whether at the beginning of the seventeenth century or the dawn of the twenty-first, whether in Berlin or Bombay, it loses a degree of traction and threatens to betray its own need to be replaced." "Metamodernism": 90.

¹⁶ As James and Seshagiri write in their defense of a return to periodization, "we need to retain periodicity not to shore up a canonical sense of when modernism began, the moment from which it cast its influence, but to establish a literary-cultural basis for charting the myriad ways that much twenty-first-century fiction consciously engages

This shift in approach is also a reconfiguration of the conventional narrative of the advent of postmodernism as modernism's endpoint. To consider later twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature through a reworking of modernist methods offers an enriched narrative of the development of postwar and contemporary literature that does not conclude with the dead end of postmodernist apolitical play. While James and Seshagiri's recent *PMLA* essay provides a succinct overview of this alternative approach, other critics have been adding to this method of scholarship.¹⁷ For example, Laura Marcus writes that contemporary fiction's reinscription of modernist methods "suggests that the interplay of modernist knowledge and obliquity continues to play a powerful role in shaping the fiction of the present."¹⁸ Marcus also notes what she terms an "ethical turn" in contemporary literature, a claim that Peter Boxall, Dorothy Hale, Adam Newton, and Tim Woods also make in varying degrees.¹⁹ For example, Peter Boxall writes that in the aftermath of postmodernism, the literature of the twenty-first century shows a "new commitment to the materiality of history, a fresh awareness of the reality of the past, and of our ethical obligation to bear witness to it."²⁰ While I agree with Boxall's characterization of contemporary literature, I argue that this "ethical obligation to bear witness" to historical realities is the major work of the modernist use of the counterfactual, which I show to be active in literature over the course of the twentieth century and up to the present.

modernism through the inheritance of formal principles and ethicopolitical imperatives that are recalibrated in the context of new social or philosophical concerns." *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁷ See Marjorie Perloff, *Twenty-First-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002); Jesse Matz, "Pseudo-Impressionism?" in *The Legacies of Modernism*, edited by David James, 114-32.

¹⁸ Laura Marcus, "The Legacies of Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge UP, 2007), 96.

¹⁹ See Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge UP, 2013); Dorothy J. Hale, "Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-first Century," *PMLA* 123, no. 9 (May 2009): 896-905; Adam Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge UP, 1997); and Tim Woods, "A Complex Legacy: Modernity's Uneasy Discourse of Ethics and Responsibility," in *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction*, edited by David James (Cambridge UP, 2012), 153-169.

²⁰ Boxall, *Twenty-First Century Fiction*, 12.

While it may seem incongruent that such an imaginative activity as the counterfactual can clearly represent reality, this ability is precisely the dynamic that my dissertation addresses. This claim is one I will make with particular force when I discuss works such as J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and Graham Swift's *Waterland* – novels that have been identified by many as postmodern and thus not engaged in any political or ethical aims. I argue that the counterfactual enables an acknowledgement that ideologically-weighted narratives – those of historical, cultural, literary, and political power – often obscure reality for self-serving needs, and that by imagining against those narratives one can directly address and represent the real. Thus, the reactivation of modernist form as process through which to imaginatively engage with real world ethical concerns is precisely the critical conversation to which I am contributing.²¹ My dissertation establishes the counterfactual as a key element through which to reroute the conversation about modernist genealogies and charts out a trajectory of postwar and contemporary literature that reactivates and transforms the possibilities inherent in this component of modernist temporal form.

A History of the Counterfactual

Defined in terms of logic, a counterfactual is a conditional sentence in the subjunctive mood.²² A conditional is composed of two component propositions, expressing a state in which one action is contingent upon the other; it is centrally a causal relation in which the relationship between two actions or states can be investigated. The subjunctive tense is used to express

²¹ For example, as David James writes, “questions of form are indissolubly linked to questions concerning how fiction confronts the material world through its imaginative simulation of how that world is sensed and known,” and that “the particularities of form are therefore central, rather than incidental, to our estimation of contemporary fiction’s involvement in ethical and political realms.” See *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge UP, 2012) 4, 7.

²² John Collins, Ned Hall, and L. A. Paul, “Counterfactuals and Causation: History, Problems, and Prospects,” in *Causation and Counterfactuals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 2.

statements contrary to fact such as wish, opinion, or possibility. The term “counterfactual,” or “counter-to-fact,” implies that the antecedent action of its conditional is not true. The counterfactual is then an engagement with what might have been; to begin with a statement contrary to fact allows for an imagining of a field of resulting possibilities.²³

This type of logical exercise has its roots in theology and philosophical thought; it emerges out of what is known as Possible Worlds theory. In the seventeenth century, Leibniz posited a new sense of reality for all things possible by locating them in “possible worlds.”²⁴ As Catherine Gallagher explains in her discussion of the function of the counterfactual in military history, “Leibniz’s invention of possible worlds is usually seen as a way of reconciling the existence of evil in this world with the simultaneous existence of an omnipotent and omniscient God but the maneuver also changed the status of historical accidents, not only allowing for their existence inside providential form but also making them the proof of that form.”²⁵ What Leibniz’s theory allows for is a wider understanding of the workings of Providence through the recognition and examination of inferior potential alternatives. To trace out the existence of these alternatives is to help understand why the manifestation of God’s plan is superior. This imaginative act does not undo the power of Providence but allows for a more thorough understanding of the choices out of which it is formed.

While Leibniz constructs possible worlds as a method of religious inquiry, in the twentieth century the investigation of alternative possibilities becomes a form of logic to test causation. Before the acceptance of the counterfactual as a viable practice, probabilistic causation (a field of practice that tests the relationship between cause and effect) was based on

²³ I take the phrase “field of possibilities” from Gary Saul Morson’s *Narrative Freedom: The Shadows of Time*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1994.

²⁴ See *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil* (1710), trans. by E.M. Huggard, New Haven: Yale UP, 1952.

²⁵ See “The Formalism of Military History,” *Representations* 104, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 24.

the paradigm that the events *c* and *e* (cause and effect) must both occur; if one does not happen, then neither can the other.²⁶ David Lewis's 1973 essay, "Causation," struck the first major blow to this narrow conception of causation, as he argues for a more indiscriminate nature of causes and effects as well as the acceptance of the counterfactual as a viable part of investigating causation.²⁷ After Lewis's groundbreaking article, the counterfactual began to be accepted by the philosophy community and is now used to conceive of wider understandings of what constitutes causes and effects and the range of influences that may produce different possible events.

A strong initial resistance to the use of the counterfactual is not limited to the discipline of philosophy, as only recently has it been accepted as a viable practice in historical discourse. This hostility raises questions as to why the counterfactual is often so forcefully opposed: what danger does it pose to established disciplines? What does it challenge or threaten? As Niall Ferguson explains, many historians have harshly rejected the usefulness of the counterfactual, seeing it as a pointless and distracting imaginative activity in opposition to the pursuit of historical truth. However, what the two main advocates for the counterfactual, Ferguson and Geoffrey Hawthorn, argue is that the counterfactual can expand our understanding of history and causality by opposing determinism.²⁸ The counterfactual recognizes that at major junctures in time, there are several possibilities as to how history could unfold. By acknowledging the

²⁶ Collins, Hall, and Paul, 1. See also J. L. Mackie's *The Cement of the Universe—A Study of Causation* (1974) for a classic defense of this type of reasoning as well as a rejection of the counterfactual.

²⁷ Lewis writes, "It remains to be seen whether any regularity analysis can succeed in distinguishing genuine causes from effects, epiphenomena, and preempted potential causes—and whether it can succeed without falling victim to worse problems, without piling on the epicycles, and without departing from the fundamental idea that causation is instantiation of regularities. I have no proof that regularity analyses are beyond repair, nor any space to review the repairs that have been tried. Suffice it to say that the prospects look dark. I think it is time to give up and try something else. A promising alternative is not far to seek." *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973): 557.

²⁸ See Niall Ferguson, "Introduction," *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, ed. by Niall Ferguson, London: Macmillan, 1997. Geoffrey Hawthorne, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1991.

multiplicity of the past, the counterfactual can then resist master narratives and the definitive nature of historical facts for it widens one's understanding of time through the imagining of other possibilities. Most importantly, the counterfactual authorizes the role of the imagination in the apprehension of the past; thus, it can be a way for the self to navigate dominant historical discourses by opening up spaces of difference from which to recognize the structure of these discourses as not natural but cultural. The publication of Gavriel D. Rosenfeld's historical monograph, *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (2005) by Cambridge University Press is an important turning point in the place of the counterfactual in the discipline of history. In his Introduction, Rosenfeld addresses directly his fellow historians' resistance to the serious critical study of counterfactual or alternate histories. He writes, "I hope to convince readers of alternate history's legitimacy as a subject of scholarly inquiry and persuade them that examining tales of what never happened can help us understand the memory of what did."²⁹

The counterfactual's promotion of temporal openness as a way to challenge linear narrative has been its major contribution to literary studies, as the discipline accepted the concept with much less resistance than philosophy or history.³⁰ While at first the question of "what might have been" seemed only posed in the more popular genres of science fiction or fantasy, the critical use of the counterfactual has become more widespread as it has been seen as particularly

²⁹ Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (Cambridge UP, 2005), 4.

³⁰ Other disciplines have also recently recognized the potential of the counterfactual. In the field of psychology, the counterfactual has become a theoretical approach to explicate the basic processes of learning and memory and a practice to work through feelings of guilt and blame following a traumatic event. For an overview of the use of the counterfactual in psychology, see Neal J. Roese and James M. Olson, eds., *What Might Have Been: The Social Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995.

suites to discuss postmodernism's experimentation with time, causality, and narrative structure.³¹ For example, Catherine Gallagher describes the temporal experimentation that the counterfactual enables as a marker of major postmodern works.³² Lubomír Doležel draws upon the language of the counterfactual when he discusses the ways in which he sees both fictional and historical narratives as creating possible worlds.³³ The work of Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale is also central to this conversation. McHale writes that postmodern literature is concerned centrally with ontological questions such as "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" as well as the larger questions of "What is a world? ... What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?"³⁴ For McHale, postmodern literature participates in a boundless exercise of world creation and deconstruction. Hutcheon's influential work on historiographic metafiction develops Hayden White's famous claim that there is no fundamental difference between history and fiction, for she argues that writing the past necessarily constructs it.³⁵ Throughout my dissertation, I will argue for a distinction between the modernist use of the counterfactual and the framing of the counterfactual as an apolitical postmodern aesthetic technique. The latter approach focuses on how an infinite proliferation of possibilities challenges the existence of any

³¹ One of the most famous examples in science fiction is Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), which considers what life would be like if the Nazis had won World War II. I will touch briefly on this work again in my Afterword, in which I discuss the Amazon.com television series based on Dick's novel.

³² As Gallagher explains, "A generation for whom Borges's 'The Garden of Forking Paths' and Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* are classics has almost come to expect serious fiction to provide chronological reverses and time loops. Far from relegating works to the 'fantasy' or 'science fiction' categories, these techniques are among the identifying features of the weightiest postmodern narratives." "Undoing," in *Time and the Literary*, ed. by Karen Newman, Jay Clayton, and Marianne Hirsch (New York: Routledge, 2002), 12.

³³ See Lubomír Doležel, viii.

³⁴ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), 9-10.

³⁵ Hutcheon writes, "Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity." See *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 92-93.

type of truth or certainty; I argue that the modernist use of the counterfactual makes this potentially endless play politically and ethically productive by identifying and pursuing possibilities that can be liberating and reparative.

Though the critical engagement with counterfactual has increased alongside the theorization of postmodern literature, I argue here that it does not begin in the postmodern age, but rather that counterfactual thinking enables the fictive imaginary to contend with the politics of the writing of history by reconfiguring time to include the actual and the possible. One can look as far back as Aristotle's *Poetics*, a foundational text of narrative theory, to find the counterfactual at work in his definition of poetry. According to Aristotle, history is limited to detailing the particulars of the past, while "the poet's function is not to report things that have happened, but rather to tell of such things as might happen, things that are possibilities by virtue of being in themselves inevitable or probable."³⁶ The poet's imagining of possibilities other than what came to pass may also weaken the determinism of the past and allow the events of history to be considered as one of several possibilities, for if the poet "takes real events as the subject of a poem, he is none the less a poet, since nothing prevents some of the things that have actually happened from being of the sort that might probably or possibly happen" (55).

While one must be careful to recognize generic differences when comparing Aristotle's theory of poetry to theories of fiction, the emphasis on the freedom to imagine other possibilities resonates strongly with contemporary work on narrative time, much of which embraces a return to the study of formalism after the linguistic turn in literary studies that marks poststructural theory. For example, Mark Currie rejects Linda Hutcheon's characterization of the contemporary novel as historiographic metafiction because he sees this approach as favoring

³⁶ *Poetics*, trans. by James Hutton, New York: Norton, 1982, 54.

abstract theory over an attention to formal structure. Instead, Currie's study of the temporal dynamics in contemporary fiction calls for a degree of formalism so that the critic "can do justice to the nature of narrative: to the fact that its statements about time are inevitably involved with their temporal structure, or that time is a theme of narrative, but it is also part of the temporal logic of storytelling."³⁷ Similarly, David Price also rejects Hutcheon's theory of the novel, for he understands the novel as not simply problematizing historical knowledge but actively engaging with the production of historical narrative. In Price's words, the authors that he studies "try to *think* history; that is, they see the novel as a form of speculative thinking that engages the poetic imagination in an attempt to construct, not discover, the truth of the past."³⁸ Currie and Price both attend to a reinvestment in the study of the novel's form, and they offer analyses of contemporary works that experiment with temporal structure through a reimagination and investigation of the past, which both critics argue is pointed towards the possibilities of the future.³⁹ Inherent in this dynamic, I suggest, is a counterfactual approach to time. Furthermore, Currie and Price's rejection of the postmodern descriptor for the fiction that they study suggests that their type of formal scholarship shares an affinity with critics whose work is aimed at a reconceptualization of the state of twentieth- and twenty-first-century fiction. For example, Jessica Berman's concept of the "as if" realm, which she defines as a moment of temporal

³⁷ Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction, and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 28.

³⁸ David Price, *History Made, History Imagined: Contemporary Literature, Poiesis, and the Past* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 11.

³⁹ For example, Price writes in regards to his project: "The novelists examined here also often employ the poetic imagination as a means of questioning history, which, in turn, produces a countermemory or counternarrative to the popular and uncritically accepted referent that we take to be the historical past. They produce speculative novels of poetic history in that they expand the referential field of the past so as to provide the grounds upon which to construct a critique of that same past and, at the same time, imagine new possibilities for the future." *Ibid.*, 3-4.

disruption to narrative continuity that signals ethical imaginings of alternative spaces and times, enacts the type of formal scholarship for which Currie and Price call.⁴⁰

Indeed, contemporary narrative theory and modernist studies have a shared interest in the investigation of the political nature of open time. Another key text for this topic, and for my dissertation as a whole, is Gary Saul Morson's *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (1994). Morson's work concentrates on the political dimensions of the temporal dynamic that he terms "sideshadowing," which he defines as an "open sense of temporality and a set of devices used to convey that sense."⁴¹ Sideshadowing refers to a middle realm of real possibilities that could have happened even if they didn't; it presents the shadow of an alternative present so that time becomes not just a succession of points of reality but "fields of possibility." Through sideshadowing, one can recognize the present as one possibility of many rather than the inevitable outcome of the past. I understand sideshadowing as the awareness of the multiple origin points of counterfactual thought. To the intersection between narrative theory and the new modernist studies I offer a history of literary experimentation with counterfactual time, from *Ulysses* to contemporary literature.

In Chapter One, "Counterfactual Retellings of History in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922)," I argue that Joyce's novel is a model for how to harness the political potential of the counterfactual's open time through acts of retelling that fuse the actual with the possible, and I focus on how histories are reshaped, reformed, and retold within the novel. I discuss three of the novel's episodes – "Nestor," "Scylla and Charybdis," and "Eumaeus" – in which I consider Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom's imaginings of other possibilities to history and their

⁴⁰ See Berman, 3.

⁴¹ Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (Yale UP, 1994), 6.

responses to the potential freedom of these moments. With “Nestor,” during which Stephen teaches a history lesson at the local school, I discuss Stephen’s frustration with and inability to act against historical narratives of imperialism and violence that oppress his artistic impulse. However, I focus on a moment in which Stephen briefly imagines the “room of the infinite possibilities,” a counterfactual space, and I establish this space as a central trope of my dissertation. Through my discussion of “Scylla and Charybdis,” I show how Stephen is beginning to creatively engage with historical and literary narratives through the formulation of his Shakespeare theory. I argue that this theory also speaks to *Ulysses*’s transformative nature, of fusing the real Dublin with the reimagined, the actual historical past with that which was also possible. Finally, I turn to “Eumaeus” and argue that this episode establishes Bloom as the novel’s most successful navigator of the counterfactual and thus also the model for Stephen’s process of artistic growth. Throughout, I argue for the recognition of a modernist practice in which counterfactual reimaginings and retellings enable the individual to respond creatively to culturally dominant narratives through politically charged, aesthetic acts.

Though Chapter Two, “‘Shadow Texts’: The Power of Deferral in Sam Selvon’s *Moses Ascending* (1975) and J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986),” takes a large leap in space and time from that of Chapter One, I argue that these two novels are continuing and responding to the work of *Ulysses* – its concern with artistic production in a colonized culture, its form as fusing the actual and the possible – but in the era of decolonization. I show how the novels approach the modernist question of authorship, in particular to Woolf’s discussion in *A Room of One’s Own* of the material conditions necessary for authorship, through the dramatization of the narrators’ struggle to write memoirs or narratives of their lives. These two novels are also retellings, in their own way, of Daniel Defoe’s classic imperialist text, *Robinson Crusoe*. Selvon’s novel tells

the story of Moses, a West Indian living in London in the 1960s and 1970s, who decides to buy a house and take to the attic to write his memoirs. I discuss the multiple ways in which Moses seeks to emulate the model of authorship set forth in *Crusoe*, including the use of antiquated English in his memoir and the hiring of a white servant whom he renames Friday. In a more direct challenge to the authority of *Crusoe*, Coetzee's *Foe* offers an alternative origin story of Defoe's novel. *Foe* is narrated primarily from the perspective of Susan Barton, a castaway who lands on Crusoe's (spelled without an 'e' in the novel) island. Once she returns to London, she takes on the task of writing her memoirs for the author, Daniel Foe, to use to turn into the novel that will become *Robinson Crusoe*. I examine how the memoirs that the narrators attempt to write within the space of the novels remain unfinished or incomplete, thus deferring their full form to an undetermined space and time, a counterfactual realm. My study of these two novels focuses on the role of these unfinished memoirs, which I call "shadow texts." I argue that the failure of these writings is actually their power, and I show how *Moses Ascending* and *Foe* center on the political force of the shadow texts' open possibilities and undetermined forms.

Chapter Three, "'Counterhistory': Resisting Apocalyptic Time in Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992)" addresses the liberating potential of the counterfactual's open time in literature of the Cold War. I discuss how *Waterland*, written during the acceleration of the Cold War's final stage, and *The English Patient*, published a year after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, respond to fears of the buildup to a nuclear war and engage with contemporary rhetoric that resists a deep knowledge of history. *Waterland* is loosely structured as a series of lectures by its narrator, Tom Crick, to his class of history students, many of whom are having nightmares of the nuclear apocalypse. He decides to forgo the official syllabus and teach history via a wide variety of subject matters, ranging from

natural histories to stories of his own life and the marshland countryside where he grew up. *The English Patient* takes place in a half-destroyed Italian villa during the last battles of World War II, and its narrative jumps back and forth through the thoughts and memories of the villa's occupants – a dying pilot, his nurse, a former spy and thief, and an Indian sapper – as they process their personal traumas. I focus in particular on the novel's spatial and temporal deferral of the bombings of Japan which functions as a lesson to Ondaatje's contemporary audience as to how history can be told not just as a foreshadowing of catastrophe. Throughout this chapter, I argue that Swift and Ondaatje construct time as an open-ended and multifaceted realm so as to resist the apocalyptic narrative of the bomb that undermines the significance of the past through its anticipation of a singular end to history. I call this strategy "counterhistorical" as it builds upon the counterfactual's ability to contain multiple narrative paths. I take the term "counterhistory" from Michael André Bernstein's *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (1994), in which he uses it to discuss a type of narrative alternative that can be used to resist the singularity of historical inevitability.⁴² I expand the term's meaning to include a fictional widening and enriching of historical time that challenges the category of the factual. I argue that the strategy of "counterhistory," which I show as building upon the modernist use of the counterfactual, is at work in *Waterland* and *The English Patient* through the texts' representation of marginalized histories and their narrative structures. In contrast to the novels under study in my previous two chapters, which defer alternative possibilities to a future time, here I discuss how *Waterland* and *The English Patient* attempt to mitigate a fear of the future by imbuing time with a multiplicity of paths and thus multiple endpoints, in order to challenge the unidirectional flow of time towards a quickly approaching end.

⁴² See Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 14.

In my last chapter, “Memory, Guilt, and the Counterfactual in Contemporary Fiction,” I argue that part of what shapes the literature of today is the use of counterfactual thinking to try to atone for the past by imagining beyond the boundaries of both the self and the nation. I argue that this process is motivated in part by an acceptance of the diminished power of Britain on the world stage and a consideration of the consequences of its past dominance. In contrast to my first three chapters, in which I focus on novelists who I show as occupying, in various degrees, marginalized positions, here I turn to two novels by authors who undoubtedly hold core positions in the contemporary literary canon: *Atonement* (2001), by Ian McEwan, and *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), by Julian Barnes. These novels reflect one another in striking ways: both are conscious or unconscious revisions of personal histories, performed by narrators whose mental capacities are declining or failing. I argue that the narrators’ use of the novel form to unravel and rewrite their pasts speaks to a reconsideration of the shape of historical narrative in light of the diminished British state at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Thus, I show the counterfactual as a way to negotiate between dominance and marginality on the personal and national level. I discuss the two novels as shifts away from what has been called the more postmodern writings in the careers of their respective authors. Indeed, both texts engage self-consciously with the legacy of modernism, and I argue in particular that McEwan and Barnes are returning to and continuing the modernist use of the counterfactual. As part of the recent critical conversation that identifies an ethical turn in contemporary literature, I argue that this ethical stance includes the use of counterfactual imaginings to recognize, inhabit, and empathize with the minds of others. This gesture, I conclude, stands as a lesson for how to ethically engage with the complex political and cultural landscape of the twenty-first century.

In my Afterword, I consider briefly the popularization of the counterfactual in both the literary and cultural spheres. My examples, Kate Atkinson's 2013 novel *Life after Life* and the Amazon television series *The Man in the High Castle* (2015), an adaptation of Philip K. Dick's now classic alternate history novel from 1962, are both explorations of the counterfactual possibilities inherent in the Nazis' rise to power. As continuations and revisions of the modernist use of the counterfactual, I consider how these works reflect on key political issues that have shaped our contemporary political landscape and also draw on the counterfactual's reparative power to allow the individual to imagine change.

CHAPTER ONE
Counterfactual Retellings of History in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922)

In response to a request for an interpretive schema for *Ulysses*, James Joyce famously answered that he could never reveal his plan behind the novel's intricacies, for to do so would be to give up his literary immortality. In fact, Joyce explained that he had "put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what [he] meant."¹ While Joyce's statement can be taken as a somewhat egotistical joke, the implication of his response, that the novel's immense complexities function only as "puzzles" to be solved within the academy, supports the apolitical readings of his work that dominated until the late 1970s.² For Joyce's answer suggests that *Ulysses*'s vast network of cultural, literary, and historical allusions operates only as a closed universe of self-referential signs. Critics then embarked on searches for the key to the novel's network, most often reading the novel autobiographically³ or as structured only through its referential parallels with Homer's *Odyssey*.⁴

To believe that there is a singular origin for the complexities of *Ulysses* is to reduce the work of the novel to a simple mimetic function. Instead, the novel continually challenges the parameters of epistemological categories through their simultaneous reproduction and

¹ Quoted in Richard Ellman, *James Joyce*, New York: Oxford UP (Revised edition), 1982: 521.

² The first major text that reverses the apolitical readings of Joyce was Dominic Manganiello's *Joyce's Politics*, London: Routledge, 1980.

³ For example, see Stuart Gilbert, *James Joyce's Ulysses: a Study* (New York: Knopf, 1952); Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*, 4th ed. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1967); Hugh Kenner, *Dublin's Joyce* (Gloucester, Mass., P. Smith: 1969) (which focuses on *Portrait* and *Stephen Hero*); and Richard Ellman's biography of Joyce.

⁴ In his 1923 essay, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," T. S. Eliot argues that Joyce's mythical method functions as a necessary change to the novel form to respond to the chaotic nature of the modern world: "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." In *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, 1975), 177. However, Eliot's reading of the function of the classical references negates any significance of the distance (temporal, cultural, etc.) between the ancient referents and the world of the novel. A central aim of my argument is to refuse any type of collapse between systemic parts and instead to explore the productiveness of such unreducible relations.

transformation.⁵ One of the central categories that the novel continually challenges and transforms is that of historical fact.⁶ Though the novel does reimagine the world of Dublin on June 16, 1904, from a vantage point distant in space and time, the novel is not invested in history as a record of truth but rather as a continual process of textualization. Its reimagination of the past fuses the actual with the possible so as to destabilize the discursive power of historical narrative. It is in this dynamic that the novel's politics emerges. To conceive of history as a process of construction and as an interpretive terrain exposes its reliance on narrative structure and undermines such shaping principles as destiny and progress.⁷ A recognition of what structures the limits of the linear discourse of history also allows for the consideration of what

⁵ In this sense, my argument is aligned with Cheryl Herr's work on cultural dynamics in *Joyce's Anatomy of Culture*, Urbana: U of Illinois Press, 1986. Herr argues that Joyce's texts function as "cultural acts that expose the shaping operations and ideological practices characteristic of urban Ireland" (ix). She discusses three dominant cultural institutions: the press, the stage (mass culture), and the church, and argues that allusions to these institutions exposes "the artificial, semiotic, and self-serving qualities of cultural systems of meaning" (11). Thus, her work offers "a way to conceive of political engagement not only as a specific commitment but also as the exposure of semantic codes" (12), an approach that I utilize here.

⁶ An earlier misreading of *Ulysses's* relationship to the discourse of history is Edward Mendelson's 1976 article in which he argues for the recognition of the genre, "encyclopedic narrative," of which *Ulysses* is one of his seven examples. According to Mendelson, encyclopedic narratives identify national cultures through the rendering of the "full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge." Though Mendelson's criteria seems to posit that encyclopedic narrative does the work of cultural analysis, when referring to *Ulysses's* history of language he reverts to an apolitical reading of the novel. See "Encyclopedic Narrative: from Dante to Pynchon," *MLN*, Vol. 91, No. 6 (Dec., 1976): 1267-1275. However, more recently Derek Attridge argues that Joyce's work parodies "the scientific model of cumulative knowledge" through the encyclopedic accumulation of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* which forms "an endless series of coincidental effects that are not at all random" and which produces "an unparalleled field in which the ruling principles of scientific knowledge can be tested against themselves, can be made to reveal their dependences on the aleatory, the excluded, the counter-rational, and the contingent" (28). See *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History*, Cambridge UP, 2000. I would add to Attridge's list "the counterfactual possibilities" of history.

⁷ Here I am working from poststructuralist theories of the relationship between literary and historical narrative. For examples, see Roland Barthes' "The Discourse of History," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1989): 127-140; and Hayden White's "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," *History and Theory* 23 (1984): 1-33 and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987). What these critics offer is a way to approach the structure of narrative as fashioning a representation of reality and experience, rather than offering a direct communication of a truth. Indeed, Barthes and White argue that historical discourse is only accepted as truth if its narrative elements are not recognized. By acknowledging history as a narrative mode of structuring and understanding time, one can then understand how its power as a dominant discourse is established.

lies outside of it – namely, other times and other possibilities. The actual is then not the inevitable but one possibility of many.

Ulysses promotes this counterfactual conception of history as a way to counter history's oppression, which operates as an ideological instrument used by state apparatuses and as a structure of exclusion in terms of what has been excised from its narrative. The counterfactual enables a recognition and navigation of history as an open textual field, and expands our understanding of history and causality by opposing determinism.⁸ The counterfactual also opens up an imaginative space for individuals to consider what else might have been. Centrally, *Ulysses* stands as a model for how to harness the political potential of the counterfactual's open time through the act of retelling. A retelling entails both a knowledge of an original narrative and the freedom to depart and transform that narrative. A retelling is then a response to the possibilities of the counterfactual, and its politics emerge through the choices made among the various aesthetic, structural, and representational modes through which to reframe the story. A retelling offers an imaginative opportunity to resist culturally dominant narratives through the ideological critique it enacts of such narratives' values and influence.⁹

Critics Robert Spoo and James Fairhall give careful attention to the place of history in the work of Joyce, in particular the relationship between history and narrative. In *James Joyce and*

⁸ My understanding of the counterfactual is influenced by Catherine Gallagher's discussion of the counterfactual as not an escape from history but an interrogation of it. See "Undoing," in *Time and the Literary*, ed. by Karen Newman, Jay Clayton, and Marianne Hirsch (New York: Routledge, 2002): 11-30. I am also drawing from the historians Niall Ferguson's and Geoffery Hawthorne's arguments in favor of the counterfactual. See Niall Ferguson, "Introduction," *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, ed. by Niall Ferguson (London: Macmillan, 1997); and Geoffery Hawthorne, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History in the Social Sciences*, (Cambridge UP, 1991).

⁹ Linda Hutcheon's work parody is akin to my argument about the function of retellings; Hutcheon discusses the duplicity of parody as engaging in a "politics of representation," whereby a parody's simultaneous promotion and critique of a representational form exposes and interrogates a culture's accepted "means of ideological legitimation." See *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2002), 97. Christian Moraru's work on rewriting is also immensely useful here; he defines "rewriting" as a "developed narrative transposition of a previous text" (20) that produces an ideological and cultural critique. See *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001). However, both Hutcheon and Moraru focus on parody and rewriting in postmodernism, whereas I argue for its relevance prior to postmodernism.

the Language of History (1994), Spoo argues that the central aim of Joyce's oeuvre is to promote creative artistic freedom as a way to resist teleological, totalizing historical narratives. In *James Joyce and the Question of History* (1993), Fairhall also focuses on the struggle of the artist to transcend the boundaries and constraints of history, which he argues occurs through the destabilization of the boundary between history and fiction. While Spoo and Fairhall offer ways in which to read Joyce's work as a resistance to the oppression of history, neither reads this resistance as a form of the counterfactual. I argue that Joyce's counterfactual retelling of the past, which fuses the actual with the possible, is a form of political, artistic resistance as it challenges the discursive power of historiography as founded upon the limits of linear narrative structure.

While *Ulysses*'s larger framework functions as a retelling of the *Odyssey*, a strategy that affords the novel legitimacy for publication and positions it as part of the established literary canon, these issues are more pertinent to my second chapter in which I discuss retellings as a literary practice. Here, I focus on how histories can be reshaped, reformed, and retold within the novel. Thus, this chapter considers the oral practice of retelling, as opposed to written history, and how a responsiveness to the present moment or condition is always politically inflected.¹⁰ I discuss three episodes of *Ulysses* – “Nestor,” “Scylla and Charybdis,” and “Eumaeus” – to consider Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom's imaginings of other possibilities to history and their creative responses to the potential freedom of these moments. The episodes “Nestor” and “Scylla and Charybdis” contain two contrasting engagements with history by Stephen. In

¹⁰ In this sense, I am in accordance with Derek Attridge's reading of the attitude towards history in Joyce, that history can be changed through the “historically generated power of the texts we write and read” and that “we can, and must, continue to find ways of rewriting ourselves, our history, our future, one another, in a constantly reworded engagement with the non-textual Real and with a constant alertness to the effects we are producing by our textual activity.” See *Joyce Effects*, 84. I read *Ulysses* in terms of how these acts of rereading and rewriting of history are practiced in the everyday.

“Nestor,” we follow Stephen’s frustrations with teaching ancient history at the Dalkey school and his ineffectual attempts to reject the enforced curriculum and the wider cultural power structure of which he is a part. Yet during his lesson, Stephen is also able to briefly imagine the “room of the infinite possibilities,” a counterfactual space. However, at this point he is unable to sustain an engagement with the counterfactual that would allow him to tell a different story of history. In “Scylla and Charybdis,” he creatively engages with historical and literary narratives through the formulation of his Shakespeare theory. In this way, he also speaks to *Ulysses*’s transformative nature, of fusing the real Dublin with the reimagined, the actual historical past with that which was also possible. Yet Stephen is still not yet fully able to put his aesthetic theory into action, as shown by his partial dismissal of his own theory at the chapter’s close. Together, these two episodes expose the discourses that structure and limit his artistic freedom and which also gesture towards the possibilities of his future. I then compare Stephen’s difficulties in responding to history with Bloom’s understanding of history as shown in “Eumaeus” to argue that Bloom stands as the model for Stephen’s process of artistic growth. In this chapter, Bloom remembers the fallen Irish leader Parnell and tells his own story of his interaction with Parnell not once but twice, each time modifying the tale in terms of the present moment of its telling. My discussion of these three episodes demonstrates that Stephen must understand and adopt Bloom’s understanding of history as textual movement in order to become the artist who can write a novel such as *Ulysses*. For one of the central questions of the novel is how Stephen can become an artist whose work is politically engaged with his present moment. I argue that the counterfactual underlies the project of *Ulysses* as a central way to understand and productively engage with the narratives of history that are so often oppressive.

Furthermore, Stephen's shift from a rejection of the narratives of history towards an understanding of history as a textual field signals a shift in agency. This shift is politically subversive for it undermines the authority of history as a universal, static narrative and offers individual subjects a way to participate in history's textual activity. This productive power to participate and interact with history's paths can then extend to populations with marginalized histories and experiences, as it does with Irish everyday life in *Ulysses*. Thus, history in *Ulysses* opens up into a space of continual retellings that fuse the actual and the possible, and the discordance between English authority and historical dominance and the lives of Irish subjects creates a space for heterogeneous histories and experiences to be expressed.

Most critics discuss the critical awareness and suspicion of history as a narrative discourse, as a postmodern development¹¹; for British history and literature, the most frequently cited starting point of this process is the official dissolution of the empire.¹² Instead of locating the origins of this process in the postwar and postmodern periods, I argue that this process begins earlier within the frayed political and cultural margins of the empire, such as Ireland, during the modernist period. *Ulysses* challenges the power of Britain's continuous history as a controlling narrative mode, and this type of challenge later becomes a key marker of postmodern discourse. Phillip Brian Harper makes a similar argument regarding the relationship between American

¹¹ For example, in drawing upon Foucault's concept of continuous history, Linda Hutcheon discusses the challenge to "the impulse to totalize" as a challenge to the "entire notion of *continuity* in history and its writing" (emphasis in original). She then explains the results of this challenge as a postmodern development, as shown in the genre that she names "historiographic metafiction": "What has surfaced is something different from the unitary, closed, evolutionary narratives of historiography as we have traditionally known it: as we have been seeing in historiographic metafiction as well, we now get the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as the much sung few, and I might add, of women as well as men." *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 66. However, as I discuss next, I argue that this type of challenge emerges earlier than the postmodern age.

¹² Steven Connor asserts that after World War II, "Britain seemed progressively to lose possession of its own history" and the belief that "it was the subject of its own history" (3). Connor argues that this disturbance of Britain's "sense of historical belonging and coherence" affects the organizational power of narrative that is then reflected in the structure of the British novel. See *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1995).

modernism and postmodernism in *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture* (1994), in which he discusses how the subjective fragmentation or “decenteredness,” a central quality theorized in the postmodern subject, can be identified in works written prior to postmodernism in the experiences of the “socially marginalized and politically disenfranchised status of the populations treated in the works” (3). This decenteredness then moves to the “center” of postmodernism as the experiences usually associated with the socially marginalized become prevalent within the general population. While Harper discusses American literature by women and racial minorities, I establish *Ulysses* as an example of decenteredness in the British context. Furthermore, while exploring the effects of colonial decenteredness within the novel,¹³ I also discuss the spatial and temporal implications of the idea of “decenteredness” in connection to the productiveness of the counterfactual. Thus, I reinvigorate the term through a discussion of what can be imagined in the space apart from a central narrative, or, how retellings deconstruct the wholeness of continuous history from a position of decenteredness. The counterfactual should then not be considered as only a postmodern aesthetic technique but as an enabler of a political critique of historical discourse that is at work in the modernist period.

“Nestor”: The Burdens of History

“Nestor,” the second chapter of *Ulysses*, contains perhaps the novel’s most explicit treatment of the oppressive effects of historical discourse. The chapter opens with Stephen quizzing a class of young boys at the Dalkey school on facts of ancient history, thus mimicking

¹³ Other works that approach Joyce from a postcolonial perspective include Enda Duffy, *The Subaltern Ulysses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) and Christine van Boheemen-Saaf, *Joyce, Derrida, Lacan, and the Trauma of History* (Cambridge UP, 1999).

the chapter's technique of the catechism¹⁴; in the chapter's second half, Stephen mainly listens to the thoughts and opinions of the schoolmaster, Mr. Deasy, on politics and history. Mr. Deasy represents the nineteenth century's belief in historical progress, as he defines history as "[moving] towards one great goal, the manifestation of God" (34). Stephen is literally in service to Mr. Deasy's ideological beliefs for the chapter also details the payment of Stephen's salary, an exchange that embarrasses him and reveals the limitations of his power. In Mr. Deasy's office, the two carry on a strained conversation in which Stephen attempts to counter Deasy's providential view of history by extending the logic of his definition:

Stephen jerked his thumb towards the window, saying:
– That is God.
Hooray! Ay! Whrrwhee!
– What? Mr. Deasy asked.
– A shout in the street, Stephen answered, shrugging his shoulders. (34)

If all of history is the manifestation of the divine, then, Stephen reasons, this definition should extend to all events, including seemingly random actions and sounds that Deasy would not deem significant to the narrative of history's progression. The sounds coming in from the street are unauthored voices of conflict, and Stephen suggests that they deserve equal status in historical record.¹⁵ These shouts can also be read as signifiers of the violence of the Irish struggle against

¹⁴ In a defense of the function of unanswered questions in *Ulysses*, Maria DiBattista writes, "it is arguable that the Catechism is the anti-narrative form par excellence, since its structure as well as purpose foreclose all possibilities of error and improvisation" (268). DiBattista argues that the catechism is antithetical to the novel's form, which is based on questions that can never be definitively answered; the openendedness of these questions "generate[s] and sustain[s] purposive mental or narrative movement" (268) along a variety of possible paths. See "*Ulysses's* Unanswered Questions," *Modernism/modernity* 15, no. 2 (April 2008): 265-275. In this chapter, I argue that the novel suggests that this type of imaginative freedom can be politically and aesthetically productive by asking counterfactual questions as a way to resist the definitive narrative of history.

¹⁵ Robert Spoo also reads Stephen's response as having a political edge: "Stephen's reaction betrays a kindred feeling of outrage, but there is another, equally important significance to his strange rejoinder to Deasy, for Stephen is suggesting that if authentic meaning can be posited as existing anywhere in history, it is in the sheer randomness, the *disjecta membra*, of a day like this June day, even in an otherwise unarresting shout in the street. Not Deasy's 'one great goal' but the random, insignificant 'goals' of the hockey players are the real data of history, and these data carry the potential for alternative visions and meanings." *James Joyce and the Language of History*, 70. I would take Spoo's point further here by arguing that the shout in the street functions as an example of

English occupation, left out of England's continuous narrative of its colonial power.

Furthermore, to investigate the origins of their agency is to move outside of the space and time of a central narrative, both of Mr. Deasy's teleology and of the scene of the novel. For here, Stephen deflates Deasy's argument by bringing attention to the present moment's multiplicity. Outside of Mr. Deasy's office, a space constructed to assert the values of continuous history, alternative events are occurring, each of which contains its own potential narrative power to be imaginatively investigated as part of history. What Stephen suggests in his rebuttal to Deasy is a move towards a temporal and spatial decenteredness.¹⁶ This reorientation promotes a widened sense of time that is both politically and aesthetically charged, as it suggests a type of narrative practice that attempts to encompass the simultaneity of the present moment through a refutation of linearity. Though Stephen's shrug, which accompanies his rebuttal, signals a refusal to enact fully his critique of Deasy, a gesture that is echoed in "Scylla and Charybdis" when Stephen says he does not believe his own theory, it is a moment of potential openness that characterizes the chapter as a whole.

Opening the chapter with Stephen's history lesson foregrounds the operation of this pedagogic site as an enforcement of a particular conception of history that controls the populace and sustains the ruling class. The questions Stephen asks his students are simple ones in that they do not require any deep intellectual engagement but only a regurgitation of pieces of information; thus, the lesson consists of multiple acts of repetition without any apparent knowledge gained. In fact, the chapter's dominant tropes are fragments of history and language,

decenteredness, as he is asking for these sounds (signifiers of the experiences of the politically oppressed) to be recognized.

¹⁶ Margaret Scanlan makes use of the term "decenteredness" to refer to a tendency for postwar historical novels to focus on more minor events of everyday private lives in contrast to larger public events of history. See *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction* (Princeton UP, 1990), 10-11. However, I suggest that this preference for the minor and the everyday can be found earlier than postwar fiction. I read Stephen's move towards decenteredness as also suggestive of a type of "sideshadowing," as defined by Gary Saul Morson. See Morson, 6.

empty of meaning and abstracted from time, and thus able to be repeated without difference. The historical facts with which Stephen drills his students are separate from their lived experience, and their constant repetition produces their cultural value; the operation of this practice in *Ulysses* suggests that the repetition of history can become a form of domination and control. Within the classroom, history is a record of violence; Stephen's lesson is on ancient battles, taught from a "gorescarred book" (24). Not only does history preserve the facts of struggles for power, but its reduction to easily digestible fragments allows for a detachment from an original context and an insertion into innumerable new situations. When a student offers up a famous phrase of Pyrrhus's, "Another victory like that and we are done for," Stephen thinks, "That phrase the world had remembered. A dull ease of the mind. From a hill above a corpsestrewn plain a general speaking to his officers, leaned upon his spear. Any general to any officers. They lend ear" (24). What has been preserved from the complexity of this battle is a pseudo-poetic saying that does not stimulate the mind but relaxes it into complacency. This phrase no longer holds any original meaning and can only conjure up a generic image of war.¹⁷ In fact, its repetitive form can also perhaps perpetuate new acts of violence, as it becomes its own recognizable scenario or cultural pattern that can be harnessed as part of larger structures of power. The phrase also lacks a history, as it does not change over time; it has been severed from time and denies any developmental narrative.

Yet the disassociation that Stephen and his students feel from the history they are studying also allows for its critical transformation. Their decentered relationship to the disjointed historical narrative imposed on them opens up a space in which repetition can become creative change. What produces this change is a type of wordplay that reorients the language of

¹⁷ For a reading of "Nestor" that focuses on the specific presence of World War I, see Robert Spoo, "'Nestor' and the Nightmare: The Presence of the Great War in *Ulysses*," in *Joyce and the Subject of History*, ed. by Mark A. Wollaeger, Victor Luftig, and Robert Spoo (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1996): 105-124.

the historical facts through elements of their lived experience. Notably, the lesson comes to a halt soon after Stephen asks, “What was the end of Pyrrhus?” and one student, not knowing the answer, plays with the word’s sound and identifies “Pyrrhus” as “a pier” (24). The student then continues this association and defines a pier as “A thing out in the waves. A kind of bridge,” and ends his definition with an example: “Kingstown pier” in Dublin. In an associative act driven by chance and coincidence rather than by an end goal, Stephen’s student moves from an atemporal signifier to local knowledge, away from abstracted history to the time and place of the present. This destabilizing gesture is similar to Stephen’s attempted refutation of Deasy’s teleological logic, for both Stephen and his student evade the logic of dominant narratives by turning their attention to the sights, sounds, and places of their everyday life. Here, the student’s linguistic play gains power by recognizing “Pyrrhus,” introduced in the classroom as a stable historical referent, as instead a textual element. His unwitting rewriting of this signifier thus challenges the solidity of the historical discourse constructed through such referents.¹⁸

The gap between historical discourse and local knowledge as grounded in the present moment is then a creative space of possibility, as historical facts and narratives can then be recast in different times and reimagined with different ends. Stephen’s response to his student’s wordplay offers an image of such open-endedness, as he clarifies that a pier is a “disappointed bridge” (25). To take Stephen’s new definition as a reply to his initial question about the end of Pyrrhus, a pier does not have an end. It is an image of incompleteness, and read with the connotation of disappointment, it may also be an image of failure. Yet Stephen continues to think about a pier’s lack in a manner that recuperates its potential failure as instead an image of

¹⁸ The importance of the role of chance in the production of the student’s chain of signifiers recalls Attridge’s postmodern reading of Joyce. Attridge focuses on the importance of coincidence in Joyce as the force behind the production of open-ended systems, which show that “Meaning is never grounded or guaranteed; but, as the product of the complexity of our cultural systems, it is always available, always utilizable.” See *Joyce Effects*, 124.

possibility.¹⁹ This recuperation takes place when his thoughts return to the ancient history that he has been teaching and he imagines other potential endings of these narratives that do not end in violence:

Had Pyrrhus not fallen by a beldam's hand in Argos or Julius Caesar not been knifed to death? They are not to be thought away. Time has branded them and fettered they are lodged in the room of the infinite possibilities they have ousted. But can those have been possible seeing that they never were? Or was that only possible which came to pass? Weave, weaver of the wind. (25)

For Stephen, this is a moment of rare imaginative engagement with historical discourse, as he considers what might have been. He concentrates on two possible alternatives, the deaths of Pyrrhus and Caesar, which could change the discourse of ancient history that he teaches.²⁰ It is a moment of counterfactual imagining, and the “room of the infinite possibilities” is a counterfactual space that stands as an aesthetic and political model for the work that *Ulysses* does as a whole.

The aesthetics that the room of possibilities offers is one of temporal paradox, as the limits of the room would seem to make the possibilities finite. However, the counterfactual can only be a type of paradox, as it requires that one imagine the existence of at least two times.²¹ Here, Stephen negotiates between his knowledge of the actual and his imagination of the possible. This imaginative act is not limited to one outcome; rather, the possibilities multiply with every moment in which they are imagined. Robert Spoo reads the room of possibilities as

¹⁹ Kingstown pier also figured as an image of possibility to Joyce, as it was the site of his first departure from Ireland to Europe on December 1, 1902. See Ellman, 109.

²⁰ In her work on the counterfactual, Catherine Gallagher discusses how texts' plots move backward in time to reverse key moments, identified as crucial points in which history is faced with at least two possible paths. She refers to this plot structure as the “Y-structure,” in which the narrative goes back to a point and then moves forward again in an alternate direction. In this moment in *Ulysses*, the narrative does not complete the movement of the Y-structure, but here Stephen has identified two moments at which a Y-structure could potentially be at work. See “Undoing,” 19.

²¹ As Gallagher points out, these two times can both exist in the mind yet only one can be fully realized: “it [the Y-structure] makes no attempt to treat the alternative branches as equally real at each moment in time. Although the two tracks may always exist potentially, they don't have simultaneous ontological parity.” Gallagher, 19.

Stephen's "longing for a base of absolute newness from which to begin aesthetic operations."²²

While the room of possibilities is the space of art, I do not agree that it is a "base of absolute newness." Instead of representing a total break with historical narrative, the room of possibilities is a shadow space that shares some origin with events that have become history. Though these possibilities have been "branded" and "fettered," they exist in a space that is not fully one of tyranny. Significantly, history cannot fully destroy these possibilities but only expel them. They remain in the room of the infinite possibilities, a place that escapes temporal linearity. However, at this moment Stephen does not choose to pursue one of these alternative lines; rather, he moves towards an imagining of the multiplicity of all historical possibilities that he, as an artist, can explore.

Stephen's struggle as an artist is to resist the codes and institutions that shape him while also not being constrained by his resistance.²³ Here his counterfactual imaginings allow Stephen not fully to reject history, which is too often an immobilizing response for him, but instead to weaken its hegemony by resituating his subject position so as to use historical narrative as a way to begin his art. As Stephen considers the potential unification of history and aesthetics, he recalls his studies of Aristotle by alluding to a passage from the *Poetics*: "It must be a movement then, an actuality of the possible as possible" (25). Here Aristotle distinguishes between poetry and history: "The difference between the historian and the poet . . . is that one tells of things that have been and the other of such things as might be."²⁴ However, the counterfactual brings together these two discourses through the imagining of what might be by beginning with what has been. The counterfactual can then serve as Stephen's way to reconcile his art with history,

²² Spoo, *James Joyce*, 20.

²³ Christine Froula defines an artist for Joyce as one who can move outside and critique the material and symbolic nets that attempt to catch and hold him. See *Modernism's Body: Sex, Culture, and Joyce* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 18.

²⁴ *Poetics*, trans. James Hutton (New York: Norton, 1982), 54.

rather than rejecting history as it stifles his creativity. Though here Stephen does not sustain a prolonged engagement with the counterfactual in “Nestor,” his statement in “Circe” that “in here [in his mind] it is I must kill the priest and the king” (589) is one in which he again recognizes the power of the counterfactual and the imagination as a liberating force. Furthermore, the novel as a whole succeeds where he fails, as *Ulysses* fuses the real Dublin with the reimagined, the actual historical past with that which was also possible. One can also speculate whether Joyce is participating in the counterfactual by setting the novel before the Easter Uprising, when it was perhaps more possible to imagine other alternatives to history’s violence. In this respect, a counterfactual imagining can function as a type of reparation, in that it explores an alternative past, before a pivotal moment in history, in hopes of producing a different present.²⁵ *Ulysses* imagines back to a point before the political context of its production so as to explore the open possibilities of this time, before its own narrative and the narrative of modern Irish history are solidified. Thus, the novel’s aim resembles the temporal paradox of the room of possibilities, as its narrative negotiates multiple times.

Furthermore, the counterfactual room of possibilities offers the knowledge that the actual is just another possibility; the actual is not the inevitable.²⁶ This knowledge has a political edge,

²⁵ Both Catherine Gallagher and Paul K. Saint-Amour argue that the counterfactual operates through the logic of reparation. See Gallagher, “Undoing,” and Saint-Amour, “Counterfactual States of America: On Parallel Worlds and Longing for the Law,” *Post45*, 20 Sept. 2011, Web, 29 Sept. 2011. www.post45.research.yale.edu/. Gallagher examines how reparation laws are dependent upon the counterfactual, as they are exercises in imagining the future of an alternative past in which such discriminations never occurred. According to Gallagher, reparation laws also restore a fullness to the past, by focusing on moments of decision in which human agents are faced with various options, not just one. Saint-Amour explores the relationship between reparation and the counterfactual through a shared “homesickness for a different present,” which is “sharpened by the counterfactual genre’s definitive trait: the loading of a pivotal moment or event with such consequence that it splits history into a before, which corresponds to real-world history, and an after that diverges from it.”

²⁶ My understanding of how the counterfactual offers this type of knowledge is informed by Morson’s study of the effects of sideshadowing. Morson writes, “When sideshadowing is used, it seems that distinct temporalities are continually competing for each moment of actuality. Like a king challenged by a pretender with an equal claim to rule, the actual loses some temporal legitimacy. It can no longer be regarded as inevitable, as so firmly ensconced that it does not even make sense to consider alternatives... The actual is therefore understood as just another possibility that somehow came to pass.” Morson, 118.

for imagining alternatives weakens any ideology based on the legitimacy of a single narrative structure. Stephen's imaginings allow him to sustain a critical space in which he recognizes the existence of historical alternatives. These alternatives are openings in which to retell the narrative of history with a difference, for after he learns to question whether a possibility is only that which has come to pass, he thinks, "Weave, weaver of the wind" (25). The act of weaving is an image of connectivity as well as spatial and temporal freedom, for to weave the wind is to move in multiple directions. In ancient Irish culture, weaving is associated with the art of prophecy; these past historical alternatives then have the potential to cast specters of future possibilities.²⁷

However, Stephen's meeting with Mr. Deasy quickly stifles the sense of hope and liberation of these potential narratives. Deasy's office is full of fetishized symbols of history, shells and fragments of the past. Stephen's gaze falls on a tray of Stuart coins that lie safe in their case, an image of historical enclosure that starkly contrasts with the open space of the room of possibilities. Stephen recognizes that the world of Deasy denies difference, as he thinks, "As it was in the beginning, is now... world without end" (29). One reason that Mr. Deasy has asked Stephen into his office is because he wants Stephen to take a letter on foot and mouth disease to the press for publication, relying on Stephen's acquaintance with Dublin's literary circle. Yet Deasy has not finished his final draft, and asks Stephen to wait while he "[copies] the end" (32). This gesture affirms Deasy's control over a continuous narrative and is at odds with the aesthetic promise suggested by the room of the infinite possibilities. For here, Deasy's rewriting does not include a change and thus lead to a different end, but is an act of repetition similar to Stephen's earlier pedagogic exercises. Once Deasy finishes his copy, he announces to Stephen that he has

²⁷ Gifford, 31.

“put the matter in a nutshell,” and that “[t]here can be no two opinions on the matter” (32).

Deasy’s reduction denies opposition as well as resistance; there can be no simultaneous alternative, like that which the counterfactual offers. Deasy’s method of composition corresponds to his understanding of history, for he reduces history to single causes, as he blames all women for the fall of men (from Menelaus to Parnell), and England’s decline on Jews. This reduction denies history the richness of possibilities that is the basis of the counterfactual.

In Deasy’s office, Stephen is unable to put the lessons of the room of the infinite possibilities into action; he reverts to cynical rejection instead of a creative engagement with historical narrative. He returns to an understanding of history as solely a record of violence and an immobilization of the imagination.²⁸ Stephen tells Mr. Deasy that history is a nightmare from which he is trying to awake. The tortuousness of a nightmare denies any agency to the dreamer; Stephen is then caught, unable to act or resist, though perhaps the effort of “trying to awake” contains the beginnings of artistic agency. The sights and sounds of brutal conflict pervade Stephen’s nightmare. In Mr. Deasy’s office, Stephen listens to the noise of the boys playing outside and hears it as part of a larger history of violence: “Time shocked rebounds, shock by shock. Jousts, slush and uproar of battles, the frozen deathspew of the slain, a shout of spear spikes baited with men’s bloodied guts” (32). This passage’s sharp rhythms and its images of weapons, gashes, and bloodshed show history to be a repetition of wounding; furthermore, the connotation of “frozen” suggests the immobility that Deasy’s presence inspires. Stephen sustains this type of imagery in the “Eumaeus” episode, in which he and Bloom rest up in a

²⁸ James Fairhall makes the argument that Joyce’s aim is to resist this type of understanding of history: “Joyce, in his fiction, attempted to subvert history, which he saw as a chronicle of violence and oppression, and as a fixed past that had ousted other possible pasts and thus delimited the present.” See *James Joyce and the Question of History*, Cambridge UP, 1993, xii. I argue that it is specifically the counterfactual’s liberating effect that works to resist the sense of inevitability and offers a way to imagine against a conception of history as progressing only through violence.

cabman's shelter after the wildness of "Circe." There, Stephen asks Bloom to take away a table knife, for, as he says, "I can't look at the point of it. It reminds me of Roman history" (635). He associates the knife with the murder of Julius Caesar, an event that to some extent helps trigger his earlier counterfactual imaginings. Yet knives also recall a more recent political assassination; the character Skin-the-Goat, the cabman's shelter operator, was purportedly one of the getaway drivers in the Phoenix Park murders in 1882. Knives then link these two events that ended in violence and foreclosed other historical possibilities; their sharp points are the instrument and image of this closure.²⁹ Yet knives are also associated with Stephen; Buck Mulligan calls Stephen "Kinch, the knife-blade" (4) for his sharp criticism of the social order that shapes him. Stephen has the potential to wield the knife of history as part of his own strategy of resistance, but he must move past a conception of history as a series of sharp endpoints to history as a permeable field of openings or possibilities, which is what the counterfactual offers him.

"Nestor" demonstrates the cultural and ideological barriers that hinder Stephen's artistic progress while also pointing to a potential path towards artistic freedom through counterfactual engagements with historical discourse. In "Scylla and Charybdis," Stephen again attempts to navigate hegemonic cultural narratives, an effort that is prominently marked by counterfactual reasoning. In this chapter, Stephen's elocution of his Shakespeare theory anticipates his future as an artist, but he is still hindered by his inability to make his efforts concrete – to transform his oral resistance into solid commitment. Yet the novel itself is a type of realization of these acts, as it paradoxically foreshadows its own beginnings. Thus, "Scylla and Charybdis" offers a simultaneous vision of Stephen's lack as well as the shape of his artistic accomplishments, of his past, present, and the possibilities of his future. This counterfactual widening of temporality,

²⁹ For an extended discussion of the Phoenix Park murders and the motif of knives in *Ulysses*, see James Fairhall, *James Joyce and the Question of History*, particularly Chapter 1.

destabilizes the divide between actual and possible in a manner that I argue is politically and aesthetically productive.

“Scylla and Charybdis”: Reimagining Temporal Openness

Joyce identified literature as the technique of “Scylla and Charybdis,” and the chapter, set in the National Library, is foremost concerned with the future of Irish literature, as Stephen converses with several librarians and prominent members of the Dublin literary scene.³⁰ The bulk of their conversation is composed of Stephen’s explanation of his Shakespeare theory, which proposes that the ghost of Hamlet’s father is actually Shakespeare. Through his promotion of his theory, Stephen is performing in a sense for acceptance into this literary circle. He displays his extensive knowledge of Shakespeare’s life and work, yet has noticeably not been invited to a party being held by the writers that evening and has not been included in an upcoming anthology of young Irish poets, edited by A. E., who is part of the group at the library with Stephen. The reason behind his exclusion may be that, as Andrew Gibson notes, here Stephen develops a “critique rather than a celebration of Shakespeare and his world”³¹ that displaces the figure of Shakespeare (an object of English cultural nationalism) in order to make way for his own future art. His decentering discussion of Shakespeare unites politics and aesthetics, as he enters into conversation by arguing against Platonic notions of art and for an

³⁰ As Margot Norris explains, the four major members of this group were all actual historical personages, three of whom were still alive at the time of the novel’s publication in 1922. These were: Thomas William Lyster (the novel’s “quaker librarian”), an editor and translator; John Eglinton, the pseudonym for William Kirkpatrick Magee, a prominent essayist, editor of the literary magazine *Dana*, and assistant librarian; Richard Best, the library’s assistant director and a prominent translator; and the poet and critic George Russell, who wrote under the pseudonym A.E. Norris discusses the transformation of historical figures into fictional characters as an exploration of counterfactual possibilities: “The office in the National Library of ‘Scylla and Charybdis’ is peopled, in a sense, by historical figures... but all are equally fictional and now subject to fiction’s prerogative to represent ‘what might have been: possibilities of the possible as possible,’ to quote Stephen” (17). See “The Stakes of Stephen’s Gambit in ‘Scylla and Charybdis,’” *Joyce Studies Annual* (2009): 1-33. I argue that this boundary-crossing characterizes the novel as a whole so as to destabilize the division between the real and the possible.

³¹ *Joyce’s Revenge: History, Politics, and Aesthetics in Ulysses* (Oxford UP, 2002), 67.

Aristotelian approach – that art is grounded materially and socially in the historical moment of its production. This practice underlies his discussion of Shakespeare’s life and work and also speaks to the work of *Ulysses*. Many critics have noted that Stephen’s aesthetic theory both foreshadows and encompasses *Ulysses*.³² I continue this reading, yet I argue that his theory anticipates how *Ulysses* reimagines the past through an expansion and fusion of times that brings together the historical past with its counterfactual possibilities. Thus, Stephen’s understanding of artistic process will eventually produce a retelling that resists the static “truth” of historical record and reimagines the past through a revitalization of ousted possibilities.

According to the chapter’s intellectual interlocutors, Irish literature is still waiting for its magnum opus to arrive; as one librarian comments, “Our national epic is yet to be written”³³ (192). This sense of expectation pervades the chapter, as all are looking forward to the unknown future of Irish writing. This expectation is coupled with a dissatisfaction with the current state of Irish literature; for example, Stephen’s entrance into conversation with the literary figures occurs as they are lamenting that young Irish authors have not yet produced a figure that can be put on the same plane as Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Of course, *Ulysses* is the future that these men are awaiting, yet it will also disrupt their expectations; neither Bloom nor Stephen fits the mold of the noble hero, as Joyce rewrites such traditional characteristics to function in the novel’s time and place. Thus, *Ulysses* represents the anticipation of its production and the literary expectations that shape its future reception while reimagining a time when its own form is not

³² For example, Christine Froula points to “*Ulysses*’ many representations of itself as Stephen’s future art” in “Scylla and Charybdis.” She writes that “Joyce’s palimpsestic portrait of an artist-self mirrored at once in the fictional yet profoundly autobiographical Stephen and in the writing that is *Ulysses* breaks open the vessel of narrative temporality so that fictional time spills over into real time, much as Picasso’s cubist compositions rupture the two-dimensional picture plane into multiperspectival space.” *Modernism’s Body*, 88-89.

³³ The librarian is referring to an essay by Dr. George Sigerson, “Ireland’s Influence on European Literature,” in which he encourages authors of the Irish cultural revival to write epics drawing on ancient Irish literary tradition. Gifford, 214.

yet solidified. What remains unanswered in the time of “Scylla and Charybdis,” though answered by the text of *Ulysses*, is what form this future Irish epic will take. This question centers on the text’s relationship to the time and place of its production, as the novel is invested in a specific world as produced through a counterfactual reimagining that reactivates past possibilities alongside present and future actualities. Thus, the novel combines historical specificity with temporal openness, which destabilizes the discursive power of the historical and literary narratives that it rewrites.

As the novel’s politics emerges through its temporal aesthetics, it is fitting that the conversation that dominates “Scylla and Charbydis” begins with a debate over Platonic versus Aristotelian philosophy. Russell (the poet A. E.) dismisses the debate over the question of an Irish Hamlet by arguing for a Platonic approach to aesthetics that negates a concern with a text’s historical origins. Russell explains, “Art has to reveal to us ideas, formless spiritual essences. The supreme question about a work of art is out of how deep a life does it spring” (185). According to Russell, art is a reflection of eternal truths and can only represent those truths in a distorted form. Russell’s defense of an apolitical and atemporal aesthetics is antithetical to the manifestations of *Ulysses*’s investment in the counterfactual, which creates a sense of open time that revives the possibilities that shape and give weight to every moment.³⁴ *Ulysses*’s recreation of the possibilities that permeate June 16, 1904, is a complicated self-reflexivity, as it reimagines the time and place from which the novel is produced and within which the novel is figured as a future possibility. In a type of defense of *Ulysses*, Stephen responds to Russell by using

³⁴ In a discussion of contingency in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, Morson offers a description of the novel’s temporality that I find apropos to *Ulysses*’s method of recreation of June 16, 1904: “At each moment the field of possibilities subtly changes in ways that in principle cannot be foreseen. Every moment offers an array of opportunities and dangers, each of which would shape future opportunities differently. Time ramifies not only at infrequent historical nodes but constantly, which is why possibilities are incalculably large. History is thus a ravelment of possibilities” (156).

Aristotle's theories to argue for an art that is rooted in its cultural origins. After criticizing Plato's aversion to the artist's role in society, Stephen thinks, "Unsheathe your dagger definitions... Space: what you damn well have to see... Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past" (186). Here, Stephen rejects an aesthetics that wishes to isolate the work of art from its real world context, and, in an allusion to St. Augustine, promotes an engagement with the complexities of the present moment.³⁵ The present, through which the future moves toward the past, is a further expression of *Ulysses's* paradoxical temporality.

It is through this Aristotelian approach that Stephen discusses the relationship between Shakespeare and his work, which also speaks to the future productive relationship that Stephen will have with the world in which he lives. In contrast to Stephen's difficulties in imagining and maintaining a method of aesthetic productivity as seen in "Nestor," here his narration of Shakespeare's life and work is sustained and fluid, though his inner thoughts still show signs of insecurity. Stephen uses his knowledge of Shakespeare's life to evoke a sense of the world that surrounded and helped to generate his writings. In answer to the question of who he thinks king Hamlet is, he begins by offering a narrative of Shakespeare's walk through London towards the Globe Theatre:

– It is this hour of a day in mid June, Stephen said, begging with a swift glance their hearing. The flag is up on the playhouse by the bankside. The bear Sackerson growls in the pit near it, Paris garden. Canvas climbers who sailed with Drake chewed their sausages among the groundlings.

Local colour. Work in all you know. Make them accomplices.

– Shakespeare has left the huguenot's house in Silver street and walks by the swanmews along the riverbank. But he does not stay to feed the pen chivying her game of cygnets towards the rushes. The swan of Avon has other thoughts.

Composition of place. Ignatius Loyola, make haste to help me! (188)

³⁵ "Dagger definitions" is an allusion to Aristotle's distinction between nominal definitions and essential definitions. As Gifford explains, "The distinction is used to point out that the process of definition begins with the 'nominal' and proceeds to the 'essential': it moves in the direction of cause." Gifford, 199.

Here, Stephen conjures up the world outside of the space of art, the Globe, but the direction of his description contains the implicit argument that the world through which Shakespeare travels is an inherent element that is aesthetically reworked in the plays. Stephen's vision also creates a parallel between Shakespeare and himself; not only does Stephen pick a day in "mid June" on which to reimagine Shakespeare's walk, cast at the same afternoon hour as the time of "Scylla and Charbydis," but the passage also reveals Stephen's anxieties over his status as an artist. As he begins, he glances towards his listeners, aware that this digression is another element of his performance for their recognition and approval. In between the passages on Shakespeare, Stephen reflects on an artistic method that speaks to both his theory of Shakespeare and his own future art. Stephen then displaces Shakespeare by foregrounding the work involved in the production of this description, work that will also be put into *Ulysses*. As Margot Norris writes, Stephen is "demystifying the canonical bard while, simultaneously, laying the groundwork for a new Irish art whose ideological bent is grounded not in the past, in Irish myth and folklore, but in the politics of the present time."³⁶

Furthermore, the directive "Local colour. Work in all you know. Make them accomplices" encapsulates an aesthetics that is grounded materially and socially in the historical moment of its production and speaks to *Ulysses*'s transformation of the real Dublin with the reimagined, the actual historical past with that which was also possible. To refer to the details of Stephen's knowledge of Shakespeare's world, which parallel Stephen's/Joyce's (or the Irish artist's) knowledge of his contemporary world, as "accomplices" implies that this knowledge can be used subversively. Stephen's studied knowledge of Shakespeare deconstructs Shakespeare's literary and cultural dominance by drawing attention to his imagined everyday life, a world

³⁶ Norris, 8.

purposely obscured by the ideology that establishes Shakespeare as a cultural icon. In a related gesture, *Ulysses* positions insider knowledge of Irish everyday life to lie at the center of its narrative so as to resist the representations of Ireland from an outside perspective of a conquering power. Furthermore, the novel's resistance to dominant narratives also applies to aesthetic form, as it counters the narrowing and linking of events that occurs in the formation of a linear narrative by reactivating past possibilities to mingle with actual ones.

Ultimately, Stephen's Shakespeare theory concerns the spectral relationship between the artist and the work of art. To conceive of artistic production as ghostly haunting further supports the counterfactual aesthetics of the novel, for the counterfactual explores the alternative possibilities that haunt the actual. The trope of haunting also recalls the "room of the infinite possibilities" in which possibilities linger outside of time, waiting to be resurrected by thought. In this chapter, Stephen defines a ghost as "one who has faded into impalpability through death, through absence, through change of manners." A ghost is then one who "returns[s] to the world that has forgotten him" (188); thus Stephen and Bloom can be ghosts, as they are wanderers with uncertain relations to their homes, as well as Joyce, who returns via the novel to a world he has left behind. *Ulysses* is then a novel of ghosts, of ghostly possibilities and of ghostly travelers, and the novel asks for these specters to be seen not just as past histories that weigh down the present but to find a way to transform these ghosts into alternative possibilities and futures that offer a liberating vision within the present.³⁷ The artist is also a type of ghost, for Stephen's assertion that Shakespeare is the ghost of Hamlet's father is a way to understand how the artist speaks to and through his creations. Stephen elaborates by pointing to the knowledge that king Hamlet's ghost has about his own murder, knowledge that he could not have attained on his own,

³⁷ Spoo argues that the novel's "recurrent images of ghosts and fabrics, specters and textiles" are "figures for the artist's relationship to history." *James Joyce and the Language of History*, 40.

and thus must have been given to him by his creator. The artist's voice is then "heard only in the heart of him [his creation] who is the substance of his shadow, the son consubstantial with the father" (197). This heteroglossic layering bespeaks the non-singular origins for the world of *Ulysses*: a mingling of Joyce's past with the world that he creates; it also accounts for the novel's interest in the mystery of paternity, a type of creativity that can never be fully known, as well as its prescient awareness of itself as detailed in "Scylla and Charbydis." Thus, one of Stephen's listeners is able to summarize his theory as follows: "The truth is midway... He is the ghost and the prince. He is all in all" (212). According to this statement of temporal fusion and artistic creation, if Shakespeare is everywhere, then so is Joyce in *Ulysses*.

Furthermore, the world that the work of art creates allows for the exploration of alternative possibilities, as Stephen articulates a counterfactual understanding of Shakespeare's reworking of his own personal and cultural history through his work: "He found in the world without as actual what was in his world within as possible" (213). He even uses the language of possibility and probability to wonder whether Shakespeare anticipated the biographical readings of his oeuvre that figure Hamlet as Shakespeare's dead son Hamnet:

– *Is it possible* that the player Shakespeare, a ghost by absence, and in the vesture of buried Denmark, a ghost by death, speaking his own words to his own son's name (had Hamnet Shakespeare had lived he would have been prince Hamlet's twin) *is it possible*, I want to know, *or probable* that he did not draw or foresee the logical conclusion of those premises (189, emphasis mine)

Here perhaps is Joyce speaking to his future critics as he acknowledges the potential for a biographical reading of his own novel, which the shadowy relationship between the artist and artwork destabilizes.

Ultimately, the world of literature offers a counterfactual realm in which one can imagine beyond certainty. Here, the room of the infinite possibilities is refigured as the National Library,

for there Stephen “ponders things that were not: what Caesar would have lived to do had he believed the soothsayer: what might have been: possibilities of the possible as possible: things not known” (193). The imaginative space of the room of the possibilities is actualized in Stephen’s contemporary moment, as the library’s books are other past attempts at such imaginings, which *Ulysses* will eventually exist alongside. These texts contain “[c]offined thoughts... Once quick in the brains of men” (193), which lie in wait to move once again in another’s mind. The mind has the power not only to consider the wide expanses of the unknown and its ghostly counterfactual possibilities, but to re-actualize the thoughts of another. In fact, thought is what gives the self a sense of constancy. When Stephen worries over the continuous changing of the molecules that make up his body, he counters this potential threat to the stability of his identity with another Aristotelian concept: “But I, entelechy, form of forms, am I by memory because under everchanging forms” (189).³⁸ Here, “entelechy,” or the mind producing thought, offers continuity to the self as a controllable process of creative force. It is this liberating process, one of both constancy and change, that is the origins of artistic production.

In fact, Stephen understands both the body of the artist and the body of his work as counterfactual realms explored through the force of creative thought: “As we... weave and unweave our bodies, Stephen said, from day to day, their molecules shuttled to and fro, so does the artist weave and unweave his image” (194). The artist’s life is a history that can be continually reimagined; this creative act, which unites permanence with the passing of time, opens up the temporality of the self to allow for the contemplation of past and future possibilities, in which the self is both the creator and the object created. For, Stephen continues,

³⁸ Entelechy refers to the realization of potential, or an actuality that has the form-giving power to produce further actualities of the same type. Gifford, 206. “Form of forms” is taken from Aristotle’s *On the Soul*, in which he writes, “As the hand is the instrument of instruments, so the mind is the form of forms and sensation the form of sensibles.” Gifford, 32.

“In the intense instant of imagination, when the mind, Shelley says, is a fading coal, that which I was is that which I am and that which in possibility I may come to be. So in the future, the sister of the past, I may see myself as I sit here now but by reflection from that which then I shall be” (194). The novel that emerges out of this counterfactual conception of artistry is a retelling, a reimagining, a weaving and unweaving of the self, of language, literary narrative, and of history. *Ulysses* gives weight to what might have been and also what came to pass; it rejects a value distinction between the actual and the possible, a move that is both critical and reparative of Irish culture.

Yet after such a promising moment, in which the novel anticipates its own becoming and which offers a way to imagine against and beyond history to what is unknown, when asked if Stephen believes his own theory, he replies in the negative. Yet then he thinks, “I believe, O Lord, help my unbelief” (214). Some critics have read this gesture as demonstrative of Stephen’s wariness of committing to an ideology.³⁹ I agree with John Gordon that Stephen’s reply should be read as not a complete rejection but a sign that his theory is still a work in progress.⁴⁰ Thus, it is another indicator of the chapter’s temporal twist – Stephen does not (yet) believe his theory because he has yet to realize it through the work of *Ulysses*. Furthermore, Stephen’s vacillation functions as another productive paradox of the chapter and of the novel as a whole. Both to believe and unbelieve, to affirm and deny, is to inhabit and be separate from an epistemological structure. Stephen’s wavering recalls the shadowy doubling of the artist’s voice, yet Stephen’s voice is still a shadow not yet located in a “substance.” However, he is beginning

³⁹ Froula writes, “The self-proclaimed modern artist must believe in order to embody the cultural phenomena he would dissect and disbelieve in order to dissect the cultural phenomena that he embodies” (26).

⁴⁰ Gordon reads Stephen’s theory as a type of performance in which his “no” “means that his ‘creator’ has not yet endowed him with the answer to such questions. This leaves him, again, with that wound of doubt—without which, we are allowed to infer, there would not be any *Ulysses* for us to read.” See “Getting Past No in ‘Scylla and Charybdis,’” *James Joyce Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 515.

to understand the potential of being both within and outside, and *Ulysses* is the attempt to maintain a type of paradox that destabilizes certainty. This paradox is at work in the novel's temporality of imagining back so as to imagine forward, and this shadow space of possibility is not only aesthetic but political, as it circumnavigates the structure of formative narrative paths. The politics of this openness constructs a type of decenteredness that can weaken the singularity of a continuous narrative, and Stephen now seems in a position, outside yet within, to put such a critique into action in the future.

Towards the end of the chapter, there is an indication of how Stephen will develop the ability to employ the counterfactual productively. Bloom appears in the library, having come to examine the files of the *Kilhenny People* in order to find an advertisement. He follows one of the librarians out of the room like a ghost, as a "patient silhouette" and a "bowing dark figure" (200). Buck Mulligan, Stephen's antagonistic friend who has joined the group at the library, recognizes Bloom from seeing him in the Greek sculpture section of the art museum, and turns to Stephen to tell him, "He knows you. He knows your old fellow" (201). Such details cast Bloom as the artist/father of Stephen, for he has knowledge of Stephen that Stephen is unaware of and his shadowy presence recalls the relationship between Shakespeare and Hamlet. At the chapter's close, Bloom reappears, as he, Mulligan, and Stephen are all exiting the building at the same time. Before Stephen sees Bloom, he senses his presence, an anticipation described as "feeling one behind" (217). This phrase echoes the language of the close of the "Proteus" chapter in which Stephen thinks he senses someone behind him and turns to see a ship sailing by. As Stephen feels trapped in Ireland and is searching for a freedom of artistic expression, and as I discuss later, Bloom's artistic sensibility is shaped by his openness to travel, the ship in "Proteus" prefigures his brush with Bloom in "Scylla and Charybdis."

As Stephen steps away from Mulligan, he becomes aware that he is at a crossroads, having chosen to leave his home with Mulligan that morning: “Part. The moment is now. Where then? If Socrates leave his house today, if Judas go forth tonight. Why? That lies in space which I in time must come to, ineluctably” (217). Stephen stands in a moment in which there are multiple possibilities available to him, and he wonders what his future, the unknown time and space towards which he is heading, holds for him. Significantly, Bloom passes between Stephen and Mulligan at this moment and becomes a sign of the shape of Stephen’s future. Bloom will take control over the path of Stephen’s day, as he will lead him home that night, yet Bloom also becomes a sign of the artistic paradigm that Stephen needs to adopt. After Bloom passes by, Stephen remembers his dream from the night before in which he flew above the city like the artist of his namesake, Dedalus. His dream offers a vision of freedom and artistic achievement that echoes the movement of the ship that is reinscribed in the figure of Bloom. Thus, this moment of crossing paths forecasts what Stephen “in time must come to”: the realization of the relationship between his union with Bloom and his future as an artist.⁴¹

“Eumaeus”: The Textuality of History

Although Stephen’s and Bloom’s paths cross several times in the early chapters of *Ulysses* and they travel together in a disjointed group through the magical, strange Nighttown world of “Circe,” in “Eumaeus” the two are finally alone. In this late chapter, Bloom and a somewhat inebriated Stephen slowly wander the city streets late at night and eventually decide to rest up in a cabman’s shelter. There, they listen to the stories being told around them by the

⁴¹ Much has been written about the significance of the joining of Stephen and Bloom as foreshadowed here by the end of “Scylla and Charybdis.” For example, their union is often discussed in terms of a marriage plot. For a study of how *Ulysses* undermines marriage as a structuring device, see Spoo, *James Joyce and the Language of History*, 81-88.

employees and those who frequent the shop. However, at this time of night no one is at work; the chapter is a time and space of repose, as it marks a pause in the telos of the novel in which language begins to repeat itself as characters tell and retell stories.⁴² Frank Budgen describes the narrative voice of “Eumaeus” as “the language of tired men. Sentences yawn, stumble, become involved and wander into blind alleys.”⁴³ The chapter’s deflated tone is a shift away from the forceful rhetoric of the novel’s earlier episodes, in particular Stephen’s antagonistic descriptions of history in “Nestor,” towards what Robert Spoo calls the “multivocal textualizations” of storytelling.⁴⁴ Here, history is not solely Stephen’s nightmare, but, as characters share and contribute their memories and stories of the past, historical discourse becomes popular consciousness.⁴⁵ In this shift, history no longer remains a distanced, oppressive narrative but is disseminated and produced through continual retellings, thus transferring authorial agency to the individual whose past and present experiences help form his interaction with history. These retellings are necessarily inflected by the present moment of their production, and their creative ephemerality weakens the restrictions of official written history. The chapter thus promotes a counterteological understanding of history, as it disrupts the idea that the past is a constant and seamlessly moves toward a single end. The heterogeneous nature of the retellings reveals history to be a textual process that can fuse the actual with the possible. Furthermore, the imaginative freedom of the characters’ retellings allows them to muse on counterfactual possibilities, which

⁴² Karen R. Lawrence reads the chapter’s style through the term “overwork,” as she points to both an exhaustion of language and a problem of labor. See “‘Beggaring Description’: Politics and Style in Joyce’s ‘Eumaeus,’” *Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no. 2 (Summer, 1992): 362-3.

⁴³ *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses*, 249.

⁴⁴ *James Joyce and the Language of History*, 77.

⁴⁵ Frederic Jameson argues for the importance of gossip in “Eumaeus” as “a kind of speech which is neither uniquely private nor forbiddingly standardised in an impersonal public form, a type of discourse in which the same, in which repetition, is transmitted again and again through a host of eventful variations, each of which has its own value.” See “*Ulysses* in History,” in *James Joyce: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Mary T. Reynolds (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 152.

have been ousted from history's record; centrally, the men sitting around the shelter discuss the possibility of Parnell's return.

Bloom, however, responds to the discussion of this possibility by evaluating its plausibility.⁴⁶ As Bloom maintains a position of distance from the dominant cultural narratives of modern Ireland, he can navigate the counterfactual more productively because he is not fully absorbed into any ideology that limits his vision of history. Thus, Bloom is able to negotiate the multiple possibilities of the counterfactual, thereby sustaining the importance of its open time, while also understanding the consequences of such imaginings. What a consideration of plausibility brings to the counterfactual's possibilities is an emphasis on choice; thus, there is an ethical and political weight to the negotiation of the counterfactual. The thought of Parnell also prompts Bloom to proffer his own retelling of his interaction with Parnell, which he does not once but twice, modifying each version in response to the context of its performative moment. His retellings displace the idea of Parnell as a fallen hero and instead construct him as a man of the everyday. Thus, Bloom's retellings stand as a model for Stephen's future novel in which the subjects of historical narrative are continually reimagined.

Like Stephen, Bloom is also haunted by images of his own history, namely his dead son Rudy. Bloom repeatedly thinks of Rudy's death as a crucial moment in which his life could have taken another path, and he often imagines what his life would be like if Rudy were alive. In "Sirens," he thinks of his past loss but he then considers what possibilities may lie in the future: "I too, last of my race. Milly young student. Well, my fault perhaps. No son. Rudy. Too late now. Or if not? If not? If still?" (285). Here, Bloom considers his productivity as a father in producing an heir, a role that the novel casts as a type of mysterious artistry; significantly, he

⁴⁶ Plausibility is a key factor of a responsible use of the counterfactual, as only the possibilities that seem probable or likely in the past should be explored. See Ferguson, 83-86.

imagines that his future may still offer that possibility. By the end of the novel, Bloom has moved away from his attachment to the ghosts of the past, perhaps because of his meeting with Stephen, and looks towards the future, its possibilities and its undetermined time. Unlike Stephen, who is overwhelmed by his personal past and by wider cultural and political history, Bloom maintains an ambiguous relationship to history. As a Jew, he is seen as an outsider, which affords him a space of distance as he is not fully absorbed by the church and state. He is then decentered from Irish history and from English dominance in multiple removes. Yet his ambivalence can also create a divide between him and other Irishmen, as in the “Cyclops” chapter when Bloom’s open definition of a nation leads only to violence.⁴⁷ After affirming that his nation is Ireland, Bloom says, “And I belong to a race too... that is hated and persecuted. Also now. This very moment. This very instant” (332). Here Bloom’s sense of belonging is rooted in one place but is simultaneously abroad, dispersed across space and time. Thus, Bloom continually imagines past borders and boundaries, for part of his sensibility is always elsewhere.⁴⁸

Bloom is never fully absorbed as a subject of one continuous narrative. His decenteredness deconstructs nationalist rhetoric and promotes political tolerance. In contrast, the character in “Eumaeus” who corresponds to Deasy and his teleological view of history is Skin-the-Goat, who predicts the future fall of England:

But a day of reckoning, he stated *crescendo* with no uncertain voice—thoroughly monopolizing all the conversation—was in store for mighty England, despite her power of pelf on account of her crimes. There would be a fall and the greatest fall in history. The Germans and the Japs were going to have their little lookin, he affirmed. The Boers were the beginning of the end. Brummagem England was toppling already and her

⁴⁷ Bloom’s definition: “A nation is the same people living in the same place” (331).

⁴⁸ In “Eumaeus,” Bloom responds to the stories of the sailor, W. B. Murphy, by thinking about his desire to travel; he calls himself “at heart a born adventurer though by a tick of fate he had consistently remained a landlubber except you call going to Holyhead which was his longest” (626).

downfall would be Ireland, her Achilles heel, which he explained to them about the vulnerable point of Achilles, the Greek hero— (640)

Skin-the-Goat does not allow for an alternative narrative for the future to be considered, as all events must lead toward a single end; even his loud voice dominates the shelter so that no one else can speak or resist. Furthermore, it is rumored that Skin-the-Goat was involved in the Phoenix Park murders; this possibility is another example of Skin-the-Goat's affiliation with the narrowing of historical alternatives, as that event could be considered as a counterfactual turning point in which Home Rule for Ireland could have been achieved much earlier. Skin-the-Goat serves as a reminder of Irish political strife that stems from the belief in violence as leading to revolution and the fall of the dominant power. However, Bloom is not immobilized by Skin-the-Goat's rhetoric, as Stephen in part is by Deasy, but instead is able to respond to Skin-the-Goat with his own thoughts on the nature of historical process.

Bloom first deflates Skin-the-Goat's apocalyptic vision of England's future by noting its improbability:

It was quite on a par with the quixotic idea in certain quarters that in a hundred million years the coal seam of the sister island would be played out and if, as time went on, that turned out to be how the cat jumped all he could personally say on the matter was that as a host of contingencies, equally relevant to the issue, might occur ere then it was highly advisable in the interim to try to make the most of both countries, even though poles apart. (641)

Here Bloom resists the fixity of Skin-the-Goat's prediction by recognizing the multiple possible outcomes that remain in the future's undetermined time. In this sense, Bloom promotes a type of open temporality akin to the basis of the counterfactual, for he notes that whatever does occur will not be an inevitable development but instead will be the result of the convergence of multiple factors brought together by chance. Bloom is also careful to point out that the future's possibilities, the "host of contingencies," are all equally possible; therefore, no outcome is

avored, thus deconstructing any ideology based upon a logic of history's movement. This mindset leads Bloom to encourage political tolerance, for if the future is undetermined, then England's and Ireland's relationship is not one of inherent conflict.

To Bloom, violence is never productive and will only limit the future's possibilities. Though he has a kind of admiration for "a man who had actually brandished a knife, cold steel, with the courage of his political convictions" (642), he rejects such tactics. As Bloom explains to Stephen, he "resent[s] violence or intolerance in any shape or form. It never reaches anything or stops anything. A revolution must come on the due installments plan" (643). Instead of singular moments of radical change, Bloom understands history as a temporal process. While this perspective may initially seem to counter the counterfactual's emphasis on crucial turning points, it actually supports it. For one must be wary of casting a potentially more trivial event (such as the violence of the Phoenix Park murders) as the singular cause of great change; instead, one should understand how multiple factors can converge at any moment in time, and thus the path of history requires a wide perspective and a generous explanation.⁴⁹ While Stephen's response in "Nestor" to alternatives to violence allows his mind to inhabit briefly the openness of the room of the possibilities, here Stephen refuses to engage at all on this topic, as he says, "We can't change the country. Let us change the subject" (645). In contrast, Bloom understands the problematic lure of isolating one singular event as being able to change history.

Bloom recognizes that history is a type of movement that never allows a return to an original event.⁵⁰ In fact, each moment of remembering, of recalling the past and bringing into the present, will shift and change the remembered event. To know history, then, is continually to remake it, as each retelling is a rewriting. These changes, mistaken or not, do not bother Bloom;

⁴⁹ Ferguson, 12.

⁵⁰ Spoo writes, "From 'Eumaeus' on, the text increasingly insists on the impossibility of retracing temporal and historical paths and rearriving at the selfsame, self-present point." *James Joyce*, 75.

instead, he recognizes the process's inevitability. After admiring Skin-the-Goat's political convictions, he realizes that Skin-the-Goat has been remembering his role in the murders incorrectly and that Skin-the-Goat was the driver, not one of the killers.⁵¹ Yet he attributes this error to Skin-the-Goat's irrelevance to contemporary life, as he thinks, "In any case that was very ancient history by now and as for our friend, the pseudo Skin-the-etcetera, he had transparently outlived his welcome" (642). This figure of nationalistic violence has no place in the present, and Bloom's uncertainty regarding the truth of his identity further destabilizes the received representation of Skin-the-Goat *as* such a figure.⁵² Bloom's skepticism of both the significance of Skin-the-Goat and the stability of his historical personage foreshadows his rejection of the myth of Parnell's return and recalls his meditations on Rip van Winkle, his favorite story about the inability to return to the past. Furthermore, though Bloom purports to remember the Phoenix Park murders "as well as yesterday" (629), he thinks that they took place in 1881 instead of 1882. His unawareness of his mistake in remembering the correct date is a further indication of the potential mutability of historical record.

Bloom's unconscious perpetuation of misinformation speaks to the reader's experience of the world of *Ulysses*, for it is difficult to distinguish the historically accurate details from those that are fictional. A comment on the impurities of historical discourse, this dynamic is also at work in texts that circulate within *Ulysses*. When Bloom picks up a late evening edition of the *Telegraph* newspaper, he sees how the act of recording can alter the original event. He reads an

⁵¹ Bloom thinks, "it just struck him that Fitz, nicknamed Skin-the-Goat, merely drove the car for the actual perpetrators of the outrage and so was not, if he was reliably informed, actually party to the ambush" (642). Thus, Bloom questions even whether or not he is right in this correction, or whether he was given the wrong information.

⁵² In discussing the effects of the ambiguous identity of Skin-the-Goat, James Fairhall writes, "It is not that Joyce substitutes one Skin-the-Goat for another, a fictional character for a historical figure. Rather, the two Skin-the-Goats coexist as contradictory yet non-cancelling realities, suggesting the limitations of any narrative of history that ... says, in effect, *This* is what happened or *This* is what that person was really like. There is no denial of the reality of history (past events). Rather, there is a recognition that we interpret this reality in histories (accounts of past events) which take on a reality of their own, regardless of their validity in terms of historical evidence" (37).

article about the funeral that he attended earlier in the day; the article gives a brief summary of his friend Dignam's life and those present at the ceremony. Yet there are several significant factual errors in the write-up, including a misspelling of Bloom's name and the inclusion of C. P. M'Coy, Stephen, and the novel's favorite nameless, cloaked figure who has now acquired a name, M'Intosh (a play on his defining characteristic, his mackintosh), all of which have now become part of the record of the past. In contrast to history's repetition without change in "Nestor," Bloom sees in the newspaper that every retelling will shift and change the nature of the past. Moreover, the newspaper's retelling unites the factual with the possible. Though Stephen was not at the funeral, the newspaper records that he was and he in fact could have been, for he is traveling through the same space and time. The newspaper then functions as a type of counterfactual account, as it conveys a more full sense of the world of this past moment by including possibilities that could have happened even if they didn't. The counterfactual can then perhaps be *more* truthful than official historical record, if we can think of truth as a recognition of the actual and the possible as equal, intertwined realms.

Because of his privileged knowledge of the funeral, Bloom knows which details have been added to the article, yet his skill at navigating and evaluating its narrative extends to other circulating texts and records. When listening to W. B. Murphy tell of his wife waiting for him back home, Bloom places his story in the tradition of the returning hero. He recognizes how this stereotypical narrative conjures up a generic image, as he can "easily picture his [Murphy's] advent on this scene" (624). While this act of imagining recalls Stephen's thoughts on the images summoned by Pyrrhus's famous phrase in "Nestor," here Bloom destabilizes the perpetuation of this cultural pattern by considering how this narrative could be reversed; thus, he thinks that such stories are never about "the runaway wife coming back, however much devoted

to the absentee” (624). Bloom constantly undermines the hegemony of dominant narratives, in particular the myth of the returning hero. Thus, when a cabman suggests the possibility of a future news story about the return of Parnell, Bloom is not caught up in the romance of the idea; instead, he considers the function of such a belief in the present moment to be a regression because it pursues a possibility that does not offer a more liberated future for Ireland.

Bloom does not immediately reject the idea of Parnell’s eventual return but instead evaluates its plausibility. However, he does think that it is “[h]ighly unlikely, of course, [that] there was even a shadow of truth in the stories and, even supposing, he thought a return highly inadvisable, all things considered” (649). As with his skepticism of both the relevance and identity of Skin-the-Goat, Bloom understands how Parnell’s identity has been created, sustained, and modified outside of official historical discourse, starting with the sensational coverage of his trial (which Bloom then recalls at length) and continuing with the stories the men are telling around him. He also recognizes that Parnell can no longer function in the present as the leader that he once was, for he has now become a divisive figure. To support his suggestion, the cabman offers multiple possibilities (or counterfactual alternatives) as to how Parnell could still be alive. Recalling the discussion of the image of a pier in “Nestor,” it is the lack of a complete knowledge of the end of Parnell’s life that is the source of the enduring faith in his return. Furthermore, these counterfactual imaginings offer an opportunity to imagine a more proper end, as Parnell has come to be seen as a disappointing leader and a figure of unfulfilled potential. Because of the lack of a clear or singular ending for Parnell, Bloom acknowledges that he cannot fully rule out any possibility but only note which one is more or less likely to occur. Thus, “the remark which emanated from friend cabby might be within the bounds of possibility” (649). Though Bloom does not think that Parnell’s return is plausible, he cannot completely dismiss it.

Though the novel promotes counterfactual exercises as a liberating activity, Bloom emerges as the privileged user of such imaginative pursuits, favored over such other practitioners as Skin-the-Goat and the cabman. The first step in utilizing the imaginative resistance offered by the counterfactual is to imagine the myriad possibilities that history has ousted from its record, as we see Stephen beginning to do in “Nestor.” In declaring their faith in their chosen historical alternatives, Skin-the-Goat and the cabman show that they have moved past this first step and have selected a singular vision to pursue. Yet the novel implicitly criticizes both for their faith in their favored counterfactual alternatives. The question then becomes what distinguishes Bloom’s approach to the counterfactual. Because of his decentered position, he does not endorse counterfactual alternatives that further an ideology that has proved unsuccessful in leading Ireland towards independence (i.e., Skin-the-Goat’s affiliation with revolutionary violence and the cabman’s attachment to Parnell). His recognition of history as a contingent process, rather than a directed movement toward favored outcomes, further bolsters his position of critical distance. Thus, he is never fully absorbed into following one alternative possibility, and instead is able to imagine the ramifications of the more and less plausible outcomes that each moment contains. With Bloom as its figurehead, *Ulysses* itself offers multiple possibilities of the past from which it has emerged without favoring one over the other, so as to force a negotiation with history’s entanglements and to open up a way to reimagine an undetermined future for Ireland. *Ulysses* suggests that Stephen must take Bloom as his model in order to maintain history’s openness while also creatively interacting with the paths of history. This type of unrestricted negotiation is what will lead to Stephen writing a novel on the scale of *Ulysses*.

By considering the possibility of Parnell’s return, Bloom discerns the textuality inherent in the dissemination of historical memory into public consciousness, and because of this he is

able to add his contribution to history by retelling the story of his own interaction with Parnell. Bloom's retellings of his personal interaction with Parnell rejuvenate him as a figure of civility and kindness. Bloom remembers Parnell as a person he ran into in the *United Ireland* newspaper offices in 1890. There, Parnell drops his hat, Bloom picks it up for him, and Parnell thanks him: "He saw him once on the auspicious occasion when they broke up the type in the *Insuppressible* or was it *United Ireland*, a privilege he keenly appreciated, and, in point of fact, handed him his silk hat when it was knocked off and he said *Thank You*, excited as he undoubtedly was" (650). His sympathies with Parnell's actions against the newspaper do not lead Bloom to an act of similar violence but to a gesture of courtesy and politeness. Parnell responds in a similar manner, and their exchange fits Bloom's idea of patriotism, which he defines earlier as "friendlier intercourse between man and man" (644). Thus an equal exchange emerges out of political aggression. Bloom remembers Parnell not solely as a historical figure or as a lost hero but as an actual person with whom he has had human contact. As Michael H. Begnal writes, Parnell becomes "important in the context because he is remembered and created by Bloom, not Bloom being important because he saw Parnell."⁵³ Here, Bloom interacts with history on his own terms, through his own experience.

Moments later, Bloom tells the story of Parnell a second time, during which he embellishes his descriptions and adds digressions. His retelling is a textual modification that brings the past into dialogue with the present, as his thoughts on Parnell lead him to recall his experiences at Dignam's funeral earlier on in the day. He makes a comparison between Parnell and John Henry Menton, in whose hat Bloom pointed out a dent, so as to emphasize the value of courtesy: "[Parnell] saying: *Thank you, sir* though in a very different tone of voice from the

⁵³ "Art and History: Stephen's Mirror and Parnell's Silk Hat," in *Joyce's Ulysses: The Larger Perspective*, ed. by Robert D. Newman and Weldon Thornton (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1987), 242.

ornament of the legal profession whose headgear Bloom also set to rights earlier in the course of the day, history repeating itself with a difference; after the burial of a mutual friend when they had left him alone in his glory after the grim task of having committed his remains to the grave” (655). Here Bloom becomes an author who combines history and art, as his second retelling shows a fusion of times, his sense of audience, and his sensibility of language. His stories mingle with the prevailing myths of Parnell being discussed around him; this mixing counters and weakens the dominance of these myths by offering an alternative, local vision of a distanced, historicized figure.⁵⁴

The myth of Parnell’s return ultimately becomes an instance for Bloom to consider how he understands the passing of time. Bloom’s comment that history repeats itself with a difference shows history to be composed of patterns that are continually shifting and transforming, not solely a repetition of violence, as Stephen sees it. History then repeats itself in retellings, yet with differences based on temporal change and the context of the present moment in which they enter. Bloom accepts history as a movement forward, yet not as an inherently set linear path but one in which an individual can participate. This conception of history affords Bloom critical distance. In a rejection of nostalgia, Bloom offers his own thoughts on history: “Looking back now in a retrospective kind of arrangement, all seemed a kind of dream. And the coming back was the worst thing you ever did because it went without saying you would feel out of place as things always moved with the times” (651). Here, Bloom recognizes that Parnell can no longer function as the leader that he once was, for the times have moved on. Thus, Bloom understands how possibilities take on particular significance in certain cultural moments, yet he also

⁵⁴ I understand Bloom’s retelling as a form of what Shari Stone-Mediatore calls “experience-oriented writing,” which she defines as “a crucial means by which people can resist institutional control over how their identities and histories are represented.” See *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 11.

recognizes that the context of when these possibilities are imagined affects their meaning. It is this belief of Bloom's that Stephen must also adapt – to understand history as a textual field constantly being rewritten.

Bloom's retellings show a continual remaking of personal experience that unites past and present; their fluidity contrasts with the oppressive solidity of official historical record. These retellings are akin to the novel that Stephen will eventually write; they reject totalizing interpretations of the past and promote the aesthetic freedom of the present moment, which the image of the "room of the infinite possibilities" captures. In this sense, Bloom's retellings and Stephen's future work support James Fairhall's claim regarding Joyce's overall artistic aim, which he argues is both "to make history and to free himself from it."⁵⁵ I argue that such an effort can be achieved through counterfactual reimaginings and retellings, which free the individual to respond creatively to culturally dominant narratives so as to weaken their authority through a politically charged, aesthetic practice.

In this chapter, I have argued that in *Ulysses* everyday retellings of history offer the possibility for imaginative resistance to dominant historical narratives. These acts of retelling allow the individual to consider the ways in which history could have differed and then to form his own alternative narrative. However, the novel's support of Bloom as a model demonstrates that no one alternative narrative should silence all others, but rather that within each moment there are multiple possible narrative paths. The temporality of *Ulysses* draws on this understanding, as the novel works to expand the possibilities of the present while reimagining the past and re-casting its own future. While this chapter has focused on the everyday practice of

⁵⁵ Fairhall, 62-3.

retelling as a political and aesthetic act, it is also important to recognize the other central practice of retelling that the novel enacts: its rewriting of Homer's *Odyssey*. As the function of this type of literary practice is the subject of the next chapter, here I will briefly consider how my discussion of everyday retellings of history speaks to the relationship between *Ulysses* and the *Odyssey*.

As I discussed in the beginning of the chapter, T. S. Eliot's 1923 essay on *Ulysses* identified the technique of the "mythical method," a structuring system that Eliot saw as "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity." This aesthetic practice, with Joyce's work as the central example, is now considered a key marker of modernism and consequently has been discussed as a central way in which writers responded to the fractured experience of modernity. Thus, a novel about everyday Irish life now occupies one of the central nodes of the British literary canon. Yet Eliot's delineation of the mythical method as a "continuous parallel" characterizes it as a restrictive practice, recalling the unification that marks Foucault's concept of "continuous history," rather than a freeing one. Eliot's constrained categorization limits *Ulysses*'s exploration of the *Odyssey* to a "continuous parallel" rather than opening up a questioning of the *Odyssey*'s dominance, whether that refers to its narrative, its aesthetics, or its canonical status, located at the beginnings of Western literature. Thus, Eliot's praise of *Ulysses* does not recognize the possibilities of difference, which I have argued is where the novel's politics emerge. Furthermore, Eliot fails to include any example or quotation from the novel, which John Nash reads as an elision of "textual and historical particularity" that "mask[s] a general political unease with Joyce and Ireland."⁵⁶ What Nash brings attention to in Eliot's canonical reading of Joyce is how a focus on the novel's aesthetic structure can obscure

⁵⁶ John Nash, "Genre, Place and Value: Joyce's Reception, 1904-1941" in *James Joyce in Context*, ed. John McCourt (Cambridge UP, 2009), 47.

the detailed workings of the novel's politics. Yet I would argue that Joyce's use of Homer is indeed political.

As I have shown, *Ulysses* is a self-aware literary text, cognizant of the traditions and expectations that shape its reception. The novel's careful foreshadowing in "Scylla and Charybdis" of its future as the modern epic for which all are waiting comes to fruition when John Eglinton, one of the literary figures gathered in the National Library in that chapter, writes in *The Dial* in October 1922 that *Ulysses* is a "masterpiece" and a "violent interruption of the movement known as the Irish Literary Renaissance."⁵⁷ Here, Joyce's incorporation of Eglinton into *Ulysses* as a judge of Stephen's potential as an artist anticipates Eglinton's position of authority in reviewing the novel. Furthermore, Eglinton's reading of *Ulysses* as a "violent interruption" contrasts with the language of Eliot's "continuous parallel," offering an image of rupture rather than symmetry.⁵⁸ For Eglinton, the mastery of *Ulysses* emerges out of its break with tradition. While I do take *Ulysses* to be a political novel, my understanding of its promotion of counterfactual exercises to move individuals toward creative interactions with dominant narratives leads to a conception of the novel's relationship with literary tradition as lying in between Eliot's "continuous parallel" and Eglinton's "violent interruption." I read Joyce's retelling of the story of the *Odyssey* as a questioning of the continuous structure of the Western literary canon by reimagining its foundational text, thereby exploring the original "actual" as well as the possible. As Joyce approaches the canon from a decentered perspective, this retelling recognizes and implicitly interrogates the values and markers of the canon. *Ulysses* then functions as a questioning of origins – of the power of the *Odyssey* viewed as the beginnings of literature but also how such a beginning point can be continually reimagined, as its story

⁵⁷ Qtd. In Nash, 48.

⁵⁸ Nash suggests that this imagery carries overtones of the political acts occurring during the ratification of the 1921-22 Treaty of Independence, thus reading the novel's "interruption" as a politically violent act. Nash, 48.

resurfaces throughout time. Thus, while the novel's association with Homer elevates it to the status of high literature,⁵⁹ it also deconstructs the *Odyssey's* authority.

Recent criticism on the relationship between *Ulysses* and the *Odyssey* offers a new perspective on the limitations of the straightforward readings offered by the “mythical method.” James Ramsey argues that a key aspect of the integration of the *Odyssey* into Joyce has been overlooked: the presence of “later responses, allusions, citations, and references to the *Odyssey*.”⁶⁰ The creation of this web of allusions from throughout history and all to the same myth, what Ramsey calls Joyce's “multi-textual, multi-linguistic, multi-epochal approach,” frees Joyce from any “mechanical reliance on the *Odyssey*.”⁶¹ The authority of the *Odyssey* as a narrative singularity is thereby weakened by the recognition and incorporation of allusions to later retellings and continuations as well as precursors – narratives that Homer may have drawn upon in the composition of the *Odyssey*.⁶² Furthermore, I would argue that this allusive multiplicity evokes the protean orality of the *Odyssey* before it was recorded in written form. Thus, to recognize the ways in which the *Odyssey's* myth has travelled through literature, as well as the narratives that preceded it, is to recall the nature of the *Odyssey's* production out of a culture of performative retelling in which each speaker who recited the epic reconstituted its form in a specific time and place and impressed upon it his individual experiences. To recall this practice of retelling is to destabilize the notion of an “original” *Odyssey*, and offers a model of

⁵⁹ Joyce himself perhaps recognized the utility of foregrounding the Homeric parallels, as he was active in distributing interpretive schema to critics such as Valéry Larbaud and Stuart Gilbert. Joyce also revised certain chapters of *Ulysses* so as to align them more closely with the interpretive schema. Celia Marshik argues that this strategy is a defense against censorship. She writes that Joyce's revisions “place within the text the means of its own defense, in this case, the implied argument that *Ulysses* cannot be obscene because it is a carefully planned and wrought work of art.” See *British Modernism and Censorship* (Cambridge UP, 2006), 157.

⁶⁰ James Ramsey, “Intertextual Metempsychosis in *Ulysses*: Murphy, Sinbad, and the ‘U.P.: up’ Postcard,” *James Joyce Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 99.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁶² Ramsey focuses on Ovid, Dante, the lost play *Odysseus Pseudangelos* (an ancient continuation of the *Odyssey* story), and the precursor text of the *Arabian Nights*.

aesthetic creation and continuation that evokes Bloom's practice of retelling that I have argued is the basis of *Ulysses*. Hence, *Ulysses* places itself within a tradition of retelling in which texts are continually reinterpreted and their meanings are reconstituted through the times and places in which they are reimagined. This proliferation of narratives, of which *Ulysses* is composed, refutes the mythical method's denial of change. Thus, the workings of *Ulysses*'s retellings are given a past as well as a future, as *Ulysses* is then one part of a larger process.

As a retelling also offers an opportunity for critique of the original narrative's cultural dominance, the choices in how *Ulysses* remakes the myth of the *Odyssey* are ideologically significant. To investigate these choices, one must address the space between the dominant original narrative and its retelling as a space of creativity and contested power. In my next chapter, I discuss two novels, Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1975) and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), which continue the work of *Ulysses* through their interrogation of foundational literary texts, and I show how a retelling functions as a decentered critique of those origins, traditions, genres, and values.

CHAPTER TWO

“Shadow Texts”: The Power of Deferral in Sam Selvon’s *Moses Ascending* (1975) and J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986)

In an interview with David Attwell, in which he discusses the options a writer has to respond to his political conditions, J. M. Coetzee offers the following offhand comment: “I have never known how seriously to take Joyce’s – or Stephen Dedalus’ – ‘History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.’”¹ Stephen’s dramatic remark, which encapsulates his struggle to create art when faced with history’s record of violence, remains to Coetzee a statement of uncertain import. Instead of taking this brief comment as Coetzee’s dismissal of Joyce, I suggest here that it provides a glimpse as to how Coetzee continued to process the meaning and influence of Joyce’s great work, as well as the larger modernist movement for which Stephen’s declaration has become a motto.² Thus, the roughly seventy years between the publication of *Ulysses* and the time of this interview did not render modernism obsolete. Rather, it remains a movement whose strategies and aims still resonate with Coetzee’s position as an author. Coetzee’s work is principally concerned with producing fiction in his native South Africa. As Attwell comments, Coetzee’s writings are structured by the condition that “the discursive-political consequences of the country’s [South Africa’s] protracted trauma *militate against* fictionality.” Coetzee responds to the question of how art can respond to violence by rejecting any sense of art as paralyzed before catastrophe; instead, his “fiction begins to speak to the political on its own terms.”³ As Coetzee has explained, he constructs his work so as to rival rather than mimetically represent history. This rivalry, Coetzee suggests, produces “a novel that operates in terms of its own

¹ J. M. Coetzee, “The Poetics of Reciprocity: Interview,” in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 67.

² David James interprets Coetzee’s remark in a similar way in his chapter on Coetzee and modernist minimalism in *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel*. See pp. 96-97.

³ David Attwell, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 4.

procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history.”⁴ Confronting the challenge to create art in cultures shaped by imperial violence, Coetzee and Joyce (via Dedalus) position their work in similar ways. Both adopt a counterfactual conception of art; Coetzee’s above description of his goal as an author evokes Stephen’s “room of the infinite possibilities” that is the space of potential artistic creation. Coetzee and Joyce then construct their fiction as a space of possibility in which, by imagining against the facts of history, a writer can more directly address and engage with the surrounding cultural and political dynamics. Thus, by imagining difference, a writer confronts the real.

In arguing that Coetzee is implicitly responding to and furthering Joyce’s concerns for the state of art in a colonized culture, I position Coetzee as participating in a modernist conversation. Joyce’s creation of *Ulysses* as a counterfactual realm is his response to the oppression of historical discourse as wielded by a dominant outside power, England. For Coetzee, and, as I argue here, for other authors who are similarly positioned on the periphery of a dominant culture, such circumstances and strategies are still relevant. In this chapter, I address two novels – Samuel Selvon’s *Moses Ascending* (1975) and J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986) – that respond to the modernist question of authorship through the dramatization of the narrators’ struggle to write memoirs or narratives of their lives. The time between the publication of *Ulysses* in 1922 and Selvon’s and Coetzee’s novels is the era of decolonization. Selvon’s native Trinidad became independent from the British Empire in 1963 and Coetzee’s South Africa received its independence from Britain in 1934, though the country remained part of the Commonwealth until 1961. Furthermore, South Africa did not fully abolish apartheid, the

⁴ Quoted in Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee* (Cambridge UP, 2009), 24.

system of racial segregation that originated during Dutch colonization and was made an official government policy in 1948, until the country's first multi-racial free elections in 1994. Until then, one can argue that South Africa remained a colonized nation, not by the occupation by an outside country but through the continued implementation of a violent system of racial hierarchy, the values of which underlie the project of imperialism. I argue that the investigation of authorship in these two novels directly responds to the long process of decolonization and the emergence of postcolonial literature in the shadow of canonical British writings, a process that *Ulysses* also directly addresses. Furthermore, *Moses Ascending* and *Foe* are in different ways retellings of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a foundational literary text of British imperialism, having set the model for fiction that supports the colonial project.⁵ *Moses Ascending* follows Moses, a West Indian living in London during the late 1960s and early 1970s, as he struggles to write a memoir in which he adopts Crusoe as a model of authorship and uses antiquated English in the vein of Defoe's novel. Moses also emulates Crusoe by hiring a servant, a white man named Bob whom he renames Friday, so as to benefit further from his performance of genteel authorship. Whereas Selvon's novel indirectly responds to Defoe, Coetzee's *Foe* directly confronts the narrative production of Defoe's *Crusoe* and offers an alternative origin for the novel. *Foe* is narrated primarily from the perspective of Susan Barton, a castaway on

⁵ For example, Helen Tiffin writes, "Like William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe* was part of the process of 'fixing' relations between Europe and its 'others', of establishing patterns of reading alterity at the same time as it inscribed the 'fixity' of that alterity, naturalizing 'difference' within its own cognitive codes." See "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse," *Kunapipi* 9, no. 3 (1987): 23. Diana Loxley discusses how the fictional renewals of *Crusoe* provided a "model formula for the assimilation of the language of conquest, masculinity, supremacy, and authority and also of the supposedly inherent, eternal values of that [English] language." See *Problematic Shores: the Literature of Islands* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990), xi. In terms of the subject of retellings, it is also important to keep in mind that *Crusoe* can also be called a retelling of the memoirs of the Scottish castaway Alexander Selkirk. I thank Stacey Olster for calling this point to my attention. In line with my closing discussion of the *Odyssey* in the previous chapter, Defoe's novel also draws upon many source texts. Martin Green offers examples of such texts; along with Selkirk, he also includes the Sinbad story in *The Arabian Nights*, the Hagan story in the *Gudrunssaga*, and the Philoctetes story in the *Iliad*. See Green, *The Robinson Crusoe Story* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1990), 17-18.

Cruso's island, and includes the memoir that she writes after her rescue and return to London for the author Daniel Foe to use to write a novel about her experiences.

While critics have discussed the significance of postcolonial iterations of major works of the British canon such as *Crusoe*, my focus here is on the fact that both novels' narrators are writing texts that may or may not become the novels that we read.⁶ Selvon's Moses often refers to his memoirs and discusses his various strategies for its writing, and at times *Moses Ascending* moves towards collapsing the space between Moses's memoir and the novel itself, though the relationship between the memoirs and the novel remains ever ambiguous. In *Foe*, Susan Barton's memoirs are something of a failed project as she composes them for use by Foe rather than as part of an independent effort; within the time and space of *Foe* we never see her memoir transformed into a complete text. I argue that these two novels force the reader to engage with imagined writings that lie beyond the boundaries of the actual narratives and to question why these writings fail or remain not fully realized. This critical practice destabilizes both narrative and canonical structure by recognizing alternative narrative possibilities that have not yet been fully articulated and which may allow for the expression of marginalized histories and experiences.

⁶ For example, Chandrima Chakraborty argues that postcolonial retellings of canonical works enable "an interrogation and re-definition of the conceptual frames of the West to undo the long-lasting effects of ideational colonization and subjectification of postcolonial subjects." Such retellings can offer agency to marginal and oppressed peoples and can ultimately function as forms of reparation. See "Interrupting the Canon: Samuel Selvon's Postcolonial Revision of *Robinson Crusoe*," *ARIEL* (2003): 52. This conception of retellings in some part underlies my rationale for pairing *Moses Ascending* and *Foe*, as my argument is invested in how the texts reorient the Crusoe story from a decentered perspective, as the novels' protagonists are marginal figures whose powers of self-representation are impeded. Here I am drawing from a wealth of postcolonial criticism on the practice of retelling. For example, Elleke Boehmer writes, "For the once-colonized to interpret Homer or Shakespeare or Dante on their own terms meant staking a claim to European tradition from beyond its conventional boundaries. Take-over or appropriation was in its way a bold refusal of cultural dependency. It signified that the powerful paradigms represented by Europe's canonical texts were now mobilized in defense of what had once been seen as secondary, unorthodox, deviant, primitive." See *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, (Oxford UP, 1995), 205.

This uncertainty of production echoes my discussion of *Ulysses*, which highlights the temporal paradoxes of the implications that *Ulysses* is the novel that Stephen will eventually write. The protagonists of these three novels struggle to write novels, memoirs, and the narratives of their lives, and in the space and time of the texts their attempts at authorship remain in the “room of the infinite possibilities,” or the realm of alternative narrative paths. Yet as Stephen is mostly unable to write during the time of *Ulysses*, with the exception of a few short poetic verses that he recalls during the “Aeolus” section, the novel itself becomes the imagined end product of his future labors. In Coetzee and Selvon, the narrators do write, yet their texts remain always unfinished, a difference that suggests a perpetual deferral of their projects’ completion. The uncertain status of these characters’ not-yet-successful writings destabilizes narrative singularity, such that *Moses Ascending* and *Foe* are haunted by the possibility of the other, unfinished or incomplete texts. There is then an irresolvable gap between the unrealized texts and the novels that we read, yet this uncertainty is productive in that the unrealized texts retain a type of formal openness because they can never be fully solidified. This openness carries with it a type of political force, in that it gestures towards alternative possibilities and thus weakens any discourses based upon a single, linear narrative structure. I understand the nature of these unrealized writings as “shadow texts,” a term that I base on Gary Saul Morson’s concept of the “paraquel” or the “shadow song.”⁷ Calling the protagonists’ writings in *Moses Ascending* and *Foe* “shadow texts” refers not only to their penumbral status within the novels but also to the parallel between their shadowy form and the novels’ relationships with the original text, *Robinson Crusoe*. The crux of this relationship is then the question of why the characters’

⁷ Morson’s term refers to the literary genre of works such as *Moses Ascending* and *Foe* that are in some sense continuations of an original text, the example here being Defoe’s *Crusoe*. Morson is careful not to limit the form that such continuations can take; instead, Morson writes, “what is important is that there be more events, other events, ‘side’ events that could have happened.” See Morson, 151-153.

writings fail within the novels, and what this failure means for an understanding of the novels' relationship to *Crusoe*. Whereas *Ulysses*'s transformation of Homer's *Odyssey* is ultimately beneficial to Joyce's expression of Irish everyday life, in Selvon and Coetzee the narrators are hindered by their attempts to emulate Defoe's canonical text. I argue that the failure of the protagonists' writings signals the paradoxical nature of the struggle for agency and full expression of marginal histories within dominant discourses, in that their inclusion into the dominant will inevitably alter their minor status.⁸ Thus, *Moses Ascending* and *Foe* confront the problem of the minor voice by relegating the "true" texts of the protagonists' lives to an othered space and time, a counterfactual realm, beyond the central narrative. The novels' structure is centered on the possibilities of these absent texts and the political force of their open form and temporality.

Yet *Moses Ascending* and *Foe* hold vastly different places in the literary canon, and consequently their pairing offers a contrast in orientation and approach to the minor. Currently out of print, Selvon's *Moses Ascending* has received little critical attention; the work that Selvon is most known for is his 1956 novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, to which *Moses Ascending* is ostensibly a sequel. In fact, Selvon's literary reputation almost completely derives from the earlier novel's use of West Caribbean dialect.⁹ In the nineteen years between the publication of

⁸ In my theorization of the status of the minor within a major discourse, I am implicitly engaging with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a "minor literature." Deleuze and Guattari state that a minor literature has three major characteristics: it is a language written by a minority within a major language (which they refer to as a "deterritorialization of language"); it is always political; and that it takes on a collective value. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16-18. While Deleuze and Guattari are invested in the power of the minor to bring about revolutionary change within a major discourse, here I am interested in the power of the minor to actively resist any participation in a major discourse, as both novels I discuss intentionally defer the expression of the narrator's full consciousness to a future time.

⁹ Kenneth Ramchand calls the novel's narrative voice "a linguistic achievement," and he discusses the range and flexibility of the narration to shift vocabularies, grammars, and syntaxes as the creation of a "modified dialect which contains and expresses the sensibility of a whole society [of native British and immigrants alike]." See Kenneth

The Lonely Londoners and *Moses Ascending*, Selvon became conscious of his literary identity as an author whose writings are known for a creolization of English.¹⁰ Thus, in *Moses Ascending* there is more than irony at work in the fact that Moses chooses to write his memoirs in an outdated and clichéd style of standard English reminiscent of *Robinson Crusoe*.

While Selvon writes from the position of a minority outsider, Coetzee's *Foe* is written for a global audience. Coetzee has long been recognized as a major author of literature in English, and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. Yet Coetzee has commented that "the white writer in South Africa is in an impossible position,"¹¹ and in 1987 he described this position of the South African white man, seated on a "lonely throne," as one of "veiled unfreedom."¹² Here Coetzee suggests that he writes both from a position of dominance, hence he is partially complicit in the system of apartheid that he criticizes, and a position of relative disempowerment, because his authority is a result of a racist system of oppression. In another Attwell interview, Coetzee describes an essay about a white South African author as one who "[writes] without authority."¹³ While Coetzee's own international success may contradict this statement, I agree with Attwell's argument that Coetzee positions himself as a writer working from "semimarginality."¹⁴ This sense of semimarginality permeates *Foe*'s investigation of authorship and agency. Many critics have acknowledged that in *Foe* Coetzee recognizes the limits of his ability to write for an othered figure through the novel's treatment of Friday,

Ramchand, introduction to *The Lonely Londoners*, by Samuel Selvon (New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1985), 13.

¹⁰ See Sam Selvon's "Preface" to *Moses Migrating* (Boulder, Colorado: Three Continents Press, 1992) in which he discusses his own literary reputation.

¹¹ Quoted in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1999), 195. See also J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988), 11.

¹² J. M. Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, 97.

¹³ J. M. Coetzee, "Retrospect: Interview," in *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, 392.

¹⁴ See David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 111-12.

Cruso's slave.¹⁵ Yet instead of associating himself with the figure of Foe, the novel's dominant author, Coetzee has explained that his sympathies lie with Susan Barton, "Foe's foe, the unsuccessful author."¹⁶ It is the discursive authority of the dominant white male author figure that both novels investigate and challenge in their retellings of *Robinson Crusoe*, a text that inaugurates such a trope, through narrators who fail at their writing projects. Yet these narrators' failures speak to the novelists' acknowledgement of their marginal positions within the central canon and point to the possibilities of future writings as potential narratives of full expression. While the retellings of *Crusoe* by Selvon and Coetzee gain prestige through their affiliation with the canonical text, their transtextual relationship challenges the singularity of Defoe's novel by perpetuating the possibilities of alternative narratives whose exclusion reveals the values that shape the literary canon.

Because Selvon and Coetzee are active in the second half of the twentieth century, their work has not typically been called modernist. For example, Selvon has been discussed in terms of a realist portrayal of West Caribbean life, and critics have often focused on the dialectical style of his play with language.¹⁷ In contrast, the categorization of Coetzee has been much more widely contested. Some have called him a postmodernist whose works lack a political aim.¹⁸

¹⁵ In the novel, Friday's tongue has been cut out (a change that Coetzee makes to the original narrative), a wounding that Susan Barton refers to as a "secret" and which comes to stand for his unknown history. It will be impossible to know the truth of Friday's story, Susan says, until "by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday." J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 118. All other references to this text will be to this edition and will include page numbers.

¹⁶ Quoted in Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 112.

¹⁷ For example, Chandrima Chakraborty argues that the "use of creoles, patois, and Black English" in the narration of *Moses Ascending* "resists and decenters the domination of the 'Queen's English' and captures the rhythm, vocabulary, and syntax of island 'dialect.'" Chakraborty, 65.

¹⁸ Paul Rich accuses Coetzee of writing postmodern literature that is "destined to remain the vehicle for expressing the cultural and political dilemmas of a privileged class of white artists and intellectuals" and which dooms "literary postmodernism in a postcolonial context [such] as South Africa ... [to] a moral dead end." See "Tradition and Revolt in South African Fiction: The Novels of Andre Brink, Nadine Gordimer, and J. M. Coetzee," *Journal of South African Studies* 9 (1982): 73; and "Apartheid and the Decline of the Civilization Idea: An Essay on Nadine

Others, such as David Attwell and Derek Attridge, see him as a “late modernist,” a label that Coetzee himself has accepted.¹⁹ Recently, Coetzee has been discussed as employing modernist strategies; in *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel*, David James argues that Coetzee revives the modernist aesthetic of minimalism (via Ford Madox Ford and Samuel Beckett) in order to “facilitate his scrutiny of the interior, psychological dimensions of imperialist violence.”²⁰ In this chapter, I suggest that Coetzee and Selvon engage with modernist counterfactual time so as to interrogate the cultural and political modes of oppression that hinder the full expression of marginalized individual experience. In doing so, they take part in the larger modernist conversation about what it takes to be an author. Along with Joyce, these novels are also in dialogue with Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). Woolf’s discussion of the materialist underpinnings of authorship – the privacy of a room and money – calls attention to the social inequalities that shape the literary canon. Selvon and Coetzee dramatize a Woolfian scene of writing, as Moses and Barton both write in an attic room with a view, and Susan Barton benefits in particular as an author from the occupation of this charged space. These two novels utilize and respond to modernist tropes and temporal strategies so as to imagine against the oppression of history, which is shaped by imperial violence, and to examine the material and social requirements for the future expression of marginalized experience.

Gordimer's *July People* and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*," *Research in African Literatures* 15 (1984): 389.

¹⁹ Attridge calls Coetzee a “late modernist” and writes, Coetzee “does not merely employ but extends and revitalizes modernist practices, and in so doing develops a mode of writing that allows the attentive reader to live through the pressures and possibilities, and also the limits, of political engagement.” See *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 6. Jane Poyner notes that Coetzee accepts Attwell’s label as “late-modernist” rather than postmodernist. See *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 10.

²⁰ David James, *Modernist Futures*, 101.

Moses Ascending

An ambiguity of intertextual relations marks *Moses Ascending* in a variety of ways: in the novel's correspondence to *Robinson Crusoe*, the uncertain relationship between Moses's memoir and Selvon's novel, and finally, the novel's relations with other works by Selvon. *The Lonely Londoners*, the novel to which *Moses Ascending* is a sequel, is told in the third person and chronicles the expectations and disappointments of immigrants to Britain. Its loosely structured narrative, composed of threads that follow various characters' daily lives in London, is held together by the consciousness of the more seasoned immigrant and London resident, the novel's central protagonist, Moses Aloetta. By the end of the novel, Moses has grown tired of shepherding new arrivals to London, and he wonders about the possibility of true social change that could offer upward mobility: "Lock [sic] up in that small room, with London and life on the outside, he used to lay there on the bed, thinking how to stop all of this crap, how to put a spoke in the wheel, to make things different."²¹ Moses associates his hope for the alteration of society with authorship, as he sees literary success as the "spoke in the wheel," offering an accelerated path to economic mobility. By the novel's close, Moses is "wondering if he could ever write a book like that, what everybody could buy."²² In *Moses Ascending*, Moses hints that this aspiration may have been achieved through the composition of *The Lonely Londoners*. As he recalls his long friendship with Galahad, a character who appears in both novels, Moses thinks, "I have chronicled those colourful days in another tome."²³ This statement's implication that Moses is both author and character lends him a status of residing both inside and outside of the

²¹ Samuel Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1985), 140.

²² Moses's dream of becoming a successful author is prompted by a meeting with his friend Daniel, who has recently returned from France with reports that "all kinds of fellards writing books what turned out to be best-sellers... One day you sweating in the factory and the next day all the newspapers have your name and photo saying how you are a new literary giant." Ibid., 126.

²³ Samuel Selvon, *Moses Ascending* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1975), 44. All other references to this text will be to this edition and will include page numbers.

texts. The shift from *The Lonely Londoners*' third-person narrative voice to the first-person narration of *Moses Ascending*, which I read as indicating the maturation of his authority over the act of narration, further complicates the origin and production of the novels as the distance between the teller of the tale and the tale itself collapses.²⁴

This uncertainty continues in Selvon's Preface to the third novel in *The Lonely Londoners* trilogy, *Moses Migrating* (1991). In "A Special Preface by Moses Aloetta Esq.," signed "M.S./S.S.," Selvon writes of the over-determined relationship between himself and Moses, and finally states that "Somewhere between the actuality and the dreamworld of fiction the truth about Moses – the truth about a whitewashed Black man torn apart by the circumstances of living in a white society – exists."²⁵ Here Selvon offers a portrait of Moses as a man whose unified sense of self has been shattered by the effort of surviving in a world that others him. What is significant here is Selvon's assertion that the "truth about Moses" resides in a type of counterfactual space, between reality and fiction. The narrative that could convey this truth can exist only in this imagined space of possibilities. Each novel in the Moses trilogy is then a partial failure at the unification and full expression of Moses's consciousness, yet the novels' play with the existence of other texts by Moses "outside" the narratives hints at the possibility of success in the future. The promise of future possibilities may be why Selvon chose to return to the narrative of Moses, begun in *The Lonely Londoners*, and resume it almost two decades later in *Moses Ascending*.²⁶ The unfinished nature of the trilogy's narratives gestures towards their

²⁴ The development of authority through a shift in point of view from third person to first person recalls the well-known ending of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). In the last chapter of Joyce's novel, the point of view shifts from third-person to first person from the perspective of Stephen Dedalus; this shift has often been read as the development of Stephen as an artist via the emergence of his own narrative voice. I suggest that Selvon is calling upon this particular aesthetic shift by Joyce in the structuring of his Moses trilogy.

²⁵ "Preface," *Moses Migrating*, xii-xiii.

²⁶ This choice suggests that there is something productive for Selvon as author in the openness of his novels' counterfactual time; it allows him to return to texts and continue them at any point in the future.

completion in an unknown future time, a quality accentuated by the novels' lack of full narrative closure. For example, at the end of *Moses Ascending*, Moses says that he "may have an epilogue up [his] sleeve" (140). Perhaps this epilogue will offer a way to communicate the full truth of his experiences, yet in the space and time of the novel this is not yet possible. Within *Moses Ascending*, Moses's attempts to write his memoirs are unsuccessful because, in his imitation of Robinson Crusoe, he models himself and his writings on the ideals constructed by white society. Thus, the novel reveals the consequences of being, as Selvon articulates it, "whitewashed," and suggests the possibilities of truthful expression in future writings.

In many ways, *Moses Ascending* is a novel about the questions Moses faces in his attempts to write – of what kind of author he wants to be, what kind of book he wants to write, and how invested his work should be in the political movements occurring around him, namely debates over Britain's immigration policies and the Black Power movement that was gaining strength in Great Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁷ His decision to write is motivated by his purchase of a house in the Shepard's Bush neighborhood of London, for he believes that the acquisition of property confers upon him a stature necessary for authorship.²⁸ His ability to purchase this house also signals, as Selvon points out, the economic advancement of immigrants

²⁷ The changes in Britain's immigration laws between the time of *The Lonely Londoners* and *Moses Ascending* are central to understanding the two novels. At the time of *The Lonely Londoners*' publication, Britain had an open immigration policy via the 1948 British Nationality Act that gave British citizenship to all people living in Commonwealth countries, and full rights of entry and settlement in Britain. However, by the 1970s, when *Moses Ascending* was published, Britain had imposed a series of increasingly stringent immigration regulations, as seen in the British Nationality Acts of 1962 and 1968 and the Immigration Act of 1971. These restrictions, Sutton and Makiesky write, "made Britain's political stance on race relations clear and served to deflect the direction of outflow from the West Indies toward the United States, which liberalized its immigration policies in 1965." See "Migration and West Indian Racial and Ethnic Consciousness," in *Migration and Development: Implications for Ethnic Identity and Political Conflict*, ed. H. I. Safa and B. M. Dutoit (Paris: Mouton Publishers, The Hague, 1975), 120.

²⁸ Moses's fixation with property may also influence his conception of authorship, in that the publication of his work would transform his text into a type of intellectual property via copyright laws. For discussions of copyright and literature, see Paul K. Saint-Amour, *The Copyrights: Intellectual Property and the Literary Imagination* (Cornell UP), 2003; and *Modernism and Copyright*, ed. by Paul K. Saint-Amour (Oxford UP), 2010. Furthermore, as Maria Grazia Sindoni notes, foregrounding the issue of "property" at the very beginning of the novel "echoes one of the best known Caribbean novels, Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*." See *Creolizing Culture: A Study on Sam Selvon's Work* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2006), 222.

after several decades of residence in Britain.²⁹ The authorial identity Moses works to construct is intimately tied to the physical space he occupies. In an affirmation of his association of upward mobility with writing, Moses explains his choice of rooms: “Having lived below the surface of the world all my life I ensconced myself in the highest flat in the house: if it had an attic I might of even gone higher still” (3). This space appeals to Moses because it makes him visible, having moved up from “below the surface of the world,” and offers him mastery over the view from his window. Yet his rooms are also a space of retreat and perhaps isolation, for “being at the top of all them stairs was a deterrent to idlers and hustlers calling too frequently” (3-4). In this space, Moses feels that he is the “Master of the house” (4), as he feels in control of the tenants who live below him.³⁰ In this space of privacy and authority, one that recalls Woolf’s description of the physical space necessary for writing, Moses begins to cultivate his authorial persona. He tells his friend Galahad, ““literary masterpieces have been written in garrets by candlelight, by men who shut themselves away from the distractions of the world”” (43).

Moses begins to reconstruct this model of authorship by first furnishing the space with markers of eighteenth-century gentility: “Chippendale furniture and Wedgwood crockery,” though Moses notes that these were purchased “third-hand” (33). Moses’s conscious imitation of dominant cultural codes is undercut by the ways in which his imitation falls short of the model.

Not only are the pieces of eighteenth-century furniture most likely cheap copies, but his authority

²⁹ Selvon comments that *Moses Ascending* “is a way of registering progress in the social situation of the West Indians in London, both personal economic progress within the West Indian community or the society at large, and progress in the development of understanding between the groups and races.” See Michel Fabre, “Samuel Selvon: Interviews and Conversations,” in *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*, ed. Susheila Nasta (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1988), 72.

³⁰ Chakraborty notes the joy of ownership in *Moses Ascending* and *Robinson Crusoe*. See Chakraborty, 58. Roydon Salick argues that Moses’s construction of a bourgeois social identity isolates him from his community of immigrants: “Somewhat reified by his novel bourgeois station, his new position becomes a weapon of sorts, distancing him from his fellow blacks, and allowing him the gleeful privilege of shutting the door in their faces. This newfangled snobbery will necessitate the cutting of ties with those he considers beneath him, leaving him in his willful ignorance essentially alone.” See *The Novels of Samuel Selvon: a Critical Study* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 134.

as a landlord is undermined by his lack of control over the activities occurring in his house. Moses eventually discovers an illegal immigration ring being operated by his Pakistani tenants, and instead of being able to shut down their operations, Moses is forced into participation. His basement also becomes the center of operations of the Black Power movement, as the leaders organize marches and protests that literally emerge out of Moses's house. The Black Power movement gained strength in the 1960s in response to the racist legislation passed by the government, and while such laws tended to isolate immigrant populations, the increasing visibility of such movements in society speaks to their growing power and influence and the creation of a space for black cultural expression.³¹ While these protest movements are implicitly criticized in the novel through the depiction of their leaders' corruption and the incohesion of their messages, they stand as examples of somewhat successful efforts to challenge the oppression of immigrants in Britain.³² Yet Moses's involvement in these movements is coerced rather than consciously chosen, as he tries instead to maintain the façade of white power that he believes will facilitate class change for him through the composition of his life writings, a model which is ultimately impossible for him since there is no middle- or upper-class in Britain at this time that is not of European descent. In this way, Selvon implicitly criticizes the Woolfian

³¹ Stuart Hall uses the term "colony society" to describe this dynamic. He writes, "the foundation of *colony society* meant the growth of internal cultural cohesiveness and solidarity within the ranks of the black population inside the corporate boundaries of the ghetto: the winning away of cultural space in with an alternative black social life could flourish." See Stuart Hall, et al, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London, Macmillan, 1978), 350.

³² Salick calls the immigration ring and the Black Power headquarters the "march of blacks" which moves in and out of Moses's house, and notes that despite the flaws of these movements, they do hold "even if only limited, hope and promise for the oppressed and enslaved." Salick, 134. Maria Grazia Sindoni notes that in *Moses Ascending* such movements are more visible and empowering than in *The Lonely Londoners*: "Whereas in *The Lonely Londoners* the Caribbean community was intent in preserving itself purely in physical or psychological terms, in *Moses Ascending*, the same community shows multi-layered perspectives and its life is enriched by cultural practices and political projects that seem less prone to conformity as they were in the previous novel." See Sindoni, 216.

model of authorship for its isolation, for the novel suggests that Moses can only become a writer through an immersion into his surroundings rather than through a retreat.

The principal way in which Moses attempts to construct an authorial persona in imitation of Crusoe is through the hiring of a servant: “my man Friday, a white immigrant name Bob from somewhere in the Midlands” (4).³³ Moses’s description of his relationship with his Friday clearly echoes Defoe’s novel in many ways. Moses feels an instinctive urge to hire Bob, an urge that supports a sense of racial superiority, for as Moses says, “My blood take him because he was a good worker, young and strong” (4). In Defoe, Crusoe’s dominance over Friday is depicted as natural and permanent, for Friday is a willing slave, having submitted himself by putting Crusoe’s foot on his head.³⁴ Moses’s depiction of his relationship with Bob, which he describes as that of “Master and Servant” (5), also echoes that of Crusoe and Friday in the meticulous description of the duties that Bob performs around the house, which Moses portrays as a beneficial, educational experience: “He was a willing worker, eager to learn the ways of the Black man. In no time at all he learn how to cook peas and rice and to make a beef stew” (4). Likewise, in Defoe’s novel Crusoe takes on the duties of educating Friday, teaching him to speak and about the Bible.³⁵ Again, Moses imitates Crusoe’s actions in the relationship he cultivates with Bob; Moses concludes his description of his choice to take on Bob by saying, “I decided to teach him the Bible when I could make the time” (5), and after he finds out that Bob is illiterate, Moses decides to teach him to read and write.

³³ As Chandrima Chakraborty notes, “the discovery of Bob marks the moment of the text’s most overt ideological engagement with Defoe’s text.” Chakraborty, 57.

³⁴ In Defoe, the passage is as follows: “At last he lays his Head flat upon the Ground, close to my Foot, and sets my other Foot upon his Head, as he had done before; and after this, made all the Signs to me of Subjection, Servitude, and Submission imaginable, to let me know, how he would serve me as long as he liv’d.” See Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) ed. by Evan R. Davis (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Editions, 2010), 220.

³⁵ The first words Friday learns are his own name, “Friday,” for the day that Crusoe saved him, and “Master,” which stands as Crusoe’s name to him, thus locking them into a Master-slave relationship. In regards to Crusoe’s teaching of Christianity, Crusoe states, “From these things, I began to instruct him in the Knowledge of the true God.” *Ibid.*, 229.

The role reversal at work between Moses and Bob, with the black man as master and urban property owner and the white man as servant and migrant from the country, has obvious subversive potential. However, Moses ultimately is not empowered by his positioning, and the irony of their relationship becomes a critique of the binary power structures that inform the colonial encounter encapsulated in *Crusoe*. The faith Moses holds in the position of master results in the impossible wish for the erasure of his racial identity, for he desires a way “to walk in black as midnight and emerge as pure and white as the driven snow” (16). The novel shows this wish to be a dangerously naïve one through the problems he confronts in his attempts at being a master and through the criticisms by other characters of Moses’s admiration of the Crusoe persona. Moses’s authority over Bob crumbles over the course of the novel, as Bob begins to resist the role of the slave imposed on him, refusing to follow Moses’s “commands,” and later it becomes obvious that Bob’s submission to Moses is a tactic to live rent-free. Here the rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe* destabilizes the subject position of the master and challenges the category of the slave, suggesting instead a need for a hybrid sense of postcolonial identity.³⁶ As John Tieme suggests, Moses cannot occupy either the role of Crusoe or the role of Friday because he is neither.³⁷ It is this hybrid sensibility that might be the subject of the novel’s “shadow text,” the not-yet-written narrative of Moses’s true self.

Ultimately, Moses does not feel secure in his occupation of the role of master, as occasionally the excessive confidence of his narration breaks to reveal his fears of downward

³⁶ As Helen Tiffin writes, “Post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridized, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity. Decolonization is process, not arrival; it invokes an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them; between European or British discourses and their post-colonial dis/mantling.” 17.

³⁷ John Tieme argues that *Moses Ascending* “displaces the framework offered by the Friday-Crusoe opposition from its center. What emerges is that there is no way in which Moses can enter into Crusoe's shoes, but he is equally incapable of sustaining the role of Friday. He is a man between worlds, a hybrid subject with aspirations towards an English identity that he is unable to fulfill and vestigial loyalties to his Caribbean roots that he is unable to discard.” *Postcolonial Con-texts: Writing Back to the Canon* (London: Continuum, 2001), 60.

mobility. For example, during a description of a Black Power rally at which he is arrested, Moses's use of elevated language to construct himself as a figure of power fails him. When a policeman grabs him, he remarks that "[i]f I had had time I would of said, 'Unhand me, knave,' but instead I say, ' Let me go man, I ain't done nothing'" (36). Under duress, Moses is not able to compose a response in the lofty and antiquated English that he values, and instead he returns to the creolized English that is his natural speech. At a time when his freedom is endangered, his pretense to linguistic virtuosity and his assured, ostentatious tone deflates as he openly identifies as an oppressed immigrant. When recalling the fear a black man feels when a policeman knocks on his door, he says, "I don't know if I can describe it properly, not being a man of words, but I had a kind of sad feeling that all black people was doomed to suffer, that we would never make any headway in Brit'n" (35). This admission of political awareness builds to an association of the plight of immigrants in Britain with the transportation of slaves from Africa to the Caribbean, as his time in the jail cell reminds him of stories he has read about slave rebellions aboard ships. In a moment of potential insubordination that clashes with his previous adherence to the dynamic of the dominant master and subversive slave, Moses wonders, "if I play dead if they would jettison me in the Thames as we passing, and I could make my escape" (37). However, here Moses begins to draw again from the language and clichés he has learned from reading literature, and the hesitation of the previous passage, in which he doubts his ability as a writer and a "man of words" to describe the true experience of the immigrant, disappears. Yet it is the honesty of this hesitation that holds the potential for truth-telling and that suggests what Moses may be able to write in the future once he fully grasps the effects of colonialism on his consciousness.

The style and subject of the memoir on which Moses is currently working functions as a contrast to what should be the subject and style of this future text. The conventions to which

Moses attempts to adhere in his memoirs indicate his understanding that one must write in order to participate successfully in a dominant discourse. The disparity between the style of writing that he adopts and the subject matter portrayed is then a criticism of the shaping principles of the literary canon. However, since we do not have access to Moses's official memoir, our knowledge of it comes only from how Moses describes it in his "unofficial" memoir, the novel. When speaking about his memoir, Moses occasionally boasts about his use of the Queen's English in its composition,³⁸ while his narration of *Moses Ascending* blends languages as he shifts between high and low linguistic registers and cultural references. The "pure" language in which Moses writes his memoir becomes one part of the novel's narrative voice as it mixes with popular and formal phraseology of English and West-Indian culture, resulting in what Maureen Warner-Lewis calls a "linguistic extravaganza" that reveals an uneven process of cultural assimilation.³⁹ For Moses's choice to write in Standard English is his attempt to cultivate an image of himself as an Old World man of arts and leisure and to benefit from the cultural prestige afforded such a figure. He continually looks back to the model of an eighteenth-century gentleman and such diction then surfaces in his narration. For example, Moses often pauses to address the reader, often as "dear R." or "kind R.", a device that Selvon himself admitted is an ironic reference to the novels of Henry Fielding.⁴⁰ The irony of this device, as Selvon explains, emerges through the disparity between Moses's adoption of the role of narrator of a traditional British novel and his obvious exclusion from such a tradition. While Clement Wyke reads

³⁸ In response to criticisms of his writings from another character, Moses says that she has been "hurling contempt and defamation on my usage of the Queen's language, which had always been my forte, as I have tried to show." 105.

³⁹ Warner-Lewis argues that "This linguistic hybridization and extravaganza will betray and underscore the marginal status of the migrant, the outsider, the fluctuations attendant on his tenuous social and economic position, and the psychological confusions bred by his internalized upward class mobility." See "Samuel Selvon's Linguistic Extravaganza: *Moses Ascending*," *Caribbean Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (December, 1982): 61.

⁴⁰ Selvon claims that "When Moses says 'dear R' he means the reader and starts addressing the reader in the good old English tradition of Fielding and the 18th century British novel. I am doing it and it is part of the 'great English tradition'; as a result the use of it is ironic." See Fabre, 72.

Moses's addresses to the reader as motivated by resentment,⁴¹ a reading that conflates Moses with Selvon's motivations, I argue that Moses is attempting to convince himself that he does belong in such a tradition, which he also tries to prove to his reader by including multiple literary allusions to authors such as Dickens, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth. However, by the end of the novel he realizes his exclusion and understands that his future writing project must engage with the ideologies that have structured his life.

Before Moses comes to such a realization, his ideal of black authorship is to write in flawless English so that his writings could pass for those of a canonical author. Moses even wonders whether a black man could have written "The Ladder of St. Augustine," by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a poem that considers the possibilities for human achievement in spite of sin.⁴² Moses's speculation about this poem's authorship is potentially subversive as his question undermines the authority of Longfellow and reorients the poem to speak to the struggles of repressed minorities. Yet until the novel's close, Moses does not seem fully conscious of the subversive potential of black authorship, as here his question is more concerned with the work of a black author resembling that of Longfellow, an author already quite out of fashion, rather than presenting an alternative to the literary canon. In line with this train of thought, Moses designs his writing project as a retreat from political engagement. After Moses is released from jail, his friend Galahad comes to visit and confronts him about his work, for as a member of the Black Power party Galahad wants Moses to write about the rally and his experiences in prison. Moses refuses, and offers a definition of the memoir genre that is ignorant of its ideological

⁴¹ Wyke argues that Moses's tone of addressing the reader suggests "that the anger of past racial displacement still burns beneath the outward conciliatory tone... The obvious over-defensiveness and special pleading make his dramatic reversal of roles with the white man an ironic commentary on the social condescension and self-righteousness encountered in Britain." See *Sam Selvon's Dialectical Style and Fictional Strategy* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991), 110-111.

⁴² Moses thinks, "It is not beyond speculation to imagine that it might well of been a black man who wrote those immortal words: '... but they, while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night,'" 8.

implications: “‘Memoirs are personal and intimate... They don’t have to be topical nor deal with any social problems’”⁴³ (42). Moses’s understanding of this literary genre as foreign to his own cultural tradition clearly echoes Crusoe’s act of keeping a journal, and Moses seems completely unconscious of the ideological heft of the text upon which he is modeling his writings.⁴⁴ Instead, he sees his writings, and those of Crusoe, as private acts, as this privacy offers a way to avoid the public sphere in which the texts circulate after publication. Shaken from Galahad’s attack on his work, Moses retreats to his attic space and comforts himself with the physicality of his writings: “I turn the pages of my manuscript blindly, just to feel the parchment and remind myself that there are finer things in life besides black people” (44). Here the word “blindly” marks Moses’s effort to avoid visibly identifying with others of his race and also speaks to his ignorance of black literature. During his argument with Galahad, Moses admits to not knowing the work of George Lamming and Andrew Salkey, two prominent Caribbean authors. Galahad tells Moses that these writers are part of a tradition of “Black Literature” that includes “‘writers who write some powerful books what making the whole world realize our existence and our struggle’” (43). Moses’s aim is to not participate in this discourse but rather in the discourse of canonical British writings. Yet by the end of the novel, Moses comes to reject this goal and his future work is aimed toward this tradition, of which *Moses Ascending* is itself a part.⁴⁵

⁴³ As Margaret Paul Joseph comments, the memoir is a “European literary genre that focuses on the self.” See *Caliban in Exile: The Outsider in Caribbean Fiction* (Westport: Greenwood, 1992), 88.

⁴⁴ Salick points out that Moses does not clearly understand the generic conventions of a memoir, as he lacks the “necessary familiarity with and experience of literary precedents to place himself in an assured, confident position to produce something worth reading. His paranoid emphasis on secrecy and on a mainly centripetal objective strongly suggest that Moses is in effect engaged in writing a diary and not his memoirs. Unaware of the difference between the two literary forms, Moses, understandably, has endless doubts, not about the legitimacy of what he is engaged in, but about its very nature.” See Salick, 134-5.

⁴⁵ Chakraborty writes, “Moses's ignorance of Black 'literature' brings to the reader's attention the urgent need to expand the canon of English literature through the inclusion and institutionalization of regional and national literatures. Presenting Moses' inability to question the centrality and authority of the English canon and his desire to gain recognition in Western literary circles, Selvon's novel urges postcolonial writers (like Moses) to interrogate and interrupt the English canon and proclaim the authority of ‘Caribbean Voices.’” 66.

As part of his movement away from his original memoir and towards his future writing project, Moses tries various strategies to make his work more invested in his surroundings. First, he emulates the work of a reporter, in an effort to perhaps recognize himself in the lives of others. He tries interviewing subjects, such as his Pakistani tenants, and then he mingles in crowds as an observer. The subject of his memoir slowly begins to open up from an intensely limited, private account to a potentially wider story of the immigrant experience, as Moses recognizes that there are multiple narrative possibilities surrounding him. Within the world of *Moses Ascending*, there are alternative discourses that are aimed at portraying a truthful account of the migrant experience, in particular, Black Power newspapers, which Galahad mentions are opposed to the English papers' "contorted views of the scene" (13). Ultimately, the novel's recognition of these alternative narrative discourses and possibilities points back at itself and the question of its own origin and production, for it is part of Galahad's tradition of "Black Literature" as it succeeds in capturing a cultural and linguistic hybridity where Moses's memoirs do not. This hybridity extends to the novel's narrative structure and temporality, for the reader is made to imagine Moses's attempted memoir that lies beyond the narrative of the novel and question whether Moses's future memoir is the novel itself.

While I have discussed the many problems of Moses's approach to his memoir, there is a productive ambiguity at work in the relationship between the memoir and *Moses Ascending*. Because his memoir is never excerpted, it retains an openness and formal malleability in that the project may be shifting and changing in ways that Moses does not reveal within the novel and that may eventually produce the novel itself. This reimagining of the novel's potential production within its own space and time unsettles narrative singularity in a gesture that speaks to the challenges the novel presents to the hegemonic narrative of *Crusoe*. While Moses's

memoir is shown to be problematic because of his attempted adoption of Crusoe's subject position, the evolution from its initial form to the novel itself is left unrecorded, as it seems to happen over the course of the book. This uncertainty suggests the development of a more active resistance to the ideologies encapsulated in *Crusoe* on the part of Moses as well as to an unchanging repetition of its narrative. By the end of the novel, Moses is ready to overturn the white master-black servant dialectic that has been reinstated through Bob's recent acquisition of the attic apartment and Moses's return to the basement. Moses closes the novel with a final comment on how his memoir might be misread, once it becomes part of the public sphere, and reveals his plan for unsettling Bob's new position of authority by exposing his infidelity to his wife, Jeannie:

One final word. It occurs to me that some black power militants might chose to misconstrue my Memoirs for their own purposes, and put the following moral to defame me, to wit: that after the ballad and the episode, it is the white man who ends up Upstairs and the black man who ends up Downstairs.

But I have an epilogue up my sleeve. For old time's sake Robert still knocks one with Brenda on and off. What I plot to do is to go up top, and not only inform Jeannie of his infidelity, but arrange for the both of we to catch Master Robert in *flagrento delicto*, when I will fling down the gauntlet. (139-40)

At some point over the course of the novel, Moses has acquired a critical perspective on his memoir, most likely through developing an understanding of the Black Power movement. As a result, he now sees how his memoir cannot remain a "personal or intimate" document that does not engage with "social problems," as he described it earlier to Galahad. Instead, he understands the problems of any adherence to the binary power relations encapsulated by *Crusoe*, whether it is himself in the position of the master or Bob, and is now actively engaged in disrupting the model, for it is unclear whether Moses wants to return to the attic space or have no one occupy it.

Moses's reference to his plan to unsettle Bob's position of authority as an "epilogue" blurs the distinction between action and authorship, and points to the possibility of political

engagement through the completion of this future text. It is unclear what narrative form this epilogue will take and what text it will be an addendum to, the private memoir or the novel itself. Either way, the possibility of the epilogue unsettles any narrative closure of Moses's life story. This future writing project, which will critically intervene in the ideological models that have structured Moses's consciousness, becomes the goal of Selvon's work in black literature, yet at this point it remains a shadow narrative that casts the possibility of ethical and political justice and the full expression of a marginal voice. Furthermore, the possibility of an epilogue continues the practice of narrative continuation and augmentation that is already at work in *Moses Ascending's* relationship to Selvon's previous novels and to *Robinson Crusoe*. This practice recalls Joyce's development as an author through the story of Stephen Dedalus over the course of several works (from his first novel, *Stephen Hero*, through *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*), and Joyce's incorporation of retellings, continuations, and precursor texts of the *Odyssey*, as discussed at the end of Chapter One. Through his open-ended novels of the developing artist, Selvon actively draws upon and responds to this modernist model of counterfactual artistic creation and continuation so as to imagine against dominant narratives and historical inequalities. Selvon turns to this modernist practice, which questions the creative and material requirements for authorship, in the effort to document the struggles of establishing a literary tradition for Caribbean migrants in a postcolonial world. *Moses Ascending* projects the possibilities of alternative narrative practices, in the composition of Moses's memoir that may or may not become the novel itself and in the as-yet-unwritten epilogue, to show how colonialist narratives such as *Crusoe* have marked the postcolonial consciousness. Although the complete expression of these alternative narratives is not yet possible, their shadowy presence conveys the

potential of future writings that will interrupt colonialist discourse and offer full agency to the voice of the marginal.

Foe

Whereas the proliferation of actual and imagined narratives within *Moses Ascending* destabilizes the singular origins of narrative production, J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) enters the world of the writing of *Robinson Crusoe* and offers an alternative origin for Defoe's novel. I argue that *Foe*'s challenge to this dominant text opens up a counterfactual space of narrative possibilities in which alternative histories can be expressed. A common accusation against Coetzee is that his work lacks a political and ethical aim because it does not directly engage with the cultural and political realities of South Africa.⁴⁶ There is, however, a political thrust to Coetzee's refusal of strict verisimilitude, as he has explained that he constructs his work so as to rival rather than mimetically represent history. He understands his work as a realm in which to imagine freely other possibilities to history, and this counterfactual imagining exposes and interrogates the ideology of historical discourse. Coetzee's novels then refigure and transform the possibilities of history.⁴⁷

In *Foe*, Coetzee expands his aim of rivaling historical narrative to include literary history. What emerges out of this confrontation with Defoe is a novel that engages in the politics of the discursive scene of writing. The structure of *Foe*'s narrative develops the possibility of a full and complete voice of the novel's narrator, Susan Barton. Composed of four parts, the novel begins with excerpts from Barton's memoirs. The text of this section is included within

⁴⁶ See footnote #18 for an example of such a reading.

⁴⁷ Other Coetzee novels relevant to my argument here may include: *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), which imagines a civil war in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s, and *Disgrace* (1999), about post-apartheid South Africa.

quotation marks, which raises the question of the novel's compiler and emphasizes that Barton is composing her memoirs with an intended recipient, Foe, in mind. The novel's second section provides a record of Barton's letters to Foe, most of which are not received because Foe is evading creditors. In the compilation of these unread letters, Barton's voice increases in frustration over Foe's failure to respond. In the third section, the novel shifts into a first-person narration of Barton's relationship with Foe and her efforts to maintain control over her life story. Yet Susan's inability ever to occupy fully a position of authorial autonomy undermines this generic development towards an independent narrative voice. This lack manifests in multiple ways, syntactically and structurally. In the novel's first three parts, Susan's narration is marked by a dependence on Foe's authority to transform her narrative into a successful text. This dependence lends the language of her narration a sense of deferral and double-voicedness, as she self-consciously attempts to construct herself as a figure of authority in her writings while also believing that her narrative will not be complete until Foe, the recipient of her memoirs, intervenes and rewrites it.⁴⁸

This delay of completion is also at work in the novel's structure. The novel's final section begins with the same sentence as Part III (the only difference is the change from past to present tense), yet Susan Barton is no longer the narrator and the section takes place in an unspecified future time. The repetition of Barton's narration in a different, unknown voice moves the novel into the realm of narration and language production itself. The final section interrogates the language and world produced by the novel's previous sections as part of a received text whose repetition allows for alteration. The final section also recognizes the limits

⁴⁸ For an extended study of Coetzee's investigation of linguistic address in connection to his works' ethical engagements, see Carol Clarkson, *J. M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). In particular, see Chapter Three, "Voice," for a discussion of Susan Barton's "double-voicedness" as a mediation on the conditions of writing.

of Susan's (and implicitly, Coetzee's) authorial powers and thus the limits of *Foe*'s narrative, as the section closes with an image of Friday opening his mouth underwater to speak and emitting a stream of sound, a voice silenced yet full and one of substance and force. This final section destabilizes closure because the novel's initial goal, the production of Susan's novel, is not achieved. The section moves into the future in which the novel self-consciously recognizes its semimarginal status in literary history and what still remains outside of its narrative scope – a recognition of the power of the minor. Furthermore, the novel's final move implicitly refers to its relationship with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, as it projects a future time in which alternative narrative possibilities are recognized – a reflection of its own practice of counterfactual retelling.

The novel's incompleteness recognizes the future possibilities of narrative fullness in a manner similar to the ending of *Moses Ascending*, which closes with a reference to Moses's future writing project, to what he calls his "epilogue." As with *Moses Ascending*, the writing projects that shadow the narrative of *Foe* (Susan's completed narrative, Friday's history) are left unfinished or unwritten, and exist outside of the space and time of *Foe*. These "shadow texts" destabilize the narrative singularity of *Foe* through the recognition of alternative narrative paths. The consideration of these alternative narratives widens the novel's linear space and time to what Gary Saul Morson terms a "field of possibility" that resists any one point of closure.⁴⁹ To imagine these alternative narratives also calls attention to the reasons behind their exclusion, thus revealing the ideologies that shape *Foe*'s narrative. However, *Foe* simultaneously performs this deconstruction of a dominant narrative through its counterfactual reimagining of *Robinson Crusoe*, as Coetzee's novel casts an alternative possibility of that story's origin. Yet it is the "unofficial" work of the narrators of *Moses Ascending* and *Foe* that becomes the novels that we

⁴⁹ See Morson, 11-12.

read. This elevation of the narrators' work suggests that texts produced in the struggle towards authorship can be valued on their own, rather than dismissed or ignored, as they carry political force in their exposure of the value structures and aesthetics of dominant discourses.

Barton's preconceived notions of literary texts and her self-conscious attempt at authorship mark the excerpts from her memoirs, entitled *The Female Castaway*, with which *Foe* begins. The novel opens with Barton's description of herself at the moment at which she gives up on rowing the small boat in which she has escaped from her ship's wreck and allows herself to fall into the ocean. She writes, with Foe as her intended recipient, "At last I could row no further. My hands were blistered, my back was burned, my body ached. With a sigh, barely making a splash, I slipped overboard."⁵⁰ It is a moment of both relinquishment and transformation; in her exhausted state she gives up control over her own actions, and in the sea she becomes "like a flower of the sea, like an anemone" (5), a fluid image of beauty and growth. The novel returns to the potential creativity of this open space in its final section, as it is underneath these waters that Friday opens his mouth to speak. After the sea carries her to Cruso's island and she washes up on shore, Barton acquires a new identity. Her first words mark her with the persona that she then adopts and conforms to in her memoirs with the aim of selling a novel. She is found by Friday on the beach and says to him, "Castaway... I am cast away. I am all alone" (5). Friday leads her to Cruso and in introducing herself to him she repeats, with small variations, the novel's opening: "Then at last I could row no further. My hands were raw, my back was burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard and began to swim towards your island" (11). Here, in this retelling of her own history Barton alters and slightly modifies her language, conscious of her new listener, Cruso. This echoing

⁵⁰ J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 5. All other references to this text will be to this edition and will include page numbers.

recurrence of language draws attention to the process of writing and the construction of her identity through her text, as Barton chooses this introductory speech to Cruso as the way to introduce herself in her memoir and to the listener who replaces Cruso – Foe.

As an author, Barton is intensely aware of her possible readers as well as their expectations of her work. Like Moses, whose insecurity over his ability to write manifests in his asides to his “dear Reader” so as to cultivate an authoritative image of himself, Barton’s memoirs are filled with her attempts to compensate for the literary skills that she sees herself as lacking. Like Moses, she is clearly a student of literature, as she establishes the world of her life on the island by distinguishing it from the stereotypes established by popular texts:

‘For readers reared on travellers’ tales, the words *desert isle* may conjure up a place of soft sands and shady trees where brooks run to quench the castaway’s thirst and ripe fruit falls into his hand, where no more is asked of him than to drowse the days away till a ship calls to fetch him home. But the island on which I was cast away was quite another place: a great rocky hill with a flat top, rising sharply from the sea on all sides except one, dotted with drab bushes that never flowered and never shed their leaves.’ (7)

Barton writes with a consciousness of how her text will compare with others, as here she dismantles the Edenic imagery of popular castaway narratives and differentiates the record of her life on Cruso’s island from other texts already in circulation. This public conception of her writings contrasts with Moses’s authorial self-positioning, as he initially imagines himself in a position of removal and his memoirs as a private document that is not in dialogue with contemporary literature. The trajectory of *Moses Ascending* is toward the rejection of this understanding of authorship and the cultivation of a relationship between Moses’s writings and his political and cultural moment.

Yet the central element through which Barton contrasts her life and her memoirs with those texts already familiar to her potential reader is labor; she notes that such texts obscure the work needed to survive on a desert island as well as the work involved in escaping such a

situation. Furthermore, Barton's memoirs, as well as her letters and the first-person narration of the novel's third section, expose the labor involved in the act of writing. In one of her letters to Foe, Barton describes the physical and mental work of the act of authorship:

‘The storyteller... must divine which episodes of his history hold promise of fullness, and tease from them their hidden meanings, braiding these together as one braids a rope. Teasing and braiding can, like any craft, be learned. But as to determining which episodes hold promise (as oysters hold pearls), it is not without justice that this art is called divining.’ (88-9)

The creation of a narrative is an exercise in the contemplation of possibilities, one that echoes Stephen Dedalus's description of the “room of the infinite possibilities,” a counterfactual space.⁵¹ For Stephen to become a writer, he must learn to engage creatively with the narratives of history by fusing the actual with the possible, to see history as a field of possibilities. To Barton, the storyteller has the power to see what is hidden or what has been excluded, as well as to “divine” or see the form of the future; these alternative or future possibilities can then be woven into a narrative. *Ulysses* is Stephen's practice in action, a novel in which the factual and the possible mingle and which casts itself as the novel that Stephen will eventually write. In contrast, *Foe* never projects itself as the competed text of Susan Barton; we see her efforts to write continually frustrated, and she is ultimately silenced by the narrative that Foe eventually writes – the novel of *Robinson Crusoe*. Instead, *Foe* records Barton's attempts to write, yet her final goal is never realized and thus remains outside of *Foe*'s narrative in an othered space and time. The reason for this exclusion is related to Barton's understanding of the storyteller's labor. She continually mentions that she lacks the skills to compose her memoirs, which is why she turns to Foe as a figure who possesses the artistic capability to turn the record of her life into art. Centrally, in

⁵¹ The passage from *Ulysses* is as follows: “Had Pyrrhus not fallen by a beldam's hand in Argos or Julius Caesar not been knifed to death? They are not to be thought away. Time has branded them and fettered they are lodged in the room of the infinite possibilities they have ousted. But can those have been possible seeing that they never were? Or was that only possible which came to pass? Weave, weaver of the wind” (25).

Barton's description of the storyteller's work she genders the figure as male; as a woman, she does not feel she has the authority to "divine" the potential of her story and "braid" together an aesthetically complex narrative. While an argument about gender is certainly possible here, it is not the only way in which to read Barton's belief in her insufficiencies as a storyteller.⁵² As I discuss earlier, Coetzee's admitted identification with Barton offers a way to read her failure as a comment on his own semimarginal status as a white South African novelist.⁵³ Susan's expressions of self-doubt and her depiction of Foe as the successful storyteller are then a larger characterization of the dominant literary canon, centered in Britain and inaugurated by *Robinson Crusoe*, from which Coetzee sees himself as partially excluded and to which the novel responds.⁵⁴

The writings of Barton included in *Foe* record her attempt to express the truth of her experiences and retain control over her story. Thus, if Barton does labor as a storyteller, her work is more resistant than creative. Towards the end of *The Female Castaway*, Barton recounts her rescue from Cruso's island by a British merchant ship. After her rescue and in another act of retelling her history to a male listener, she relates her story to the ship's captain. He listens with great interest, and then urges her to write it down and sell it. "There has never before, to my

⁵² For example, Linda Hutcheon writes, that *Foe* suggests that "it is not her [Susan's] tone or her narrative skills but her gender that has everything to do with her lack of narrative authority – and with her being written out of the male narrative we know as *Robinson Crusoe*." See "The Politics of Impossible Worlds," in *Fiction Updated: Theories of Fictionality, Narratology, and Politics*, ed. by Calin-Andrei Mihailescu and Walid Hamarneh (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 218.

⁵³ David Attwell makes a similar point, as he argues, "the feminism Coetzee constructs through Susan carries allegorical burdens that have little to do with gender. In the allegory of white South African authorship, Susan's womanhood suggests the relative cultural power of the province as opposed to the metropolis and of unauthorized as opposed to authorized speech; gender therefore serves as the sign of the position of semimarginality that I have called colonial postcolonialism." See Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 111-12.

⁵⁴ Attridge argues that *Foe* stages a critique of canonicity on two levels: through Barton's struggles and through *Foe*'s relationship to literary tradition: "What is unusual about *Foe* is the way it simultaneously seeks admittance to the literary canon and draws attention to the canon's cultural and historical contingency, just as Barton, in seeking cultural acceptance for her story and through it an assertion of her unique subjectivity, shows an increasing awareness of the double bind that this implies." See Derek Attridge, "Oppressive Silence: J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Politics of the Canon," in *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-Century "British" Literary Canons*, ed. by Karen Lawrence (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1992), 220.

knowledge, been a female castaway of our nation. It will cause a great stir” (40), he tells her. Her gender is what makes her history a potentially successful commodity, and when Susan responds that she does not have the “art” to compose her narrative in an aesthetically accomplished way, the captain replies that the booksellers would hire a man to rewrite her story, “[putting] in a dash of colour too, here and there” (40). Susan resists this idea, for she does not want her history to be changed to the point that it becomes a lie, a fiction: “I would rather be the author of my own story than have lies told about me,” she responds. “If I cannot come forward, as author, and swear to the truth of my tale, what would be the worth of it?” (40). If her history were to be rewritten from the dominant position of a male author, Barton would become the object, not the subject, of the narrative and she would lose the claim to communicate the truth of her experience. Barton’s concern with her claim to truth is the driving force of her attempts to retain authority over the composition of her history and her resistance to its manipulations by male authors. The problem that Barton confronts here is the inevitable alteration of the marginal or minor voice when expressed within a dominant discourse. She resists the reshaping of her history from an outside perspective, yet she feels she lacks the skills to express it independently as a marginal figure.⁵⁵ Her dependence on Foe as the recipient (and eventual author and eraser) of her discourse recalls Moses’s repeated addresses to his “dear Reader” and his use of antiquated language to elevate his life story, as the struggles of both narrators to adopt the accepted properties of the established literary canon eventually destroy the authenticity of their histories. Rather than portraying this destruction, *Foe* and *Moses Ascending*

⁵⁵ Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran argue that “Susan's problem, then, is not primarily a lack of voice or a lack of art, of representation in its aesthetic and semiotic sense; it is a problem of representation in its political sense, a sense that foregrounds issues of appropriation and totality, of complicity, privilege, and usurpation – a problem, in brief, that considers the accountability of representatives to their total constituencies.” “Reading History, Writing Heresy: The Resistance of Representation and the Representation of Resistance in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*,” *Contemporary Literature*, 33, No. 3 (Autumn, 1992): 444.

exclude the completed, finished writing projects of Barton and Moses and allow them to exist as future possibilities, counterfactual narratives that shadow the novels' records of their attempts to write.

Barton's struggle with authorship begins as a retelling of the stories that Crusoe told her on the island; she positions herself as the owner of his history, for he sees no need to preserve a record of his life. The stories he tells her contradict one another to the point that "in the end [Barton] did not know what was truth, what was lies, and what was mere rambling" (12). In many ways, he is a disappointing figure, lacking the verbosity and authority of Defoe's Crusoe. He does not keep a journal, and when Barton argues for the need to record the minutiae of their island existence so as to distinguish Crusoe from "the old mariner by the fireside spinning yarns of sea-monsters and mermaids" (18), he answers, "Nothing is forgotten... Nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering" (17). Crusoe does not value truth-telling and writing as the potential creation of an alternative history, for, unlike Barton, the possibility of being forgotten is not a threat to his identity. The stability and centeredness of his identity, which is generated by his complete dominion over the island, produces a type of blindness in that nothing that resides outside of him, his mindset, or his world has value. In contrast, Barton recognizes her marginality, her lack of a stable subject position, and wants to produce a record of her experience to combat the constant threat of her identity being reshaped by an outside discourse. This is the same imperative that Moses feels by the end of Selvon's novel; his "epilogue" will challenge the binary power relations that his earlier writing project adheres to, and will open up a narrative space wherein the full expression of a marginal history can be imagined. This space of narrative possibility, of the potential writing projects of the narrators that will document the political and cultural realities of the marginal, haunts both *Moses Ascending* and *Foe*. These writing projects

are left to the future, and their undetermined forms press upon the borders of the novels' narratives, exposing the limits of the narrators' abilities to document fully their histories. These unrealized narratives gain force in their power to alter the temporality of the novels through the disruption of closure and the evocation of a future space and time of writing.

Part I of *Foe*, Barton's memoirs, concludes with a challenge to how Foe may define her identity: "Do you think of me, Mr Foe, as Mrs Cruso or as a bold adventuress? Think what you may, it was I who shared Cruso's bed and who closed Cruso's eyes, as it is I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island" (45). She defies Foe's potential interpretations of identity, as configured only through her relationship with Cruso, by asserting her control over Cruso's history through a sense of authority and closure she feels she wielded over his life and death (he dies on the voyage back to England). She positions herself as occupying and usurping Cruso's subject position, the position that allowed him to dismiss anything that exists outside of his world. Yet such subversive self-positioning is not permanent, as this dynamic of interpretation and resistance comes to define her relationship with Foe and his attempts at reconfiguring her memoirs. Part II of the novel opens with a letter by Susan that describes her initial meeting with Foe: she introduces herself on his doorstep and offers her story to him, an echo of the memoirs which open with Susan telling Cruso how she came to the island. Despite her resistance to an identity configured only through Cruso, she mentions to Foe that she has adopted the name "Mrs Cruso"; now that she is back in the metropolitan center, she can no longer resist such narrow subject positioning. She also apologizes for what she sees as the deficiencies of her text, which she describes as a "sorry, limping affair" but that he "will know how to set it right" (47). In a later letter, she turns away from her wish to control Cruso's history and instead regrets the central role she has given him in her memoirs: "Who but Cruso,

who is no more, could truly tell you Crusoe's story? I should have said less about him, more about myself" (51). She recognizes that the project of recording his life has displaced the record of her own experiences and has also limited her writings' scope to a history of the island rather than Barton's full life. This realization evokes Moses's eventual rejection of the techniques of self-fashioning that he utilizes to model himself after Robinson Crusoe and to present himself in this manner in his memoirs. The writings of Barton and Moses both attempt to occupy and master the dominant subject position of a figure such as Crusoe and to master dominant literary forms, and these endeavors result in a masking rather than an illumination of their histories. This movement from initial adherence to eventual rejection of such a model widens to the level of the novels as a whole, as it reflects Selvon's and Coetzee's simultaneous dependence on and departures from Defoe's canonical narrative.

While Barton's letters in Part II document her dependence on Foe to reshape her history into an aesthetically complex text, in this section Barton's journey towards authorial autonomy also begins paradoxically to take shape as Foe's absence prompts her to continue writing. Yet his refusal to reciprocate initially unsettles her sense of identity, as she feels separated from the history of herself that she has written and which is not yet complete. She sees Foe as able to unite this division, as she pleads with Foe to "return to [her] the substance [she has] lost" through the writing of her memoir (51). This quality of "substance" that she feels she lacks is akin to what she sees as the weaknesses of her writings, as she then states that though her "story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth" (51). As David Attwell explains, Barton believes "substance" to be Foe's ability to "provide sufficient realistic detail to give her story the density of 'truth.'"⁵⁶ This ability is not only concerned with manipulation of language and

⁵⁶ David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee*, 109. Jane Poyner writes that to Barton, substance "refers to a kind of verisimilitude and a faithfulness to her story." See Poyner, 98.

narrative, to fill out the facts of her narrative with plausible details, but is also rooted in material conditions. Barton believes that “[t]o tell the truth in all its substance you must have quiet, and a comfortable chair away from all distraction, and a window to stare through” (51-52). The physical environment that Susan believes is necessary to produce writing that presents the richness of truth is strikingly similar to Moses’s understanding that great works of literature can only be written by upper-class men shut away in garrets. Both Susan and Moses imagine that a successful author must inhabit a room isolated from the rest of the house (and the world), furnished comfortably, and most importantly, with a view.⁵⁷ While in *Moses Ascending*, the view from the window implies upward mobility, for Susan the view also offers the possibility to imagine another space and time. Her description of what is necessary to tell the full substance of truth also includes “the knack of seeing waves when there are fields before your eyes, and of feeling the tropic sun when it is cold; and at your fingertips the words with which to capture the vision before it all fades” (52). The view from Foe’s window becomes a portal through which an imagined experience can dominate the actual; thus, it is a type of counterfactual space. This ability to imagine and express alternative experiences gestures towards the novel’s larger investigation of “shadow texts,” as the final step in Susan’s conception of authorship is to record an alternative vision in language.

While it is not difficult to see that Susan’s and Moses’s image of authorship has been gleaned from portraits of authors circulating in canonical literature, what is striking in both novels are the ways in which the narrators attempt to occupy and utilize this space. While *Moses Ascending* begins with Moses’s imitation of such a space in his attic writing room and ends with

⁵⁷ As previously discussed with *Moses Ascending*, Susan Barton’s image of authorship also suggests the influence of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. This reference to Woolf in Selvon and Coetzee’s novels offers a critical history of the literary canon’s social, economic, and gender inequalities via the materiality of authorship. While Woolf imagines the future of women’s literary production, Selvon and Coetzee consider the emergence of postcolonial authors from the periphery.

his rejection of it, in *Foe* Susan and Friday move into Foe's house after he has disappeared because she has run out of money and has nowhere to go. In a letter to Foe, Susan tells him of their occupancy, and promises him that they "will disturb nothing" and "will vanish like ghosts" when he returns (64). Like shadows, they haunt the dominant author's dwelling, yet she begins to contradict her own promise not to leave behind a trace when, in the same letter, she describes her occupancy of his writing desk: "I have your table to sit at, your window to gaze through. I write with your pen on your paper, and when the sheets are completed they go into your chest. So your life continues to be lived, though you are gone" (65). At first, Susan's shadowy mimicry of Foe's act of writing works to support and uphold his position of authorial power. However, soon her occupancy of his seat becomes subversive, as she starts to gain a sense of power over the material conditions that construct the image of Foe as author. In the same letter, continued later on in the day, she writes, "I sat at your bureau this morning (it is afternoon now, I sit at the same bureau, I have sat here all day) and took out a clean sheet of paper and dipped pen in ink – your pen, your ink, I know, but somehow the pen becomes mine while I write with it, as though growing out of my hand" (66-67). Here, the substances of Foe's writing practice – his pen, ink, and paper – begin to become the possessions and then the corporeality of Susan as she performs the act of writing in his place. This transformation occurs as Susan continues to produce new writing, as she waits for Foe to return and to take over the construction of her narrative. Her productivity increases in his absence, while her idealized image of him as an author deflates. She continues to write letters, along with other new pieces such as lists of "strange circumstances" during her year as a castaway and pictures to try to communicate with Friday (65). Her comfort in her own identity as a writer grows as she feels more confident in her occupation of Foe's position:

I may bemoan the tedium of life in your house, but there is never a lack of things to write of. It is as though animalcules of words lie dissolved in your ink-well, ready to be dipped up and flow from the pen and take form on the paper. From downstairs to upstairs, from house to island, from the girl to Friday: it seems necessary only to establish the poles, the here and there, the now and the then – after that the words of themselves do the journeying. I had not guessed it was so easy to be an author. (93)

Here, Susan starts to produce the complexity and depth that she initially felt her writing lacked, as she now is able to order a fictional world spatially and temporally. She also begins to understand that Foe's authority is not an inherent part of him but rather is produced through a collection of material objects that she now possesses.

In response to Susan's growing independence as an author, Foe attempts upon his return to regain control over the production of her castaway narrative by reframing it as part of a larger tale of Susan's search for her daughter in Brazil (which was the reason why she was traveling on the ship that sank). While Susan lives in Foe's house, a young girl shows up at the doorstep, claiming to be Barton's daughter; Barton believes that Foe has sent the girl to manipulate her and make her conform to the identity that he is writing for her.⁵⁸ The struggle between the two encompasses Part III of *Foe*, which opens with Susan knocking on the door of Foe's new lodgings. The narrative form shifts again into a first-person narration, yet despite this advance towards authorial independence Susan still seeks news from Foe on the progress of her narrative. She also offers him more unsent letters she wrote during his absence, new writing that figures the future possibility of Barton as author. However, he is not interested in this work, as instead he wants to hear of her time on the island of Bahia, where she searched for her daughter, so as to

⁵⁸ As several critics have noted, Foe's manipulation of Barton in this manner is an intertextual reference to Defoe's novel, *Roxana*. For example, see Spivak's "Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's *Foe* Reading Defoe's 'Crusoe/Roxana,'" and Attwell's *J. M. Coetzee*, 109-112. *Roxana* is a confessional narrative of a woman who lives prosperously as a prostitute, and who refuses to acknowledge the existence of her daughter. However, she is wracked with guilt after she rejects her daughter, which is what prompts her to write her confession. As Attwell explains, "In *Foe*, Susan Barton's desire to control her destiny is sustained in her repudiation of the daughter as Foe's own invention. Unlike *Roxana*, the embrace of the mother and daughter produces no memorable bonding... a struggle for control over the narrative is staged between Foe and Susan and Susan does not succumb" (110).

restructure her island story within the larger framework of a *Roxana* narrative. She resists this reduction of her castaway narrative, responding, “The story I desire to be known by is the story of the island. You call it an episode, but I call it a story in its own right” (121). What is at stake here is Barton’s public literary identity, a key element of the novel’s central concern with the relationship between authorship and authority. Foe’s reconstruction of Barton’s narrative to focus on her relationship with her daughter would shift emphasis from her as an individual to Susan as a recognizable type, and she objects to the diminution of her history on the island within a more conventional narrative of motherhood. Susan’s struggle is one of representation, as she resists losing control over her own agency as her marginalized history enters a dominant discourse. Her resistance is also a defense of the autonomy of her history for it deserves recognition on its own rather than alteration.

As part of her effort to maintain control over her own history and her claim to tell the truth of her life in opposition to Foe’s attempt to alter and suppress the fullness of her narrative, Barton’s final strategy is to return to silence. She tells Foe, “It is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to *withhold*. By such means do I still endeavor to be father to my story” (123, emphasis mine).⁵⁹ Barton realizes that by keeping silent she can preserve the truth of her narrative, rather than allow for its manipulation by others. It is this choice of deferral and of silence that reinvests her narrative with the power of remaining minor. Her would-be narrative then becomes a silent yet full space, without limitations and known only through imagination. The penumbral status of this unrealized text gestures towards the future possibility of the full expression of Barton’s life. Barton further explains her strategy of silence and deferral when

⁵⁹ This passage is another opportunity for a critical reading focusing on gender. For an example, see Kirsten Holt Petersen, “An elaborate dead end? A feminist reading of Coetzee’s *Foe*” in *A Shaping of Connections: Commonwealth Literature Studies – then and now*, ed. by Hena Maes-Jelnic, Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1989), 243-52.

contrasting the castaway narrative that she has related to Foe and the alternative narrative possibilities of a more full account of her life:

‘I am not a story, Mr. Foe. I may impress you as a story because I began my account of myself without preamble, slipping overboard into the water and striking out for the shore. But my life did not begin in the waves. There was a life before the water which stretched back to my desolate searchings in Brazil, thence to the years when my daughter was still with me, and so on back to the day I was born. All which makes up a story *I do not choose to tell*. I choose not to tell it because to no one, not even to you, do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world. I choose rather to tell of the island, of myself and Cruso and Friday and what we three did there: for I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire.’ (131, emphasis mine)

Barton resists Foe’s compartmentalization of her identity by asserting that she exists beyond the space and time of the story she has shaped for him, and vice versa – in fact, that she encompasses multiple stories, not just one.⁶⁰ Indeed, the sense of spatial and temporal depth that her writing begins to acquire when sitting at Foe’s desk echoes in her characterization of her life’s expansiveness, a record of which would move back and forth through time and across continents. She also acknowledges the conscious choices behind the construction of her castaway narrative in that she has deliberately decided not to tell Foe of her life before the island. In contrast to her earlier claims of inadequacy and of lacking substance, here she resists the need to prove her worth by allowing Foe to rewrite her history into a complicated, intricate narrative. Instead, her substance extends from the control she wields over the exposure or withholding of her history. Her power derives from her freedom to tell her story in the manner in which she chooses. This freedom includes the choice to keep part of her life secret and thus unknown, and to preserve it from alteration by Foe, the representative figure of the dominant literary canon. In conjunction with Lewis MacLeod’s argument that Friday has not had his tongue cut out but that “his silence

⁶⁰ Again, this idea echoes Joyce’s “room of the infinite possibilities,” and applies it directly to the project of the (fictional) memoir.

[is] a voluntary act,”⁶¹ I argue that the power of choosing to remain silent speaks to the novel’s larger aim of questioning discursive authority and investigating the potential of remaining marginal, minor, or even silent.

Over the course of the narratives of *Foe* and *Moses Ascending*, the narrators realize that their current writing projects are limited by the self-imposed modifications to subject matter, language, and narrative scope that they initially deem necessary in order to be accepted by and disseminated through the literary canon. This realization empowers rather than suppresses Moses and Barton, for it prompts a growing resistance to the literary conventions and expectations that initially provoked feelings of inadequacy. Their resistance includes a shift in attitude towards the unfinished writing projects they undertake in the space and time of the novels. While they initially perceive the composition of their narratives as a way to express and expose their experiences to a wider audience, they both come to see the incompleteness of their writings as a criticism of the values and belief systems of the narrative structures and canonical discourses from which their work is excluded. The diminishing identification between Moses and Barton and their writing projects opens up a potential future space and time in which they may be able to express fully the truths of their lives. And while the narrators eventually begin to disengage from the pursuit of their writing projects, their struggles and realizations in this process are not erased or forgotten but rather compose the narratives of *Moses Ascending* and *Foe*. The elevation of their partial failure records the process through which these marginalized figures work to become authors whose writings can be a full expression of their lives. Such potential texts, the shadow texts of the novels’ narratives, are not yet realized in form and content and as such they stand as open models of future writing. For Selvon and Coetzee, the process the

⁶¹ “‘Do We of Necessity Become Puppets in a Story?’ or Narrating the World: On Speech, Silence, and Discourse in J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 1 (Spring, 2006): 7.

narrators undergo in order to free themselves from the conventions and value systems of the dominant literary canon corresponds to their own complicated relationship to the canon, in particular its foundational text, *Robinson Crusoe*. While the novels depict the narrators' attempts to write their histories as influenced by the conventions of *Crusoe*, Selvon and Coetzee are themselves writing texts that confront and challenge Defoe's text. Yet the liberal retellings of Defoe that the novels enact via the narrators' struggles deflate the authority of the *Crusoe*/Defoe author ideal and challenge the narrative singularity of *Crusoe*. Thus, as Moses and Susan both reach a point at which they begin to turn away from their *Crusoe*-inflected histories towards future, unknown narrative forms, Selvon and Coetzee's novels are positioned in a similar state of possibility. Though *Moses Ascending* and *Foe* are both dependent on and influenced by *Robinson Crusoe*, they also move towards liberation from deference to this canonical text by exceeding its narrative strictures and challenging its values.

The lack of closure in both the narrators' writing projects and the novels themselves sustains the openness of this position so that the possibility of future completion or fulfillment shadows the central narratives as a counterfactual realm. *Moses Ascending* concludes with the suggestion of Moses's future writing project, his "epilogue." Though he does not reveal the full subject matter of this text, the possibility of its future completion defers the claim to tell the truth of his life to an alternative space and time. In *Foe*, Barton chooses not to tell her full history to Foe; this potential return to silence is not an erasure of her subjectivity but preserves her control over the nature of her public identity. While *Moses Ascending* ends with a reference to a future writing project, thus precluding any sense of closure, *Foe*'s final, enigmatic section enacts this deferral by moving into an unknown future space and time. The opening sentence of *Foe*'s

fourth section retells the opening of Part III when Barton arrives at Foe's new lodgings.⁶² Here, the language of the third section's first sentence reverberates in the mouth of an unknown speaker and in a different temporality as the verb tense has shifted from past to present, so that Part IV begins with "The staircase is dark and mean" (153). This repetition of the novel's language implies that the speaker has read the novel's earlier sections and is continuing its project in another space and time. Though the temporal setting of this section is not specified, it is after the beginning of the twentieth century for the speaker references World War I. It is a contemporary time, or perhaps a future time, and Coetzee is careful not to delimit it further. The narrative practice at work in the fourth section suggests that the project of the novel is never complete in that it is always potentially available to be rewritten from an alternative perspective. Thus, the novel's final section destabilizes its own narrative singularity, as the section provides a glimpse of a future practice of retelling. This practice parallels the novel's own engagement with Defoe's *Crusoe*.

While *Foe*'s last section has been read as the novel's final postmodern twist,⁶³ I argue that Part IV represents a brief engagement with the future potential of the novel's shadow texts. The section contains two parts, both of which are brief narratives of the speaker entering an author's house, first Foe's and then, as signaled by a plaque on the wall, that of "*Daniel Defoe, author*" (155). In both, the speaker finds the writer and Barton dead and Friday lying alive in the corner and then is somehow brought back to the world of Cruso's island. In the first narrative, the speaker hears the sounds of the island coming from Friday's mouth, and in the second narrative, the speaker reads the opening lines of Barton's memoir that lies on Defoe's desk and is suddenly transported to the island's waters. Part IV "describes and redescribes" the fictional

⁶² This narrative device recalls the multiple retellings of Barton's introduction of herself in the novel's opening section.

⁶³ For example, Jane Poyner describes the section as composed of "alternative, metafictional endings." 107.

world of *Foe* and the “real” world of Defoe through the speaker’s entrance and navigation of spaces in which the texts were imagined and written. In both, the narrator confronts the production of narrative (of *Foe*, of *Robinson Crusoe*, and of Barton’s *The Female Castaway*) and moves through the multiple worlds that the narratives project.⁶⁴

While some critics have read the unnamed narrator to be Coetzee entering his own text,⁶⁵ I argue that the narrator is instead a figure for the reader and potential future author. Here I am drawing upon Paul Ricoeur’s theory of how the reader remakes the fictional world. In the act of reading, the world of the reader and the world of the text meet and expand together, yet the reader is also able to remain partially separate from the text, as during reading, he is interpreting and forming a meaning for the text. Ricoeur focuses on the interaction between the world of the text and the world of the reader. He writes that “a work may be closed with respect to its configuration [structure] and open with respect to the breakthrough it is capable of effecting on the reader’s world.”⁶⁶ As such, the novel’s ending is a portrayal of the act of reading *Foe* and offers a glimpse of the how this act, of knowing a narrative and potentially reforming it, can empower the reader and thus generate alternative narratives. In the space and time of the fourth section, the author figures (Foe, Barton, and Defoe) are all dead, and those that are left (Friday, the narrator) remain potential writers as they actively navigate the worlds of the texts. It is in this counterfactual realm that these figures can gain agency and can begin to express themselves fully. Thus, while the complete, full textual expression of Barton as a figure for the marginalized author is not finished in the space and time of *Foe*’s central narrative, Coetzee signals its future

⁶⁴ David Attwell discusses Part IV as the unnamed narrator’s “two encounters with the scene of authorship.” *J. M. Coetzee*, 116.

⁶⁵ See Dominic Head, *J. M. Coetzee*, 124.

⁶⁶ See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1985), 2: 20. I am interested in how the interpretive and transformative power of reading, of knowing narrative and reforming it, can be discussed as an act that can occur within a text as well as how a text can be structured as rereading and reformation of other narratives, which is how I understand *Foe*.

completion with this final section in which a new narrative voice intrudes and practices an open-ended continuation of, and response to, all the narratives at work in Coetzee's novel – *Foe* itself, *Robinson Crusoe*, and Barton's *The Female Castaway*. The political claim of this final section is in its open-ended potential to respond to established narratives and insert a new voice.

Thus, the closing section of *Foe* offers a glimpse into Joyce's "room of the infinite possibilities" – the spatially and temporally unbounded space of creative possibility that contains the seeds of multiple potential narratives. It is in this space that Stephen Dedalus imagines alternatives to history's violence and that becomes an aesthetic and political model for *Ulysses* as a whole. In Selvon's works, this space is still projected elsewhere, as it contains the "truth" or the fully realized consciousness of Moses; Selvon locates this space "between the actuality and the dreamworld," or between historical fact (for example, colonial oppression) and imagined possibility (for example, a liberated consciousness).⁶⁷ Each of his novels in the loosely linked Moses trilogy represents movement toward the realization of this creative space, yet none encompass it. Instead, his novels purposely resist closure so as to signal its ever-incomplete expression. It is Coetzee, then, who comes the closest to its realization. Instead of always remaining in a time and space elsewhere, *Foe* incorporates this counterfactual realm within its central narrative as its closing gesture. By tracing the use of counterfactual time over the course of the twentieth century, we can follow a movement towards a political and aesthetic liberation through the eventual uniting of the counterfactual's possibilities with the present moment's actualities.

⁶⁷ See footnote #26 for full citation.

As I have argued earlier, modernist time is rooted in a resistance to cultural, spatial, and temporal control; works such as *Ulysses* establish the counterfactual as a central factor of this resistance. In this chapter, I have shown how writers active after the modernist era, whose writings engage with the questions of authorship in the emerging postcolonial world, construct a counterfactual realm in which to project the possibility of texts that aim at getting closer to the full expression of their marginalized histories and experiences. In this way, their works not only imagine what might have been but also what might come in the future; this temporal openness is a way to engage creatively with history's oppression and to conceive of a more just present and future. In my next chapter, I continue my work on counterfactual time as a liberating force in the context of the Cold War and the fear of the nuclear bomb, which I frame as the endgame of imperialism. I pair Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983) and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), two novels that revolve around the threat of nuclear war. I argue that these novels draw upon the counterfactual's ability to contain multiple narrative paths so as to construct a temporality of simultaneity that counters the nuclear bomb's potential to end time.

CHAPTER THREE

“Counterhistory”: Resisting Apocalyptic Time in Graham Swift’s *Waterland* (1983) and Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (1992)

In an echo of *Ulysses*’s “Nestor,” one of the opening chapters of *Waterland* is set in the classroom of the narrator Tom Crick, a history teacher in Greenwich, England. Whereas Stephen Dedalus wishes he could reject the standardized curriculum of ancient battles and wars, Crick has done just that by abandoning his class’s syllabus and choosing to lecture instead on his own family history and the history of the land he comes from, the Fens – the watery marshlands of eastern England. These actions, however, have had consequences, for in this opening chapter Crick has recently learned that the History department is being downsized and he will be forced to retire. With the end of his career in sight, the novel, loosely constructed as his class lectures, becomes Crick’s argument for a continual engagement with the past. However, Crick often meets resistance from one of his students, a particularly combative teenager named Price. In this opening scene, Price challenges the purpose of studying history because, as he puts it, ““what matters is the here and now. Not the past. The here and now – and the future.””¹ As part of his explanation of why the past does not matter, Price runs through several examples of contemporary political crises, including “the apparently unhaltable build-up of nuclear arms,” and finally concludes by stating, ““The only important thing about history, I think, sir, is that it’s got to the point where it’s probably about to end”” (7). Significantly, both Stephen Dedalus and Price suffer from nightmares about either the past, present, or future. Stephen calls history a nightmare from which he is trying to awake, and Price and his fellow classmates frequently have nightmares of the nuclear apocalypse. To Price, the nuclear bomb’s power renders history obsolete; without the promise of a future, the past can offer no meaningful lessons, as it instead

¹ Graham Swift, *Waterland* (New York: Vintage International, 1992), 6. All other references to this text will be to this edition and will include page numbers.

appears as a record of increasingly horrible events that are building up to an imminent end.

Waterland is a response to Price's challenge and to the nuclear rhetoric of the late Cold War era that generated what Sarah Henstra calls a "sense of *futurelessness* that resulted from the conviction that global thermonuclear war would break out, and destroy human life as we know it, within our lifetime."²

In the two novels that I examine in this chapter, *Waterland* and *The English Patient*, history functions an oppressive force, much as it is in *Ulysses*, charting a teleological record of violence produced by the assertion and consequences of imperial power. Yet with the escalating threat of nuclear war over the course of the twentieth century, that violence has an explosive, seemingly imminent end. Following Andrew Hammond, who claims that the effects of the nuclear age can be traced in a wide range of novels and not only in science fiction and post-apocalyptic works, I argue here that Swift and Ondaatje construct time as an open-ended and multifaceted realm so as to resist the apocalyptic narrative of the bomb that undermines the significance of the past through its anticipation of a singular end to history.³ *Waterland*, written during the acceleration of the Cold War's final stage, and *The English Patient*, published a year after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, respond to and engage with the historical and cultural context of the late Cold War period – in particular, the right-wing politics of the Thatcher and Reagan administrations and their construction of a renewed imperial prowess that is dependent upon nuclear arsenals. The novels interrogate the formulation of history as a stalemate between imperial powers and deflate the apocalyptic rhetoric that generates historical amnesia so as to reinvigorate individual imaginings and engagements with history. I call this strategy "counterhistory," which I understand as building upon the counterfactual's ability to contain

² Sarah Henstra, *The Counter-Memorial Impulse in Twentieth-Century English Fiction* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 80.

³ See Andrew Hammond, *British Fiction and the Cold War* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 56.

multiple narrative paths. However, instead of navigating historical alternatives or retelling history with a different outcome, these novels enrich and multiply time, leaving no one narrative path to dominate. In this sense, these novels counter the Cold War framing of history as a singular narrative that ends in violence by promoting a constant re-navigation of time.

“Counterhistory” resists the limitations of a narrative model of history, in particular an apocalyptic model that operates through a foreshadowing of an inevitable end. As Michael André Bernstein writes, giving weight to multiple possibilities disrupts a unidirectional view of history.⁴ I draw the term “counterhistory” from Bernstein’s *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*, as Bernstein briefly uses the concept when he explains his choice of the Holocaust as a test case for the validity of the practice of “sideshadowing.”⁵ For Bernstein, “counterhistory” is a type of narrative alternative that can be used to resist the singularity of historical inevitability.⁶ My use of this term is indebted to Bernstein’s theorization, yet I also expand its meaning to include a fictional widening and enriching of historical time that challenges the category of the factual. As I will show, *Waterland* and *The English Patient* resist any move toward a finalizing interpretive structure to time and seek to reinvest each moment with a meaning that can never be stilled. The novels then offer multiple perspectives and

⁴ Bernstein argues that if one conceives of more flexible and open models of history and resists the anticipation of an end point and the “retrospective judgment” that its closure is supposed to provide, “then the point of view of any single moment in the trajectory of an ongoing story has a significance that is never annulled or transcended by the shape and meaning of the narrative as a (supposed) whole.” See Bernstein, 28.

⁵ As Bernstein explains in his Acknowledgements, his text was written in conjunction with Morson’s *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time*, in which Morson coins the term “sideshadowing.” Originally meant to be published as one book, Morson and Bernstein decided to publish their works as separate volumes. Bernstein references the work of Amos Funkstein for his use of “counterhistory.” Funkstein defines the term as a “specific genre of history written since antiquity [whose] function is polemical. Their method consists of systematic exploitation of the adversary’s most trusted sources against their grain... Their aim is the distortion of the adversary’s self-image, of his identity, through the deconstruction of his memory.” *Ibid.*, 131, n11.

⁶ Bernstein writes that he chooses the Holocaust because “it has so often been represented through a plot governed by a logic of historical inevitability... and hence provides the kind of totalizing master narrative against which the counterhistory proposed here can be heard most effectively.” *Ibid.*, 14.

explanations as a way to promote the constant need to question and resist a singular organizational structure for the past.

In this chapter, I argue that the strategy of counterhistory is at work thematically and structurally in *Waterland* and *The English Patient*. *The English Patient* is set at an abandoned and half-destroyed Italian villa during the last battles of World War II, a time period that arguably serves as the beginning of the Cold War.⁷ Yet the novel does not concentrate on the war's major events and their consequences, but instead foregrounds marginalized, minor, or silenced voices and experiences. The novel brings together a dying Hungarian pilot, his Canadian nurse, a Canadian-Italian spy and thief, and an Indian sapper, as they attempt to process their individual traumas. Told from multiple perspectives, the narrative layers memories that jump back and forth through time, yielding a fractured structure that resists a singular explanation of the past that would limit its fullness. Significantly, the novel also defuses its potential climax in the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by spatially and temporally deferring the events within the narrative. This deferral, alongside the narrative's constant shifting and overlapping of past, present, and future, challenges the progression of the dominant historical narrative of the twentieth century so as to resist its apocalyptic values.

While *The English Patient* recasts and deflates the beginning of the Cold War, *Waterland* challenges its endgame. Set during the Thatcher years of increased government spending on science and defense, the novel frames the escalation of Cold War politics as perpetuating hostility towards any deep knowledge of history. To counter this effect aesthetically and politically, *Waterland* builds an ever-shifting proliferation of attempts to explain the past through a wide range of subject matter, including Crick's own marriage, his ancestors, a history of land

⁷ As Lee Spinks notes, the novel is poised between two eras, and the bombing of Hiroshima at the conclusion of the narrative "marks the transition from full-scale military conflict to the beginning of the Cold War." See Spinks, *Michael Ondaatje* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009), 171.

reclamation in the Fens, and the natural history of the eel. Yet Crick never settles on one explanatory strategy, as the novel promotes instead the constant need to question and resist a singular organizational structure for the past.⁸ Working to mitigate the ever-present threat of nuclear war, the novel undermines any move to standardize the passage of time into a potentially restrictive structure. Instead, Crick argues for a constant renegotiation of time that counters the power and violence of a singular end point to history.

Read together, *Waterland* and *The English Patient* offer complementary tactics of fracture and accumulation that build upon the modernist use of the counterfactual, in which questions of agency and authorship are central. My project claims that counterfactual time enables a resistance to the oppression of culturally dominant teleological narratives. In *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus must learn to productively navigate these counterfactual possibilities in order to forge a creative artistic relationship with the oppressive narrative of English dominance over Ireland. Joyce also implements the counterfactual in his fusing of the real and the imagined in his recreation of Dublin life in 1904 so as to cast the possibility of a more hopeful future for Ireland, one that is not marred by colonial violence. Joyce turns to counterfactual time in order to project the future possibility of his own novel, and as I discuss in Chapter Two, J. M. Coetzee and Sam Selvon cast the future writing projects of their narrators to an undetermined, future time so as to interrogate the cultural and political modes of oppression that hinder the full expression of marginalized individual experience. In the era of *Waterland* and *The English Patient*, Britain is attempting to reposition itself as a world power in the model of the United States, and both

⁸ Damon Marcel Decoste argues that *Waterland* promotes the values of curiosity and counterfinality as a resistance to the limitations of a single definition or narrative structure: “Crick allies... the question Why to the maintenance of the human in the face of endings – of meaning, of narratives, of life, of history itself... Thus Crick, in the face of an untenable real and the bloodbaths of historical endings, privileges the resistance of the question, the call to account, over the answer or account itself and strives thereby to eschew that paternal instinct critiqued above... the anti-eschatological virtue of inquiry persists insofar as Why remains restless, never satisfied or content but constantly able to trouble and dissect narratives making claims to definitiveness.” See “Question and Apocalypse: The Endlessness of *Historia* in Graham Swift's *Waterland*,” *Contemporary Literature* 43, no. 2 (Summer, 2002): 394-5.

novels explore the heritage of Britain's imperialism as a central part of this reemergence.⁹ Yet a key way in which the "counterhistorical" strategies of Swift and Ondaatje differ from earlier counterfactual strategies is the question of the future. In Chapters One and Two, I argue that the novels' counterfactual strategies construct the future as possibly a more hopeful and just time. Here, with the threat of the nuclear bomb, the future is an ominous and oppressive force, as it has the ability to end time. Instead of deferring alternative possibilities to a future time, *Waterland* and *The English Patient* attempt to mitigate a fear of the future by imbuing time with a multiplicity of paths and thus multiple endpoints, in order to challenge the unidirectional flow of time towards a quickly approaching end.

The counterhistorical strategies of *Waterland* and *The English Patient* also continue the ethical aims of modernist counterfactual time by enabling individual, creative engagement with dominant cultural and historical narratives. As I state in my Introduction, the spatial and temporal discontinuities of life on the margins of a dominant culture's sphere of power and influence are critical in the implementation of the counterfactual in the modernist period, and they precipitate later uses of the counterfactual over the course of the twentieth century. Here, both novels investigate the origins and values of dominant narratives from positions of marginality, while also encouraging a constant and continuous reimagining of the past. *Waterland* counters hegemonic, centrist narratives by offering local histories of the peripheral cultures inside the borders of England, thus implicitly arguing against the emphasis on "major" events through its investment in the "minor."¹⁰ In its regionalist immersion into the watery edges

⁹ However, the failure of Great Britain to assert itself as a world power during the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956 overshadows this reemergence, and I would argue contributes to the sense, in particular in *Waterland*, of contemporary imperial rhetoric ringing falsely.

¹⁰ Critics have argued that *Waterland* participates in the larger regionalist movement in British literature, which emerges out of the study of Scottish, Irish, and Welsh literature and culture. In *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (1996), Cairns Craig calls for a new approach to writing history that acknowledges

of England – the Fens marshland – the novel cycles back and forth through time in search of a way to chart the causal relationship between the past and the present, yet ultimately refuses a singular conclusion and instead promotes the value of continuous “curiosity.” This approach constructs time as an unbounded space with no singular meaning and, as Stephan Schaffrath argues, this temporal flexibility suggests the possibility of “an infinite number of pasts, presents, and futures.”¹¹ *Waterland* explores these possibilities by shadowing central historical events with minor ones. Such simultaneity creates a wider sense of time, of time as a field or space of infinite possibilities rather than as one central path.

An interest in marginal figures and forgotten or unfinished stories is a central marker of Ondaatje’s work, as he continually seeks out ways to explore the outsider position so as to give voice to what has been silenced.¹² Born in Sri Lanka, educated in England, and settled in Canada, Ondaatje describes himself as part of a “migrant generation” of authors, born in a time of postcolonial emigration that results in “writers leaving and not going back, but taking their country with them to a new place.”¹³ Critics have read *The English Patient*’s examination of figures who move between nations, in particular the Indian sapper Kirpal Singh (Kip) as

the significance of peripheral cultures (for example, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish), instead of continuing with a mode that assimilates the art produced in those cultures into a historical and cultural narrative based in the center. See *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996). Hanne Tange applies Craig’s approach to a reading of *Waterland* in which she argues that “Swift uses *Waterland* to propose an alternative English identity, based on the country’s peripheral areas rather than the values and institutions of the centre.” See Hanne Tange, “Regional Redemption: Graham Swift’s *Waterland* and the End of History,” *Orbis Litterarum* 59 (2004): 76.

¹¹ Stephan Schaffrath, “The Many Facets of Chaos-versus-Order Dichotomy in Graham Swift’s ‘Waterland,’” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 90.

¹² John Bolland argues that “Ondaatje’s interest in the figure of the outsider was influenced by his own experience of migration and later by his concern to understand the particular form of cultural hybridity experienced by his own family in Ceylon.” See *Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 13.

¹³ Catherine Bush, “Michael Ondaatje: an Interview,” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 53 (Summer, 1994): 239.

representative of Ondaatje's own experience of migration and hybridity.¹⁴ Throughout, the novel gives voice to what has been silenced, rather than what is known; its layering of times offers an acceptance of contradictory versions of the past and an ultimate acknowledgement of what Mirja Lobnik calls the "fluidity and malleability of historical experience."¹⁵

Many critical readings of these two novels' relationship to history argue that the texts are postmodern, and many categorize the novels as examples of what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction." Yet to read the novels' investigation of historical discourse as only one of play is to ignore the formal, political, and ethical elements that are the focus of this chapter.¹⁶ In this respect, I align my reading of Ondaatje and Swift with a small group of critics who resist the use of Hutcheon's term to characterize contemporary novels that interact with and challenge traditional historical narrative.¹⁷ What these critics call for is a reinvestment in the study of the novel's form – its experimentation with temporal structuring in connection to a reimagination and investigation of the past. In this chapter, I do not approach Swift and

¹⁴ For example, Lee Spinks suggests that these figures, who are not completely subsumed in nationalist rhetoric, "open up the possibility of what Bhabha calls a 'Third Space of Enunciation' in which the colonial subject might elude the politics of polarity by inhabiting a position between centre and margin where cultural meaning and representation have no primordial unity or fixity." Spinks, 17.

¹⁵ Mirja Lobnik, "Echoes of the Past: Nomad Memory in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*," *South Atlantic Review* 72, No. 4 (Fall 2007): 103.

¹⁶ Emily Horton characterizes her study of the work of Graham Swift, Ian McEwan, and Kazuo Ishiguro in a similar manner. She frames Swift, McEwan, and Ishiguro as key figures of a genre she terms "crisis fiction," which responds to "the global capitalist context of post-consensus British life." Horton argues that past critics repeatedly "prioritize issues of textual self-consciousness over and above social and ethical concerns." She sees the novelists of her study as rejecting postmodernist values and instead offering "a defense of narrative as inquiry, in such a way as to maintain the central importance of the novel as a mode of ethical thinking." See *Contemporary Crisis Fictions: Affect and Ethics in the Modern British Novel* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1-2, 38-9.

¹⁷ For example, Mark Currie argues that the term "historiographic metafiction" is a theoretical approach that does not address the formal issues of temporality that are central to texts such as *Waterland*, which he sees as experimenting with the anticipation of a future time in which a more full explanation of the present will be possible. For Currie's argument against Hutcheon, who he sees as reading fiction only for theory, see, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction, and the Philosophy of Time*, 25-28. Currie calls for a degree of formalism to be added back into criticism so that one can properly address the nature of narrative. David Price also rejects the use of Hutcheon's term; as he states, the novelists that he studies (including Swift) do not simply problematize historical knowledge in their texts but "try to *think* history; that is, they see the novel as a form of speculative thinking that engages the poetic imagination in an attempt to construct, not discover, the truth of the past." See David W. Price, *History Made, History Imagined: Contemporary Literature, Poiesis, and the Past* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 11.

Ondaatje as postmodern novelists whose works are playful pastiches that ultimately deny any possibility of historical knowledge. Instead, I attend to Swift's and Ondaatje's modernist use of the novel's form to liberate the individual from fear by positing a constant and continuous reimagining of historical time as a realm of multiple paths and points of view.

Waterland

Waterland provides a portrait of the Thatcher era, which reshaped not only Britain's political landscape but also the state's priorities in the classroom. The post-consensus age emerged out of the economic crises of the 1970s, as the country moved away from the structure of a welfare state and towards an embrace of free market economics. This defense of capitalism, through privatization, as a vehicle for democracy became a central tenant of the Thatcher era. Francis Fukuyama famously theorizes the conservative discourse of this time in his 1989 essay, "The End of History?", which he then expanded into *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Fukuyama argues that humanity's socioeconomic evolution will conclude with Western democracy as the final form of government, from which there will be no progression to an alternative system.¹⁸ Fukuyama's belief in history's "end" as Western liberal democracy, and of there being no other alternative path from or to that point, offers a restrictive narrative that celebrates the rise of capitalism and hence the imperialist underpinnings of its dominance in the twentieth century. His argument eerily emerges out of the nuclear age, in which the phrase "the end of history" also carries with it the threat of nuclear annihilation, for the democracies that he lauds are also stockpiling nuclear arsenals. *Waterland* serves as an ideological confrontation

¹⁸ Fukuyama writes, "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 4.

with “the end of history” as a progression towards the higher goal of Western capitalism, as the novel targets the rise and fall of British power over the twentieth century and the ever-present threat of nuclear war.¹⁹ In doing so, the novel resists the political and temporal determinism and apocalyptic threat of history’s “end,” for the inflexibility of such a narrative is a source of hegemonic power that can produce immobilizing fear, and is a hindrance to creative thought. The novel offers a renewed sense of time as a multifarious realm with no singular structure or meaning by continually cycling back and forth, advancing multiple causal relationships between the past and present and exploring numerous possible explanations that mingle in a realm between truth and fiction.

The novel’s “counterhistorical” strategies also challenge the factual nature of history, and its attack on New Right thought and apocalyptic time begins in the classroom. One of the widespread shifts in government policy enacted by Thatcher was in the area of educational curriculum. Andrew Marwick describes the Educational Reform Act of 1986 as taking a “more business-oriented line” with academics, valuing technology, business, and science over the humanities.²⁰ In secondary schools, science and mathematics were designated as core subjects so as to receive more funding, while the humanities were deemed to be “foundational subjects,” lower in value than math and science. Thatcher herself described this re-categorization as allowing for more focus on “content and knowledge,” as opposed to “interpretation and inquiry.”²¹ Thus, educational practice was to impart the bare facts rather than critical thinking skills. Crick’s decision to offer his students multiple ways to narrate the passing of time, and structuring narratives that circle back on one another and are never fully complete, promotes a

¹⁹ Emily Horton makes a similar point; she writes that Crick is interested in “reformulating history itself, separating it from the imperialist associations it has acquired within contemporary New Right thought.” Horton, 69.

²⁰ Andrew Marwick, *British Society Since 1945*, (London: Penguin, 1996), 361-62.

²¹ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 595-96.

continuous reprocessing and remaking of the past that directly challenges the Thatcher administration's belief in the static nature of official history's facts and the subsequent dismissal of historical revision and critical thought. Indeed, to Crick, to accept an explanation is to stop questioning and to suppress the multiplicities of the past. He teaches his students the need to "always ask why," to investigate the past continually with no end goal. In his words, "I taught you that by forever attempting to explain we may come, not to an Explanation, but to a knowledge of the limits of our power to explain" (108). One must acknowledge history as a necessarily incomplete project that does not offer a clear-cut narrative and simple explanations. Crick continues, "Yes, yes, the past gets in the way; it trips us up, bogs us down; it complicates, makes difficult. But to ignore this is folly, because, above all, what history teaches us is to avoid illusion and make-believe, to lay aside dreams, moonshine, cure-alls, wonder-workings, pie-in-the-sky – to be realistic" (108). Thus, to embrace the messiness of the past, rather than reject its significance or accept a simplified account, is to empower the individual, for a knowledge of history makes one less susceptible to repeating its mistakes while also more likely to reject the illusions of constructed cultural narratives. Indeed, it is official history, the one-dimensional "factual," that obscures reality through its oversimplification in the name of a clear-cut narrative. As Gary Saul Morson explains, the "need for coherence" often leads historians to reduce an "endless ramification" of possibilities to a single line, for "[e]ach moment has multiple potentials, but narratives almost by their very nature tend to edit out such multiplicity."²² The aim of *Waterland* is to reinvest the past with a sense of these possibilities in order to resist the centrist values that have created a linear structure of history and that, in the era of the Cold War, have created only one destructive possibility for the future.

²² See Morson, 157. Decoste makes a similar argument: "Tending to insist on final answers without appeal, on stable but restricted definitions of the meaning of things, the narrativization that fuels the making of history carries with it, too, the desire to simplify, finalize, and even brutally exclude." Decoste, 390-1.

Waterland's intertwined aims – to challenge the new conservative policies of Britain, the prevailing attitude that the past does not matter, and to liberate the individual from the fear of an imminent apocalyptic ending – come to a head in a scene, early on in the novel, in which Crick learns of the downsizing of the History department from his headmaster Lewis Scott (whom Crick refers to by his first name). Lewis, a former teacher of physics and chemistry, explains to Crick that due to an “unavoidable reduction” (22), there will be no new Head of History and that the department will be merged into General Studies. When Crick protests, Lewis explains that although he does not personally care for the subject, the decision to downsize is not entirely his own. He tells Crick that he is being pressured to promote ““practical relevance to today’s real world”” (22), an obvious catchphrase of the Thatcher administration. When Crick objects that his subject has recently gotten more popular among the students, Lewis quickly dismisses this claim, calling Crick’s classes “circus-acts” because of their shift away from official curriculum to stories of the Fens. Lewis then clarifies his own ideological position and aligns himself with the priorities of the contemporary political era. Lewis believes that educators should be “equipping [students] for the real world” by sending them “out into the world with a sense of his or her usefulness, with an ability to apply, with practical knowledge and not a rag-bag of pointless information” (23). Lewis’s utilitarian perspective conjures an image of scientific practicality that sets students on a straight path so as to implement their “usefulness,” a word that suggests that one’s purpose is to be utilized within a larger cultural system. This notion of knowledge directly conflicts with Crick’s promotion of the study of history as a necessarily incomplete project in that history, and temporality in general, is an open and indefinable force, moving in multiple directions and without an end goal or singular purpose. For Crick, a deep knowledge of history offers a lever with which to extricate oneself from the dominant cultural

system at work by continually investigating factual accounts through creative, imaginative interactions.

Crick's narration of his conversation with Lewis continues with a review of Lewis's career. In this short history, Crick shapes Lewis as a representative figure for the changing political landscape of Britain. Lewis began as headmaster in the mid-1960s, a time that Crick describes as "bright" and "revolutionary," while also being the age of "the cold war, the Cuba crisis, and the intercontinental ballistic missile" (23). Lewis emerges out of this era, full of good intentions for the future of the school. His buoyant optimism prompts Crick to compare him to a ship captain, "confidently striding the deck," and the school as "a new ship bound for the Promised Land" (23). This metaphor of imperial expansion and colonization suggests that Lewis's vision for the school operates through the same rhetoric of destiny that Britain used to shape itself as the world's chosen civilizing force. This optimistic language of expansion and destiny is also the foundation of the type of restrictive historical narrative that Crick is opposed to, as its teleology limits the consideration of alternative possibilities. However, as the empire declined over the course of the twentieth century, over the years Lewis has come to doubt his role as leader. Indeed, as Crick notes, Lewis is worried about the future, in particular about the future of his students because he fears "that in the 1980s he can't provide them with golden prospects" (23). Continuing his characterization of Lewis today, Crick returns to the metaphor of imperial navigation, yet now "It's still his [Lewis's] ship. But he's no longer captain. He's become – a figurehead. Steadfast and staunch, but still a figurehead" (24). Lewis now performs the role of triumphant leader, acting as if he is piloting the school towards a better future, yet his forced optimism masks "marks of worry" (24). Read as a comment on the state of Britain towards the end of the twentieth century, the shift in Lewis from determined commander to

empty figurehead suggests that Britain's revitalized stance as world leader, post-Suez and under the guise of nuclear power, is also a forced performance that masks a fear of the future.

Indeed, *Waterland* often contextualizes its series of histories through the decline of British power and a deflation of the rhetoric of progress. For example, towards the end of the novel, Crick delivers his retirement speech to his school's student body, in which he makes his criticism of imperialism and the linearity of progress clear. In this speech, which composes the chapter entitled "About Empire-building," he tells his audience that civilization is "artificial" and is only an idea (336); it is easily broken and cannot fulfill the promise of continuous betterment. As Crick explains, "There's this thing called progress. But it doesn't progress, it doesn't go anywhere. Because as progress progresses the world can slip away" (336). Here, faith in the faulty ideal of progress yields a detachment from reality, a message that reinforces his earlier lecture on how a sustained study of history can make one more able to resist the illusions of false ideals. Crick concludes his speech by offering his own understanding of the progression of time: "My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged, vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. But you shouldn't go mistaking the reclamation of land for the building of empires" (336). In this reconceptualization, Crick offers an understanding of progress as based on the cycles of the Fens marshland – the perpetual advancement and retreat of land formation and erosion that inherently undermines the stability of borders and hence the belief-system of the imperialist drive. Crick's model counters, in his words, "the building of empires," for it is not based upon a grand narrative of conclusive fulfillment and acknowledges rather than ignores the impermanence of land acquisition. Instead, this "counterhistorical" temporal model resists the

notion of an endpoint altogether, while making clear the risks and consequences of diminishing time into a single historical trajectory.

As Crick notes, resistance to historical knowledge accompanies a blind faith in progress, which can generate disillusionment (a removal from reality) and susceptibility to false explanations and fears. For example, Crick recalls that Lewis, slightly tipsy at a dinner party, announces one night that what he really wishes he could offer students is a fallout shelter. Instead of believing in a bright future, Lewis reveals that he fears what is to come; and because he subscribes to the Thatcher administration's resurgent rhetoric of destiny, implemented to restore Britain to its former glory, the only future that Lewis can imagine is one of doom. His solution – to offer a fallout shelter – succumbs to these fears, rather than attempting to counteract them. In a later installment of the scene in which Crick discusses the downsizing of the History department with Lewis, Crick touches on his students' fears and the options one has to address them. The conversation begins as Lewis dismisses the significance of Crick's new curriculum, calling it a sign that Crick has already waived his responsibilities as a teacher by turning his lectures into, in Lewis's words, "story-telling sessions." Crick challenges this characterization, arguing that the subject matter is still history. Lewis responds that he understands the point of the standardized curriculum to be to demonstrate to students that the past has something to teach us, and that by studying the past we can better the future. Crick quickly dismisses this depiction of historical progression: "If that were so, history would be the record of inexorable progress, wouldn't it? The future would be an ever more glowing prospect." Here, Crick recognizes that this rhetoric rings false when confronted with the "futurelessness" that dominates the contemporary era; and it is this type of challenge to the study of history that *Waterland's* counterhistorical strategies address. As he then explains, his students are indeed afraid of the

future and have rejected the value of progress. He tells Lewis, ““It came up, a while ago, in my ‘A’ level group. Nine out of sixteen said they’ve dreamt of a nuclear war. In several cases a recurring nightmare. They dream about the end of the world”” (153). This fear of the future, and subsequent belief that there is no future, also threatens the significance of the past. Crick continues, ““And I began to quite seriously think, Lew: what does education do, what does it have to offer, when deprived of its necessary partner, the future, and faced instead with no future at all?”” (154). It is Crick’s task, then, to reinvest the future as a realm of possibility so as to combat this single-minded paranoia that destroys the relevance of the past. Thus, the novel’s counterhistorical narrative offers multiple narrative paths, tracking back and forth through time, in order to counter the violence and blindness of futurelessness.

Through his efforts over the course of the novel, Crick’s students’ opinions on the value of history shift. One evening, Crick runs into his student Price as he is leaving campus. Price tells him that he has stayed late for a meeting of a new club that he helped found, and though the name is still up for debate, Price calls it “The Holocaust Club – the Anti-Armageddon League” (236). The club, inspired by one of Crick’s classes, allows members to share their fears of the end of the world, including the minutia of the ““last minutes, last thoughts, the panic, what it’ll be like for those who don’t go straight away.” As Price puts it, ““Not every kid in this school would get up and join a protest. But they might be scared. We want to pool people’s fear. Tell them not to hide it. Bring it out in the open. We want to say, it’s OK, show your fear, add it to ours”” (238). The Holocaust Club is a forum in which nightmares of history’s end become productive through their collection and juxtaposition. Price and the other club members also have a plan to publish these visions as a magazine, thus forming a collaborative text that can be shared with others. The compilation of these alternative visions offers individuals who are afraid

of nuclear war not only an awareness that they are not alone in these fears but also that their visions are not the only possibility, thus weakening their nightmares' power. Thus, the forum of the Holocaust Club empowers the individual while also undermining the dominant Armageddon narrative that has taken over the cultural consciousness. In this way, the Club operates in a similar manner to the counterfactual, as its multiple narratives mitigate the threat of the nuclear bomb as an inevitable certainty.

Crick then privately reflects on the significance of the club's name, and why he chose to become a teacher. As he explains it, he made this decision because of what he saw in Germany in 1946 – namely, the destruction and rubble of the German cities. It was, to him, a nightmare not unlike Price's; he calls it “a vision of the world in ruins” (240), through which he realized the fragility of civilization. This vision is what prompted him to teach history – to study the past as “a struggle to make things not seem meaningless” and as “a fight against fear” (241). Here Crick suggests a correspondence between the end results of World War II and the age of the Cold War, as they are governed by a similar shock and fear of the end of time. By connecting these occurrences, he places them within a larger historical context, thus creating a pattern with which to navigate time so as to alleviate the feeling of futurelessness. Instead of allowing the trauma of such catastrophes, either real or anticipated, to cripple and immobilize, these events instead become locus points that must be continually investigated, thus becoming a foundation for personal and communal development. In this way, the novel furthers modernist counterfactual practice by resisting the oppression of historical determinism and offering a moral imperative to the continual exploration of time, in particular its darkest moments.

Waterland's counterhistorical practices thus mitigate a resistance to investigating traumas past, present, and future – and both personal and external. The novel offers multiple examples of

the consequences of historical ignorance, beginning with the extended scene between Lewis and Crick regarding the downsizing of the History department. At the conclusion of their conversation, Crick notes that Lewis has avoided asking about his wife's recent abduction of a baby from a grocery store and her current stay in an asylum, which he views as the underlying reason for his forced early retirement. Instead of inquiring, Lewis refuses to engage: "No reasons, no explanations, no digging up what's past. He'd rather pretend it isn't real. Reality's so strange, so strange and unexpected. He doesn't want to discuss it" (25). The situation of Crick's wife, Mary, is a central example of the repercussions of not "asking why." Mary, who becomes pregnant at age sixteen during a teenage romance with Crick, undergoes a botched abortion that takes away her ability to have children. As Crick puts it, Mary was once someone "[w]ho liked to find things out, to uncover secrets, but then ceased to be inquisitive. Whose life came to a kind of stop when she was only sixteen, though she had to go on living" (122). This type of detachment can perpetuate new traumas, as it does with Mary, who later in life experiences a psychotic break that begins with the announcement that God has promised her a baby, followed by the kidnapping of a child. Similarly, a resistance to learning and to knowledge leads to the suicide of Tom's brother, Dick, at the end of the novel. Born mentally challenged, Dick eventually discovers that he is the product of incest, as his grandfather is his real father. The choice of his grandfather, Ernest Atkinson, to impregnate his own daughter is a response to the world-ending traumas of World War I, which prompt him to turn to a religious variant of apocalyptic thinking in which he believes his daughter's child will be "the Saviour of the World" (228). Tom's father knew the truth but hid it from both Dick and Tom, and to protect Dick from this secret he resisted any attempt to educate him. As Tom describes him, Dick "[c]an't read, can't write. Speaks half in baby-prattle, if he speaks at all. Never ask questions,

doesn't want to know. Forgets tomorrow what he's told today" (242). Because Dick has no knowledge of his origin and no sense of the passage of time, when he learns the truth the shock is too much for him to process, and with his death he returns to the waters of the Fens, the place where he feels most at home. Furthermore, the choice that Tom and Dick's father, Henry Crick, makes to keep Dick completely ignorant of the incest that produced him is rooted in Henry's relationship to his own past. A veteran of World War I, Henry spent four years in mental hospitals after his return home, and was released only after stating, "in a perfectly calm and collected voice, 'I remember nothing.'" As Tom notes, this statement only means, "I don't care to remember, and I don't want to talk about it" (222-3). Henry Crick's choice never to admit directly to or share his experience of war shapes his choice to raise his son ignorant of his past, which compounds their traumas rather than forcing father and son to confront and process them.

In light of these personal examples, Crick offers a model of historical engagement that requires a continuous reprocessing and remaking of the past. This model stands counter to official historical discourse, particularly of the Cold War era, which offers a narrow explanation of phenomena that then favors a singular end to history, rather than considering multiple possibilities. Crick explains to his students the distinction between official history and the approach to the past that the novel advocates:

I always taught you that history has its uses, its serious purpose. I always taught you to accept the burden of our need to ask why. I taught you that there is never any end to that question, because, as I once defined it for you (yes, I confess a weakness for improvised definitions), history is that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge. (108)

To impose a narrative structure onto the past is narrowly to define a cause and effect, and here Crick argues against singular explanations because to accept an explanation is to stop questioning, to suppress the multiplicities of the past, and of particular significance here, to be

more susceptible to apocalyptic fears. Crick's characterization of history suggests a futility of knowledge that has led critics to follow Linda Hutcheon's model of calling *Waterland* postmodern. Though the novel questions the assumptions of narrative discourse, I agree with Eric Berlatsky that *Waterland* should not be labeled as postmodern because it attempts to retrieve a sense of the real by "offer[ing] ways of thinking outside of narrative in an effort to access the material of the past."²³ *Waterland* challenges the values and structures of historical narratives through its counterhistorical practices so as to produce a wider sense of temporality that demands continuous investigation. Instead of passively accepting a static explanation of the past, the novel promotes an active, and thus subversive, exploration of history. In this model, to accept "the limits of our power to explain" is not a submission to the hollowness of the past but rather a call to question what any definitive explanation excludes; in this way, it encourages the consideration of counterfactual possibilities. This ceaseless, imaginative curiosity seeks out what has been silenced by hegemonic narratives, thus expanding the possibilities of the past and broadening the shape of the future into a more hopeful time, rather than a quickly approaching, fearful end.²⁴

While *Waterland* rejects a linear structure of the past, and thus the accompanying value of progress, it does not reject the possibility of larger patterns to time. As Crick tells his class, "There are no compasses for journeying in time. As far as our sense of direction in this unchartable dimension is concerned, we are like lost travellers in a desert. We believe we are

²³ Eric Berlatsky, "The Swamps of Myth ... and Empirical Fishing Lines': Historiography, Narrativity, and the 'Here and Now' in Graham Swift's *Waterland*," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no. 2 (2006): 285.

²⁴ Here, I am drawing on David W. Price's articulation of how novels of "poietic" history operate (poieisis being the act of making in language): "The novelists examined here also often employ the poetic imagination as a means of questioning history, which, in turn, produces a countermemory or counternarrative to the popular and uncritically accepted referent that we take to be the historical past. They produce speculative novels of poietic history in that they expand the referential field of the past so as to provide the grounds upon which to construct a critique of that same past and, at the same time, imagine new possibilities for the future." Price, 3-4.

going forward ... But how do we know... that we are not moving in a great circle?" (135). The possibility of temporal circularity suggests a confluence between past and present, as shown through the patterns that emerge in Crick's storytelling such as between his vision of the end of the world in 1946 and Price's nightmares. Indeed, Crick rejects a model of history as a series of revolutions that completely break with the past, as the cornerstone event of his required syllabus, the French Revolution, is so often framed.²⁵ Instead, he advances an understanding of time's passage as a continual return to the past in order to understand it more fully. He describes "[h]ow it [time] repeats itself, how it goes back on itself, no matter how we try to straighten it out. How it twists and turns. How it goes in circles and brings us back to the same place" (142). However, Crick insists that any such patterns are shifting, depending on one's perspective, like the turning of a kaleidoscope. Thus, Crick's narration perpetually shifts back and forth through time, seeking out parallels between events, but never settles on one set shape. Instead, the multiple possible correspondences between past and present warrant an unrestricted investigation of time.

Crick's approach is centrally a challenge to an apocalyptic structure of time. The novel includes multiple variants of apocalyptic belief systems beyond just the current fears of nuclear war. Faith in a religious apocalyptic model of time – that the end of the world will bring about a new beginning, or a paradise on Earth – is often a response to trauma or violence, as in the earlier example of Ernest Atkinson's impregnation of his daughter to help save a world torn apart by World War I. Even the political variant of the French Revolution follows this same pattern of Christian belief, as comrades renounced the excesses of royalty in order to return to ideals of

²⁵ On a related note, modernism was also traditionally framed as a movement predicated on a complete break with the past that ends abruptly in the mid-twentieth century. One of the larger claims of my project is to counter this understanding of modernism, as I argue that modernism's counterfactual strategies persist throughout the twentieth century. In this way, the claims of my project in relation to modernism echo Crick's approach to time.

simplicity. As Crick describes the rebels' reaction to what they believed was the end of the Revolution in 1790, "they celebrated by dressing up, in Arcadian simplicity, as swains and shepherdesses and by planting tender young trees of liberty" (137). While Crick understands the appeal of an apocalyptic belief system that offers a way to undo the trauma or corruption of the present day, he fears that it can also create an "insidious longing to revert" and will beget the "bastard but pampered child, Nostalgia." He explains this allure: "[h]ow we yearn – how you may one day yearn – to return to that time before history claimed us, before things went wrong... How we pine for Paradise. For mother's milk. To draw back the curtain of events that has fallen between us and the Golden Age" (136). Yet this desire to return to an Edenic age too often entails, Crick notes, a rejection of historical knowledge that then generates a dangerous naiveté, the consequences of which can be devastating.

During his discussion of apocalyptic revolution and nostalgia, Crick briefly references the splitting of the atom as an example of Western progress once praised for its advancement of human knowledge (136). Yet the central difference between the religious variants of apocalyptic faith and the contemporary fears of nuclear apocalypse is that nuclear war does not offer a return to a millennialist paradise. Thus, the future is a catastrophic realm that oppresses rather than liberates those who attempt to imagine it, which is why the fear of nuclear war is so devastating to Crick's students. After discussing his students' nightmares of nuclear war, Crick admits that he does not share their fears. Instead, as he sees it, "there are ways and ways, a thousand million ways, in which the world comes to an end" (155). Rather than privileging a specific direction or development to time, Crick suggests that an infinite number of endings can be imagined – that each individual mind can conceive of a different path or pattern to the passage of time and thus will arrive at a different endpoint. There is a sense of freedom and empowerment involved in

this approach, as it is not left to the privileged few to determine the end of history, but rather that each person makes his own world and creates a history. It is this type of counterhistorical understanding that is the foundation of the Holocaust Club, in which individuals' imaginings are celebrated rather than becoming immobilizing fears. Indeed, to gather alternative visions of the future is to reject any type of closed narrative of history that, as Michael André Bernstein explains in his discussion of the flaws of apocalyptic history, "[legislates] the future" and "[explains] the present and the past in terms of a single, coherent system." Such a system, Bernstein continues, "not only renders individual human creativity and freedom irrelevant, but it also removes any significance from imagining alternative paths."²⁶ *Waterland* calls for a reinvigoration of such imaginings not as a distraction from reality but in order to recognize the inherent complexity that teleological systems attempt to suppress.

A central example of systemic constraint intertwined with imperial power in the novel is in the world of Greenwich, Tom's current home, in particular the system of Greenwich Mean Time. Crick often takes walks with his wife through Greenwich's historic grounds, and The Royal Observatory is a common destination. Yet the Observatory it is more than just a structuring device for the Cricks' life, helping to divide their time into standardized units, for next to the Observatory is a plaque that marks the line of longitude 0°. The prime meridian, first established for maritime calculation of location, is also the origin point for Greenwich Mean Time, the global system of temporal organization. It is the center point of the imperial grid that systematizes space and time, and an emblem of the history of British naval power. Statues, museums, and monuments of imperial conquest dot Greenwich's landscape, a world that appears frozen in time so as to preserve the victories that these markers celebrate. For example, next to

²⁶ Bernstein, 28.

the line of longitude 0°, “perched on a plinth, becloaked and tricomed, stands General Wolfe, in bronze, staring to the Thames” (128). Instead of impressing, the General’s “perched” stance reduces the gravity of his pose. Furthermore, though Wolfe’s statue frames his accomplishments as a historical endpoint, the victory that it celebrates, the Battle of Quebec in the Seven Years’ War that helped consolidate British power in North America, was only a temporary one. Crick’s description also subtly diminishes the prestige of Greenwich’s military museums: “The Maritime Museum (relics of Cook and Nelson); the Naval College (painted ceiling depicting four English monarchs). History’s toy-cupboard. The pastime of past time” (129). Instead of communicating the power of Britain to future generations, Crick frames these historical collections as childish diversions. These museums immobilize history, undermining their significance to contemporary concerns, in contrast to the historical interactions that Crick promotes, which do not limit the meaning of the past.

Furthermore, while the repetition of “longitude zero” initially evokes a sense of chronology and order, it is precisely at the zero degree line that Mary, Crick’s wife, announces that God has promised her a baby, the first sign of her mental crisis. This announcement shatters Tom Crick’s understanding of his world, triggers his investigation of his past, and results in his abandonment of the traditional history curriculum for stories of the Fens. Thus, the repetition of “zero” also suggests the underlying emptiness of this system. For as Crick often points out to his class, history, as official discourse, is an artifice created to stave off the “old, old feeling, that everything might amount to nothing” (269). In this sense, history constructs an eventful structure of time that forms a meaningful, singular purpose for the past.²⁷ Yet Crick views such

²⁷ Rufus Cook comments on the relationship between Crick’s understanding of history’s imposition of temporal structure and Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*: “For Tom, as for Kermode, beginnings and ends together with the temporal structure that they confer are actually imposed on experience by the human mind because we find

singularity as misleading and constrictive; as he tells his students, history is “the fabrication, the diversion, the reality-obscuring drama” (40). In contrast to this narrow-minded systematization, Crick encourages a counterhistorical investigation of the past that never settles on a singular answer.

The imagining of a multiplicity of possible histories is also a central element of *Waterland*'s narrative structure. In order to weaken the centrality of the well-known events of established historical discourse, the novel parallels major events with “minor” ones. For example, Crick places the life of his ancestor, Jacob Crick, who worked the first mills in the Fens in the eighteenth century, on the same narrative plane as revolutions on the new continent: “When the redcoats were storming Quebec, and the citizens of New England were rising up against their British masters (and offering a model for the discontented citizens of Paris), Jacob Crick was putting his cheek and ear to the air to feel the direction and force of the breezes” (14). While both events evoke images of shifting forces, whether it is the wind or power structures, their juxtaposition creates a sense of simultaneity and connection that broadens one's understanding of historical time. To draw parallels between these acts undermines the distinction between “significant” events and everyday occurrences and suggests that this distinction is only determined in hindsight. To Jacob Crick, the sensations of his new occupation are of more consequence than events occurring in far-off locales. In this way, the novel subtly elevates the regional geography of the Fens over national, centrist narratives.²⁸ Consequently, these juxtapositions frequently incorporate events important to the narrative of British imperialism, as

'purely successive, disorganized time' intolerable.” See “The Aporia of Time in Graham Swift's *Waterland*,” *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 30, no. 1 (January 2004): 135.

²⁸ This strategy evokes W. H. Auden's poem, “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1938), which juxtaposes extraordinary events with the details of everyday life. Auden undermines the significance of “major” or important events – in his poem, the fall of Icarus, which is only briefly noted by its witnesses – by elevating the ordinariness of human existence, which he sees as full of experiences and purpose.

in a passage that details the beginning of the Atkinson monopoly, a dominant family in the history of the Fens: “While across the Atlantic the first warning shots were being fired in what is known to you as the War of American Independence, William Atkinson, Josiah’s son, began sending his barley direct to the brewers” (65). Again, the events echo each other as revolutionary acts, yet there is a subtle diminution of the American Revolution’s beginnings in favor of the events of the Fens. While this shift in perspective is part of Crick’s pedagogical decision to stop teaching the required curriculum, the accumulation of such references to the rise and fall of English imperial power over the course of the novel destabilizes the rigid concept of British nationhood as based on a narrative of empire, a narrative that resurges in the Thatcher era. Instead, the novel elevates localized, regional sensibilities as part of its counterhistorical strategy to promote individual interactions with history.

Furthermore, these descriptions of simultaneity are exercises in creative historical thought, as Crick reimagines minute details of the past that can never be proven true or false. Indeed, Crick revels in the freedom of this counterfactual exercise, and within his intricate histories he occasionally comments on the brevity of historical records, which would never have preserved the details that he includes. Yet this brevity does not hinder Crick but rather enables him to expand the world of the past beyond simplistic accounts. Thus, Crick’s histories contain a variety of possibilities that mingle in a realm between truth and fiction. For example, his elaborate exploration of the Atkinson brewery fire in 1911 begins with the caveat that “[p]recise accounts of the events of that day are hard to track down” (171). This gap in the historical record gives Crick license to imagine and recreate the world of that day in wild and spectacular detail. Again, this account contains a subtle criticism of English imperial authority, for the brewery burns down on the release day of Coronation Ale, a secret brew that honors the ascension of

George V to the throne and promptly sends the town into spells of delirium and drunkenness. After imaginatively probing the many possible causes of the brewery fire, Crick notes that each explanation does not occlude the existence of other possible imaginings. Instead, his speculations are part of a multitude of possible accounts, so that the many unanswered questions that Crick asks about the brewery-burning remain as open invitations to further imaginative investigation. To contrast with this abundance, Crick closes this section with the following sentence: “The verdict of the official investigators and the insurance company inspectors: an accident” (177). The curtness of this official conclusion conflicts with Crick’s open-ended, imaginative speculations, as it forecloses the suggestion of any alternative explanation. Swift’s novel thus suggests that Crick’s probing of multiple possibilities is not an unsound investigation of the past. Instead, it is official history that obscures reality through its oversimplification in the name of a clear-cut narrative. The opposition between the official account and Crick’s investigations embodies the approach to history that the novel advances – to question continually one-dimensional accounts and explore multiple explanations.

As Mark Currie comments, *Waterland*’s narrative form is an enactment of the novel’s temporal philosophy, as there is a reciprocal relationship between Crick’s historical theorization and the novel’s structure.²⁹ The novel’s performance of its own argument expands its suspicion of linearity to include fictional narrative. *Waterland* is formed through the accretion of over fifty chapters that widely vary in length, which disrupts its narrative development through sudden shifts in subject and tone. The reader’s desire for comprehension and closure of the original

²⁹ Currie argues that *Waterland* offers “an explicit discourse on the subject of time, working alongside a narrative form which corroborates and reflects its observations,” Currie, 92. It is this reciprocity that Currie argues that Hutcheon’s postmodern analysis ignores. Currie’s work of *Waterland* is largely an analysis of the establishment of a position of “future retrospect in present experience” (97-8), which he argues is a new form of temporal organization in the novel. Here, I focus on the counterhistorical imaginings that permeate the novel’s reflections on history and the novel’s narrative form.

mysteries of the novel is continually deferred, as one is forced to consider multiple alternative narrative paths. Throughout this process, the novel recognizes the reader's desire for a conventional story, with a clear beginning, middle, and end, while continually mocking this desire.³⁰ As Crick tells his listeners, both his students and the reader, man "is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories, he has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right" (62-3). As a structure of digression and deferment becomes the accepted pattern of the text, the reader is re-trained to anticipate such shifts and not to expect the satisfaction of a completed explanation. Instead, the reader learns that each narrative strand is worthy of investigation, and thus becomes suspicious of any move towards a final endpoint.³¹ The reader's adoption of an ever-curious stance is the culmination of Crick's teachings, for it is the expansion of his promotion of constant curiosity to the structure of fiction. Hence, halfway through the novel, when he attempts to conclude his lectures by offering the official verdict that the death of Freddie Parr, a boy who died in the family lock when Tom was young, was accidental, his students (and implicitly the reader) call for further investigation of details left unexplained: "But sir! Sir! That can't be all. What about that double bump on the head? What about that freaky brother? . . . What about our detective spirit? Don't stop, keep telling. That can't be the end" (109). This resistance to closure is a quintessentially modernist quality – one can think of the endings of classic works such as

³⁰ In this way, *Waterland* responds to the major argument of Frank Kermode's work of classic literary criticism *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 1967). Kermode argues that mankind relies upon the narrative structure of literature in order to organize a "meaningful experience out of the expanse of time" (17). I will touch on Kermode again in the next chapter in my discussion of Julian Barnes's novel, *The Sense of an Ending* (2011).

³¹ Here I am drawing upon Robert K. Irish's discussion of narrative desire in *Waterland*. Irish writes, "Since *Waterland* is built of such repeated digressions, they become the pattern, and each digression becomes something to decode, modifying a reader's response and undermining the possibility of a master narrative." See Robert K. Irish, "'Let Me Tell You': About Desire and Narrativity in Graham Swift's *Waterland*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 44 (1998): 926-7.

Ulysses and *Mrs. Dalloway*, which both close with gestures of openness and continuation – that furthers the counterhistorical suspicion of any narrative that promises definitiveness.

In line with these aesthetic and political values, *Waterland* ends with the renewed impetus to question. The novel's final words of dialogue, spoken by a witness to Dick's suicide, are "[s]omeone best explain" (358). The novel concludes with the opening of a new line of questioning that will produce another narrative path, in a reaffirmation of the need to reprocess the past continually. Thus, the borders of the novel's narrative are perpetually porous, as each event told within it is subject to imaginative investigation and questioning. *Waterland* teaches the reader to adopt counterhistorical practices so as continually to question narratives that attempt to contain the past within an orderly linear form, for the inflexibility of such narratives is the source of hegemonic power and an impediment to creative thought. This impetus extends from one's own history to the larger historical narratives that have constructed England as the dominant imperial power of the twentieth century. In doing so, the novel defuses the apocalyptic fears that operate through the Cold War's rhetoric of destiny in order to recast the future as a multifaceted realm of possibility that requires a constant renegotiation of the past.

The English Patient

In interviews, Michael Ondaatje has spoken of his idea of the novel as a space of resistance in which authors can oppose the politically motivated narratives of government-sanctioned publications by "reclaiming untold stories." As he explains, "One of the things a novel can do is represent the unofficial story, give a personal, complicated version of things... I think a novel can become, in this way, a more permanent and political reflection of your time."³²

³² Bush, 244.

For Ondaatje, the novel's form enables a counterhistorical practice, for the imaginative freedom of fiction can confront and question what official, factual history has silenced through an expansion of narrative time and space. Both *The English Patient* and *Waterland* begin as investigations of the paradigm-shifting violence and destruction of World War II in order to challenge the politics of the Cold War, in particular the fear of a nuclear war. *Waterland's* Tom Crick identifies his motivation to study history (and thus implicitly the driving force behind the production of the novel) as the world-ending implications of the continuous bombing of Germany and the resulting destruction that he witnesses firsthand on a visit there in 1946. *The English Patient* immerses readers into the endgame of World War II, but instead of concentrating on the era's major events so as to refine one's knowledge of official history, the novel investigates the ways in which one attempts to know the past. Ondaatje reinvests a well-known historical moment with the lives of minor figures, living on the outskirts of the epoch-making action, in order to suggest that historical knowledge contains a multiplicity of possibilities, both imagined and known. Furthermore, the novel spatially and temporally defers the narrative's potential "climax" of the bombing of Japan so as to offer room to imagine and to express what has been silenced or ignored by official narratives. This strategy is not a lessening of these events' significance. Rather, the novel explores a moment in time in which the narrative of history seems limited in terms of its outcome, as it does again in the Cold War era, and counters this limitation by opening up the possibility for contradictory versions of time to exist.

By widening this moment in time through such counterhistorical strategies, *The English Patient* offers a liberating model of individual historical interaction for those living in a world shaped by rigid Cold War politics. While *Waterland's* promotion of regionalism challenges the centrist values of British dominance, *The English Patient* counters the same Western dominance

by splintering its narrative into a range of emerging postcolonial perspectives.³³ At the center of the narrative is the English patient himself, a desert explorer whose identity is perpetually uncertain except for the fact that he is not actually English. Though he is suspected to be Count Ladislaus de Almásy of Hungary, this fact is never confirmed for he has been burned beyond recognition in a plane crash in the desert. With him in the half-destroyed Italian villa are three other victims of the war: Hanna, his nurse, who has been traumatized by her wartime service; Caravaggio, a Canadian spy in the British foreign intelligence service who was interrogated and tortured by Italian authorities; and Kip, a Sikh who volunteered to join the British military and has been trained in bomb disposal. In contrast to *Waterland* in which Tom Crick's voice dominates the narrative, *The English Patient* does not privilege one voice over another. The novel shifts between the third-person perspectives of the characters as they attempt to process their traumas, both personal and political.³⁴ The novel's form enacts its counterhistorical challenge through a multifaceted structure that fractures rather than unifies, as the characters' memories continually surface and intersect with the present, generating multiple versions of the past that resist linear order.³⁵ Set against the backdrop of the end of World War II, the novel resists any "backshadowing" of the impending nuclear bomb, and instead lingers in the

³³ Mark D. Simpson comments that the novel, which opens in April 1945, asks the reader to "reckon with empire's ragged seams – seams that, frayed to bursting by the Second World War, have by now unraveled to form those haphazard patterns we call Britain, India, Canada." See Mark D. Simpson, "Minefield Readings: The Postcolonial English Patient," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 53 (Summer 1994): 235.

³⁴ Josef Pesch argues that in one way or another all the novel's characters experience their "moment of apocalypse" through the world-shattering results of their traumatic experiences. He writes, "It [the novel] records the paradoxical attempt of the characters to forget and remember their apocalyptic experiences as they try to restabilize their lives in order to find a modus vivendi in a post-war after-world." See "Post-Apocalyptic War Histories: Michael Ondaatje's 'The English Patient,'" *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 28:2 (1997), 119-120.

³⁵ Novak makes a similar point. She writes, "The fragmentary memories that populate the narrative resist the novel's attempt at constructing a cohesive singular narrative of the past." See Amy Novak, "Textual Hauntings: Narrating History, Memory, and Silence in 'The English Patient,'" *Studies in the Novel*, 36, No. 2 (Summer 2004): 225-6.

characters' ever-shifting thoughts and memories.³⁶ Thus, the novel gives weight to its imagination of the characters' lives and thoughts instead of shaping its investigation of the past into a narrative in which the bomb is the inevitable outcome. As Michael André Bernstein writes, the choice to resist "backshadowing" teaches one to "not see the future as pre-ordained" and to "not use our knowledge of the future as a means of judging the decisions of those living before that (still only possible) future became actual event."³⁷ As a lesson to Ondaatje's contemporary audience, the novel reinvests the individual with the power continually to shape a meaningful relationship with the past and with the future, rather than denying such actions any significance due to an inevitability of historical progression.

Instead of anticipating a violent future, *The English Patient* is foremost a novel of temporal interaction; as Ondaatje comments in an interview, the novel is concerned with a "sense of the layers of history."³⁸ As the narrative shifts between perspectives, the characters' memories continually interrupt and overlap with the present moment. At the center of its narrative is the dying English patient, who lies in bed and recounts his past to all who will listen. The patient's model for his exploration of time is the ancient historian Herodotus, whose *The Histories* serves as a type of diary, as the patient has inserted memorabilia and recorded his memories along the margins.³⁹ The patient describes Herodotus as a historian who investigates

³⁶ "Backshadowing" is a term coined by Michael André Bernstein. He defines it as follows: "Backshadowing is a kind of retroactive foreshadowing in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events *as though they should have known what was to come.*" Bernstein, 16 (emphasis in original).

³⁷ Ibid., 16.

³⁸ Ondaatje continues with an architectural metaphor to explain the novel's exploration of the past: "There are churches in Rome that stand on the remains of two or three earlier churches, all built on the same spot. That sense of history, of building overlaid with building, was central in my mind – unconsciously, I think. Looking back now, it seems to have to do with unearthing, baring history." See Eleanor Wachtel, "An Interview with Michael Ondaatje," *Canadian Literature* 53 (Summer, 1994): 250.

³⁹ Lee Spinks offers useful background on the work of Herodotus and its implications for Ondaatje's intervention in the politics of historical narrative: "Known as both the 'father of history' and the 'father of lies,' Herodotus offers, in his anti-imperialist account of the conflict between the Persian Empire and the Greek city states, a model of

“the cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history” (119), the narratives that are perceived as unimportant and which are rejected from official annals, as well as myths and legends that circulate as possible versions of the past. The role of Herodotus within *The English Patient* builds upon the counterfactual practices discussed in Chapters One and Two. Similar to Joyce, Ondaatje negotiates the relationship between past and present through the modernist strategy of using a classical author’s work as a model. However, the novel does not counterfactually revise Herodotus’s writings but builds upon its approach to history so as to expand narrative and textual borders. As the patient adds to his copy of *The Histories*, “cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations – so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus” (16), the text becomes a hybrid, heterogeneous form that serves as a model for *The English Patient*’s structure. This structure recalls that of *Ulysses* – its intermixing of the actual and possible, and its rejection of totalizing interpretations of the past so as to promote the fluidity and aesthetic freedom of the present moment.

Indeed, Ondaatje invokes modernist aesthetics when discussing the narrative structures that he admires; in his words, he is drawn to “a form that can have a more *cubist* or mural voice to capture the variousness of things. Rather than one demonic stare.”⁴⁰ This aesthetic “variousness” suggests a multiplicity of experience, of individual perspectives not fusing into one voice or mode of perception but existing alongside one another in a cubist narrative form. David James discusses Ondaatje’s adoption of the formal elements of cubist aesthetics in “order

historical writing that embraces, rather than disavows, the status of history as a type of narrative... As the plural title of his account suggests, Herodotus’s concern throughout *The Histories* is to replace a monolithic conception of ‘history’ with a sense of the enduring struggle between competing perspectives and interests that lies behind the emergence of any definitive historical point of view.” See Spinks, 182.

⁴⁰ Bush, 249 (emphasis mine).

to refract the ethical implications” of multiple perspectives.⁴¹ James writes that Ondaatje incorporates cubist structures in order to complicate the telling of history so that “an event is seen through many eyes or emotions,” which “vindicates his multiperspectival narration as an ethically accountable mode, by using it to evoke perceptions of the same context of terror but from alternative angles.”⁴² James argues that such modernist strategies enable Ondaatje to confront the consequences of colonialism, or as I understand it more broadly, the violence that history can enact. I suggest here that Ondaatje’s cubist aesthetic in *The English Patient* also draws upon the modernist strategy of counterfactual time. The counterfactual contributes a “multiperspectival” and ethical awareness of the passage of time, whereby each moment can be viewed as one possibility among many. Ondaatje thus alerts the reader to the consequences of remaining within a single perspective, a lesson that extends beyond narrative structure to the structure of history itself – in particular, the violence of apocalyptic time.

The English Patient’s counterhistorical expansion also evokes the work of Selvon and Coetzee, discussed in Chapter Two, in which the narrators appropriate and expand the canonical narrative of imperial justification, *Robinson Crusoe*, as a way to make room for the expression of their own postcolonial histories. The patient’s textual interactions with the work of Herodotus recall such narrative practices, and other characters in the novel perform similar actions. For example, Hana begins to record her own life within the margins and on the blank pages of such canonical texts as Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* and Kipling’s *Kim*, both of which offer a justification of imperial power. Such acts of writing challenge the borders of these texts – of the divide between public and private, major and minor, and inside and outside. Hana’s writings open up these texts to continual modification based on the context in which she interacts with

⁴¹ David James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge UP, 2012), 71.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 89.

them. While she uses the edges of the books as a type of diary, at the same time her personal experiences are now recorded as contributions to the larger cultural record. These fragments of memory, thoughts, and emotions challenge the divide between what is accepted into the canon of official historical and literary narrative and what remains unrecorded and eventually forgotten – which is exactly what *The English Patient* aims to recover so as to challenge the factual narrative of this moment in history.

While Selvon and Coetzee's novels defer the complete expression of their narrators' marginalized experiences to an undetermined future time, *The English Patient* frames its reimagination of marginalized lives as always necessarily incomplete, as the novel resists any perspectival, temporal, or narrative containment. Instead, the novel lingers in the possibilities of this incompleteness, as a way to resist factual certainty. The patient offers a passage from Herodotus so as to explain the latter's, and implicitly Ondaatje's, aim of decentering historical discourse: "“This history of mine... has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument”" (119). Here, Herodotus defines the scope of his writing as lying outside of, or beyond, a central narrative. His histories aim to represent othered experiences – those that are not included within the borders of historical discourse as well as those that exist within a realm of alternative possibilities, haunting the official narratives of the past.⁴³ The patient describes his image of Herodotus as a man who travels the desert, “trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage” (118-9). In this vision, Herodotus is not a historian who is invested in making a distinction between what can be deemed true and what is not. Rather than producing a solid documentation of the past, his

⁴³ Friedman makes a similar suggestion: “Herodotus's capacity to envision lengthy historical processes and to approach his subject from a decentered position outside of the perspective of a particular people in a particular land locates him, for Almásy, outside of the hegemonic and linear narrative of history. His Herodotus is someone interested in telling the ‘other story.’” See Rachel D. Friedman, "Deserts and Gardens: Herodotus and *The English Patient*," *Arion* 15, no. 3 (Winter 2008), 59-60.

writings are a shimmery “mirage,” a cluster of tales that bend and change like refracted rays of light. Herodotus forms this mirage by working with possibilities or “legends,” which the patient describes as circulating like “seeds.” This comparison suggests, as Lobnik notes, the “continuous growth and transformation” of these narratives over time, and the larger “potential or promise that the stories hold.”⁴⁴ It is this sense of potential and change with which Ondaatje seeks to invest his counterhistorical narrative of the past, by eluding the known and lingering in the incomplete, the silenced, and the potential.

The patient’s stories, which anchor the narrative, primarily concern his time spent exploring and mapping the Libyan desert for the benefit of European powers, most notably searching for the lost oasis of Zerzura. Like Herodotus, he is a historian of the desert, what he calls a place of “lost history” (135) in which time and space are in constant movement and which thus evade political and geographic systemization. As with the Fens of *Waterland*, these qualities of the desert challenge British spatial control and historical teleology while also offering an aesthetic of temporal indeterminacy and openness. Though the patient’s phrase, “lost history,” can imply emptiness or blankness, the desert (and implicitly the novel) is “lost” only in the sense that traditional demarcations of space and time do not function there. Its essential nature remains conventionally unnavigable; in the desert, the patient notes, “it is easy to lose a sense of demarcation” (18). This sense of indeterminacy unravels all boundaries, including one’s sense of self and one’s sense of a nation. For this reason, as the patient explains, the desert has escaped the records of Western history: “There is, after Herodotus, little interest by the Western world towards the desert for hundreds of years. From 425 B.C. to the beginning of the twentieth century there is an averting of eyes. Silence” (133). This omission is a

⁴⁴ Lobnik, 103.

characterization of the centrist biases and structures of Western historiography rather than a judgment of the desert's nature as being of no value. As Lobnik explains, since the desert does not fit into the structures of Western historical discourse, it remains invisible from that perspective. Yet instead of being an inherently empty or meaningless space, its silence in Western historical records "bears witness to a historical (visual) erasure."⁴⁵ This erasure speaks to the limits of Western historical narratives, to the places, peoples, events, times, etc., that, in the English patient's words, have not yet been made "historical" (18). The desert's very nature resists the compartmentalization that would fully incorporate it into history. It becomes a space of openness and possibility, rather than being assimilated to a knowledge system that proceeds in a single, immobile line. The novel offers the desert as a space of individual liberation and imagination that resists the limitations of a narrative model of history, here specifically an apocalyptic progression that operates through a foreshadowing of an inevitable end.

In the desert, the fluid merging of space and time brings the past into perpetual contact with the present. When the patient's plane crashes there, his first thought is to build a raft for he feels he is "among water people" (18). The waters that covered the arid landscape thousands of years ago still have a presence, for the past has not been relegated to a distant point in linear time that is no longer accessible: "In Tassili I have seen rock engravings from a time when the Sahara people hunted water horses from reed boats. In Wadi Sura I saw caves whose walls were covered with paintings of swimmers. Here there had been a lake. I could draw its shape on a wall for them. I could lead them to its edge, six thousand years ago" (18). As the patient reinscribes the traces of the past in the present, the spatial and temporal distance between the two collapses. Instead of disorienting him, the resurfacing of a memory of water helps to locate him

⁴⁵ Lobnik, 76.

in the desert landscape. Indeed, the entire novel can be read as the attempt to order the shifting resurgence of memory, a project that can never be completed for memory, like the desert, is in perpetual flux.

To the English patient, the Cave of Swimmers, described in the above passage, is the tangled confluence of the desert's history and his own past. He continually returns to his memories of the Cave of Swimmers in his present day recollections, spoken to the others living with him in the Italian villa. It is in this cave that his lover, Katharine Clifton, dies after the patient rescues her from the burning plane that her husband purposely crashes because he knows about the affair; the patient leaves to get help but is arrested under suspicion that he is a spy and prevented from returning until several years later, when he goes back to bury her desiccated body. The convergence of past and present in this cave – of the desert's watery history and the patient's continual exploration of his role in Katharine's death – constructs the space of the desert as a central metaphor for the novel's examination, in subject and in narrative structure, for its challenge to the nature of the factual. This understanding of the past exposes the limitations of political and historical discourses that attempt to integrate the past into a coherent structure. As Amy Novak comments, by acknowledging the ambiguity of the past and shaping a discontinuous, fractured, shifting narrative, the novel puts forth an alternative paradigm of time that "resists Hegelian formulations of the relationship between past and present."⁴⁶ This resistance opens up linear discourses of the past to an exploration of their gaps and silences. It is in such spaces that *The English Patient* lingers, allowing for the emergence of multiple interpretive possibilities of the past that both supplement and interrupt linear temporal structure.

⁴⁶ See Novak, 210.

Though the English patient was at one point a key part of the system of imperial mapping, he eventually comes to reject that project and to believe in a different method of cartography – an organic model, based on movement rather than the controlling of space, that acknowledges the fluidity of the past. When Caravaggio asks the patient to show him on a map where he was flying from when his plane crashed in the desert, he takes a book with a map of India and “traces his black hand along the Numi River till it enters the sea at 23°30’ latitude. He continues sliding his finger seven inches west, off the page, onto his chest; he touches his rib” (167). Here, the patient moves beyond the borders of the page and onto his own body, suggesting that his memory of a place can be located on or within the self as part of bodily experience. Indeed, the patient describes himself as someone who “if left alone in someone’s home walks to the bookcase, pulls down a volume and inhales it. So history enters us” (18). In contrast to the abstraction of space and time in official historical and geographic discourses, here the past becomes embodied. It is this type of bodily mapping that the English patient embraces as a way to counter the fixity of conventional cartography and historiography, which works to integrate lands into a political system and time into a set narrative:

We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe in such cartography – to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. (261)

History becomes the palimpsestic layering of experience on the self, rather than an atemporal and abstracted systemization of space and time.⁴⁷ This conception posits a profoundly individual epistemology, similar to *Waterland*’s individual interactions with history, which abandons the category of the factual as it operates through verification from other bodies or outside entities.

⁴⁷ As Lobnik explains, what emerges in this passage is “the idea of an organic cartography that renders the always evolving, highly idiosyncratic topography of human life and experience.” Lobnik, 78.

The final step in the novel's reconceptualization of history as a bodily entity is the rewriting of the image of the bomb as a metaphor for the navigation of the mind. The central figure for this process is Kip, as he travels the countryside defusing bombs left behind by the Germans. In order to render a bomb neutral, he must imagine the currents traveling along the wires, determining which switches have been disguised and which line he must cut: "He schemed along the different paths of the wire and swerved into the convolutions of their knots, the sudden corners, the buried switches that translated them from positive to negative" (101). Through this imagining, Kip is able to render coherent the mess of pathways so as to offer connection and order to a system designed for disorder. The figurative language of this process surfaces in other characters' attempts to provide order to their disordered thoughts and memories. When Hana lies down to sleep at night, her mind "leaping across fragments," to her "[t]he day seems to have no order until these times, which are like a ledger for her, her body full of stories and situations" (37). However, the psychological exploration involved in this process extends beyond the self. For example, when Kip labors over a bomb, searching for its trigger, he must occupy the mindset of the person who created it. After discovering a mine in a field north of the villa, he studies the device, searching for "the possible structures in the mine, to the personality that had laid the city of threads and then poured wet concrete over it" (99). This psychological exploration often triggers memories of his own. The network of this particular mine reminds him of a game his father used to play: "Six black wires. When he was a child his father had bunched up his fingers and, disguising all but the tips of them, made him guess which was the long one" (99). The bomb prompts not only an examination of the self but also of the mind of another, and in this way it becomes a device for empathy and connection, and thus an ethical force, rather than one of violence and isolation.

However, though Kip's work with bombs allows him to connect with the minds of others, he is the character most shaken by the bombing of Hiroshima; after hearing the news, he quickly decides to leave Europe and return to India. Throughout the novel, Kip has exhibited a blind loyalty to British imperial power, having chosen to enlist in the British Army despite the protests of his brother. After he travels to England to train, he "assumed English fathers, following their codes like a dutiful son" (217). In return, his adopted British authority figures rename him, giving him the British nickname of Kip in place of his full name, Kirpal Singh (87). Kip has firmly accepted the historical narrative of Western power that both *The English Patient* and *Waterland* contest, and correspondingly, *The English Patient's* narrative turns on Kip's rejection of this ideology. The news of the American bombing of Japan suddenly awakens Kip to the realities of imperial violence, and he rails against the English patient as a symbol of Western dominance: "I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from *your* country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world... Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it, as my brother said, because you had the histories and printing presses?" (283). Here, Kip posits the source of Western imperial dominance as not only military technology but also the technologies of print and the control of historical narrative. He now recognizes the power that emerges through the production of linear history, as England has been able to mark itself as the superior culture that designates the progression of historical time. Through Caravaggio tries to correct Kip's accusations towards the patient by clarifying that he is not even English, Kip angrily responds with a redefinition of Englishness as not only a nationality but as an act of cultural, territorial, and technological aggression: "When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman" (286). While some critics have criticized the suddenness of

Kip's rejection of Western power, I would argue instead that this shock to the narrative is purposeful and directed at the novel's reader.⁴⁸ In this way, the jolt of one of the novel's few direct political statements prompts readers to consider how such imperial power operates in their contemporary worlds, and in the specific context of *The English Patient's* composition and publication, it asks readers to confront how their own countries may be on the brink of repeating the acts of the atomic bombings of Japan but on a more devastatingly vast scale.

However, though the atomic bomb unsettles the world of the villa, overall the novel mitigates its violence by displacing it spatially and temporally within its narrative. The bomb is not the inevitable certainty that concludes the novel; rather, the narrative jumps beyond the immediate violence of its occurrence to a retrospective future time, presenting the events from Kip's perspective as imagined through the memories of Hana. Instead of occurring as a moment of objective reality, the bomb only "happens" as an event through the individual actions and emotions of the characters. This counterhistorical strategy is a model for how history should be told – through the experience of the individual, thus allowing for multiple perspectives and explanations, rather than as an objective, factual event. Framed through Kip's reaction, the bomb interrupts rather than fulfills the type of linear historical narrative that produces apocalyptic thought. Furthermore, the shift to a future moment beyond the immediate context of narrative disrupts the bomb's singularity of space and time, rewriting the event as one that does not have a set place in history but rather as one that repeatedly reoccurs through individual memories.⁴⁹ *Waterland's* Tom Crick's description of the death of his mother aptly characterizes

⁴⁸ For example, Tom Clark writes about Kip's reaction that "the judgment weighed in against Western civilization as a racist imperialist behemoth seems, in terms of the larger structure of this ambitious, challenging, and poetic novel, at once gratuitous, facile, and oddly jarring." Quoted in Friedman, 48.

⁴⁹ Josef Pesch argues that this shift in time is a resistance to apocalyptic climax: "Michael Ondaatje's novel is part of the tradition of apocalyptic literature; it ends in the destructive climax of the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But it also resists this tradition in a double move: not interested in the thrills apocalyptic climaxes offer,

this recasting of the bomb's eventness as not a singular instance but as a continual phenomenon: "And though, indeed, it only happened once, it's gone on happening, the way unique and momentous things do, for ever and ever, as long as there's a memory for them to happen in" (275). Through Crick's memory, this personal catastrophe remains ever present such that its actuality is filtered through his self, rather than existing as an abstract event. *The English Patient* presents the event of the atomic bomb in a similar way, though the novel layers the memories and experiences of multiple individuals in order to reframe a shared historical event as a personal one.

To close my discussion of *The English Patient*, I would like to briefly return to the statement with which I opened this section, in which Ondaatje claims the novel can become a "more permanent and political reflection of [its] time." Following this logic, Ondaatje's choice to write a novel about the end of World War II during the end of the Cold War suggests that the novel's representation of this prior era can be both a reflection and a lesson for the contemporary moment. By telling this history through the overlapping perspective of individuals who are paralyzed by their own traumas, Ondaatje offers a way for his readers to recognize that they do not need to remain isolated by their apocalyptic fears. Through Kip's outspoken rejection of Western power, the novel also models a call to action for its readers to speak out against the oppressive forces of warmongering nations, even if the path towards the future feels inevitable. While *Waterland* teaches its readers never to fully settle on a single explanation of the past that may obscure other narratives, *The English Patient* also shows that the search for a clear pathway through time and memory will be both unending and incomplete. It is this lesson that is the

Ondaatje presents the climax via Kip's reactions seen from Hana's future perspective. He thus supplements the spatial distance of the events which happen far away in Japan by mediating them through the temporal distance of Hana's memory. Just as the apocalyptic losses of world experienced by the English patient, Caravaggio, and Hana, as situated in a past before the narrated time of the novel, the apocalyptic climax is displaced into a future, which also is outside the temporal frame of the novel." Pesch, 131.

challenge that both novels pose to the factual, and which is the central element of counterhistorical strategies that emphasize individual interactions with history. The struggle in both novels for the characters to remember and order their memories thus becomes a political challenge to the structures of historical discourse and a call to reconstruct what has been ignored or forgotten. In this way, the novels delve into the open spaces in official history so as expand its narrative of the past into multiple narrative paths that overlap and intersect but never settle back into one form.

As I have shown, *Waterland* and *The English Patient* combat the isolation of fear and the consequences of historical ignorance with an imperative to question and learn continually. Whether it is through the forum of the Holocaust Club or the patient reading from a copy of Herodotus, these novels offer practices that allow the individual to interact with historical narrative while also imbuing that narrative with a sense of multiplicity and fullness that then disrupts its singularity. These practices are empowering, and they allow the individual to potentially connect with others. Rather than remaining silenced by fears of the world ending or by the effects of trauma and loss, these two novels encourage the individual to share such experiences with others, forming a counternarrative that opposes historical narratives that are limited in perspective and outcome. This aim, in *Waterland* and *The English Patient*, is directed primarily towards those who have been marginalized. In my next and last chapter, I approach these same issues from the opposite perspective – those who have benefitted from one-sided narratives of history. I take two contemporary novels, Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) and Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), and explore how the narrators are positioned as figures for the state of Britain's declining power and influence on the world stage. In both

novels, the narrators are forced to come to terms with the consequences of their actions, and I show how the use of counterfactual thought becomes a way to mitigate the tension between dominance and marginality on both the personal and national level.

CHAPTER FOUR

Memory, Guilt, and the Counterfactual in Contemporary Fiction

Julian Barnes's 2011 novel, *The Sense of an Ending*, opens and closes with a cluster of images. In the novel's first sentence, the narrator, Tony Webster, explains that these images are drawn from his memories, yet are not in any particular order. In the pages that follow, a careful reader can take up the task of spotting and explicating these images, thereby forming a type of framework for the narrative as a whole. Yet Webster continues his meditation on memory by stating that one of the images is not something he ever actually saw, for "what you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed."¹ Thus, the novel opens by foregrounding the process of memory, as well as that of hermeneutics, as one of malleability and uncertainty.² At the novel's close, Webster gathers together another group of images taken from his memories; however, the novel's final image is also part of its opening cluster. As Webster first describes it, this image is of "a river rushing nonsensically upstream, its wave and wash lit by half a dozen chasing torchbeams" (3). Such repetition frames this image of a river briefly reversing its path as a core temporal motif and, as I argue here, a central counterfactual impulse that underlies the novel as a whole.

In this chapter, I examine the ethics of counterfactual time in relation to personal guilt and remorse in two novels: *The Sense of an Ending* and *Atonement* (2001) by Ian McEwan. Unlike my previous three chapters, which address authors occupying various degrees of marginalized positions in relation to the central canon of British literature, here I turn to two

¹ Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 3. All other references to this text will be to this edition and will include page numbers.

² Indeed, the novel's title is a direct reference to Frank Kermode's work of literary criticism, as the two works share the same title. Kermode writes that the modern age has lost a meaningful relationship to time: "Our own epoch is the epoch of nothing positive, only of transition. Since we move from transition to transition, we may suppose that we exist in no intelligible relation to the past, and no predictable relation to the future" (101-102). This perspective echoes throughout the novel as Tony Webster struggles to form a clear narrative of his own life.

authors who undoubtedly occupy core positions in the world of contemporary fiction.³ However, this position of power and influence is tenuous, as over the second half of the twentieth century Britain's importance and influence has declined and the country has in some sense been relegated to the periphery.⁴ This chapter addresses the state of the twenty-first-century British novel, and it explores how counterfactual thought can be used to navigate the tension between dominance and marginality on the personal and national level. *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending* are novels of retrospection, generated by the aged narrators' reflections on the known and unknown consequences of their actions on the lives of others. *Atonement* employs the narrative voice of Briony Tallis, also the work's implied author. Composed of several sections, the novel begins on a summer day in 1935 when a thirteen-year-old Briony falsely accuses her neighbor, Robbie Turner, of raping her cousin Lola, when the actual perpetrator was their weekend houseguest, Paul Marshall. The novel's subsequent sections trace the impact of this accusation on the lives of the characters during World War II, and ends with a coda set in 1999 in which the reader learns that Briony has written the previous three sections of the novel. Her authorship is an effort to atone for her false accusation by imagining a long, happy life for Robbie and his lover, her sister Cecilia, in contrast to the reality that they were both killed during the war. *The Sense of an Ending* is the first-person narration of Tony Webster,

³ However, as Sebastian Groes writes, McEwan's upbringing caused feelings of isolation from England and its language and culture: "It was because of his unusual upbringing that McEwan took his cue from a set of twentieth-century, bohemian writers who embodied alienation and displacement, and who were part of a European tradition of Diasporic writing." In Introduction to *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 2nd edition, ed. Sebastian Groes (London: Bloomsbury Academi, 2013), 6.

⁴ In this way, my argument recalls Jed Esty's *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton University Press, 2004). In this work, Esty traces the literary response to waning British power during the period of late modernism (1930s to 1950s), and discusses how many writers combatted Britain's decline with a revival of national cultural integrity. Here, I take a longer view of this literary response to Britain's post-imperial identity. I argue that this response, in particular in the contemporary literature I discuss in this chapter, often involves the use of counterfactual thought. In this way, counterfactual imaginings are not predicated on a resurgence of national pride but are a way to acknowledge and empathetically occupy subject positions outside of the boundaries of the self and the nation.

a middle-aged retiree living in London. In Part One, Tony is occupied by his memories of his brilliant schoolboy friend, Adrian, who committed suicide at age twenty-two. Part Two opens with the news that Tony has been left two documents in a will, and as he investigates what these items are and why they were left to him, he slowly reconsiders the version of his history told in Part One.

Taken together, *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending* are mirror images of each other: both narratives advance conscious or unconscious fabrications of personal histories, performed by narrators whose mental capacities are declining or failing. I argue here that the narrators' use of the novel's form to unravel and rewrite a personal history speaks to a reconsideration of the shape of historical narrative in light of the diminished British state at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In my previous three chapters, I show how authors in marginalized positions use counterfactual thinking to challenge the hegemony of centrist narratives, in particular the cultural and political narratives of British dominance. Here, I position *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending* as novels of the center – set in and around London, by two well-established contemporary British novelists – that struggle with the moral and ethical costs of the power of the center while also lamenting the loss of such power. The novels frame their core concerns – whether or not it is possible to atone for past actions – through stories of an individual who feels it necessary to reassess and reorient his or her personal history from the alternative perspective of those who have been wronged. I argue that these personal narratives, written from positions of both power and guilt, speak to the diminished position of Britain on the world stage. In doing so, I identify a trend in contemporary literature of narratives of guilt that offer counterfactual rewritings of the past, and I argue that a central driving element of this literary movement is a joint reconciliation with the deflation of British power and the consequences of

British dominance.⁵ Thus, these two novels reorient the ethical potential of the counterfactual from the perspective of the guilty power, as the narrators attempt to construct narratives that will contain both their own understanding of their actions and acknowledge and occupy the perspective of the victims of their actions.

As I discuss in Chapter One, Steven Connor argues that as Britain's role as a world power has declined over the second half of the twentieth century, the country began to lose a sense of identification with its historical narrative of continuous development that coincided with Western dominance.⁶ Alan Sinfield writes that the increased failure of the British state to produce economic growth and social stability over the second half of the twentieth century has led to a persistent "strain of disaffection and aggression in postwar British society" as well as a fundamental political unease that often prompts a look back at the time of World War II as a brief period in which society, and its aims, seemed truly democratic.⁷ The diminution of Britain's role in global politics and its hold on the developmental direction of history results in a sense of loss. This sense of loss produces a tendency towards retrospection, driven by an interest in both preserving the past and scrutinizing it from an outside perspective. I argue that this feeling of loss permeates much of contemporary fiction, along with a new tone of humility and openness to alternative perspectives. In this way, I am contributing to other recent arguments about contemporary fiction, such as David James's exploration of the return of the crystalline novel. James argues that this form has been revived and transformed by postmillennial writers to concentrate on the portrayal of "ethically charged scenarios of perception" that "animate our

⁵ One might consider Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger* (1992), with its exploration of the British slave trade, and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1991), with its reversed narrative that explores the trauma of the Holocaust, as other examples of this literary movement.

⁶ For example, the shift of power on the global scale from Britain to the United States corresponds with the decline of Britain's empire and a redefinition of British social welfare from post-consensus politics of Thatcher to the acceptance of Tony Blair's New Labour party of capitalist policies.

⁷ Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London: Continuum, 2007), 319-320.

understanding of selves and situations other than our own.”⁸ In this way, James argues that such novels help readers to think outside of the self. Furthermore, I am also drawing upon Peter Boxall’s claim that, in the waning power of a postmodernist historiography, which asserts that historical knowledge is a function of narrative, the literature of the new century shows a renewed “ethical obligation to bear witness” to the reality of the past.⁹ In this chapter, I identify and explore a trend in contemporary British fiction, in the context of post-imperial and postwar decline, and argue that the novelists I discuss use counterfactual thought as a central way to move beyond the individual perspective in order to consider the ethical ramifications of one’s actions.

Notably, both the novels I discuss here mark a shift in the careers of their respective authors. With *Atonement*, McEwan has moved away from what Dominic Head calls the “literature of shock” of his earlier writings, writings that Laura Marcus sees as enabling critics to situate McEwan “securely as a postmodernist writer.”¹⁰ Marcus, among others, sees McEwan’s later work, in particular *Atonement*, as returning and responding to modernist aims, and furthermore, in the words of Sebastian Groes, “indicative of... his increasing engagement with the canon of English literature, and the Western literary tradition.”¹¹ Similarly, *The Sense of an Ending* represents a clear shift away from Barnes’s earlier fiction that cemented a reputation for him as a postmodernist.¹² David James calls *The Sense of an Ending*’s first-person narrative “a

⁸ David James, "A Renaissance for the Crystalline Novel?" *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 850, 849.

⁹ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge UP, 2013), 12.

¹⁰ Dominic Head, *Ian McEwan* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 2; and Laura Marcus, “Ian McEwan’s Modernist Time: *Atonement* and *Saturday*,” in *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 2nd edition, ed. Sebastian Groes (London: Bloomsbury Academi, 2013), 98.

¹¹ Sebastian Groes, Introduction, 3-4.

¹² As Eric Berlatsky notes, a central trend in the criticism on Barnes is to view him as an apolitical postmodernist, with the central example being Barnes’s 1984 novel, *Flaubert’s Parrot*. Berlatsky observes that the novel’s “clever metafictional denaturalization of the realistic plot” has “garnered substantial critical attention as an instance of the

shimmering yet pared-down novella” that is part of a movement in contemporary literature that has rejected postmodern irony “in order to find a sincere means of visualizing what’s ethically profitable about paying closer attention to everyday perceptions.”¹³ Much is being written today on the state of the twenty-first-century novel in an effort to calibrate its relationship with the past, both literary and historical.¹⁴ In this chapter, I respond to Peter Boxall’s suggestion that there is “a *new* way of narrating time in the twenty-first century” in what he calls a “late style” of post-millennium fiction, expressed through “a pared-down sparseness of expression, a tautness at the level of the sentence.”¹⁵ I challenge the “newness” of Boxall’s claim, which he makes elsewhere in regards to a “*new* ethical relationship to history,” by asserting that writers such as McEwan and Barnes, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, are returning to and continuing the modernist use of the counterfactual.¹⁶ Here, this type of engagement with history allows such writers, who are invested in the process of addressing and atoning for past crimes, to harness the ethical potential of the counterfactual in order to theorize the possibility of reparation. Furthermore, this process encompasses a theorization of the subjectivity of history by foregrounding the significance of perspective as the shaping force of one’s understanding of the past. As Tony’s friend Adrian tells their history teacher, “we need to know the history of the

breed of postmodernism that Linda Hutcheon labels ‘historiographic metafiction.’” See Eric Berlatsky, “‘Madame Bovary, c’est moi!’: Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* and Sexual ‘Perversion,’” *Twentieth Century Literature* 55, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 175.

¹³ David James, “A Renaissance for the Crystalline Novel?": 872.

¹⁴ For example, see the work of Jesse Matz, in particular his article, “Pseudo-Impressionism?” in *Contemporary Fiction and the Legacies of Modernism*, ed. David James (Cambridge UP, 2012), 114 – 132, and his forthcoming book with Columbia University Press, *Lasting Impressions: Impressionism Now*, a study of the legacies of Impressionism in contemporary literature and culture. Another figure who looms large over this project is David James, in particular his book *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel* and the edited collection, *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction*, both of which I have cited numerous times. For a broader perspective on the relationship between modernism and contemporary art and culture, see *The Contemporaneity of Modernism: Literature, Media, Culture*, edited by Michael D’Arcy and Mathias Nilges (New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁵ Peter Boxall, “Late: Fictional Time in the Twenty-First Century,” *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 702 (emphasis mine), 710.

¹⁶ Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, 41 (emphasis mine).

historian in order to understand the version that is being put in front of us” (13). *Atonement* and *The Sense of the Ending* demonstrate this statement, as both novels offer a history of the narrator and acknowledge the limitations and consequences of maintaining a singular perspective of the past.

Atonement and *The Sense of an Ending* also offer self-conscious engagements with the legacy of the modernist novel. Many critics have studied *Atonement*'s references to the work of Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, Henry James, E. M. Forster, and D. H. Lawrence, among others; Dominic Head calls the novel McEwan's "most extended deliberation on the form of the novel, and the inherited tradition of modern (especially English) fiction and criticism."¹⁷ I would add James Joyce to this list, in particular with reference to *Atonement*'s development of the artist's consciousness over the course of the narrative. Indeed, *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending* are both centrally occupied with the role of character in the novel, a key way in which these two works continue the modernist engagement with psychology and individual experience.¹⁸ In *The Sense of an Ending*, for example, Tony Webster defines the novel in terms of character: "Real literature was about psychological, emotional and social truth as demonstrated by the actions and reflections of its protagonists; the novel was about character developed over time."¹⁹ In a comment that bears on the shape of *The Sense of the Ending*, Webster then questions whether or not such a development can truly be linear, as his understanding of his own identity changes and becomes less certain as he ages. Overall,

¹⁷ Head, *Ian McEwan*, 156.

¹⁸ Andrzej Gasiorek and David James note that "the centrality (or otherwise) of character to the novel as a genre" is one example of how postmillennial fiction "reprises earlier anxieties and debates about the nature of the novel and the function of the writer." See Gasiorek and James, "Introduction: Fiction since 2000: Postmillennial Commitments," *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 616. Laura Marcus makes a similar point, specifically in relation to McEwan, stating "his [McEwan's] more recent novels suggest a closer relationship not only with modernism but with the texts that preceded that movement and moment. This is borne out of McEwan's interest in the question of character in fiction." Marcus, 98.

¹⁹ Barnes, 16.

Atonement and *The Sense of an Ending* have become test cases for discussions of contemporary literature's relationship to the literary past. For example, *Atonement* has garnered a wide range of critical reactions, ranging from unfavorable readings of what has been called the sudden postmodern, metafictional turn of the novel's ending, to praise for its investigation and reinvigoration of modernist and late-modernist aims.²⁰ Yet critics are even divided on McEwan's stance on modernism. For example, Richard Robinson reads *Atonement* as McEwan's challenge to modernism's dereliction of duty in relation to plot; Robinson argues that the novel constructs modernism as a "straw figure: ethically neutered, disengaged from history, lacking in pragmatic morality."²¹ Such a conclusion indicts modernism as an ahistorical movement that has no stake in ethical questions, a characterization that my dissertation challenges. Instead, this chapter shows how *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending* draw upon a heritage of modernist ethical engagement with history to investigate the violence of the twentieth century and to engage responsibly with the new political, social, and cultural landscape of the twenty-first century.

To the aforementioned body of criticism that connects contemporary fiction to modernist aims, I contribute my study of the role of the counterfactual in modernism. Throughout my dissertation, I show that the counterfactual offers a way for the individual to respond productively to abstract, ideological concepts such as history and the nation, thus forming a connection between personal and national histories. In this way, counterfactual thought enables

²⁰ For example, Brian Finney argues that critics who see the novel's ending as an unexpected metafictional turn are radically misreading the novel, and offers several examples from reviews of the novel that criticize McEwan a sudden misstep with the novel's ending. For example, Margaret Boerner in the *Weekly Standard*: "In a kind of lunacy that one supposes he imagined was like Ionesco's absurdity, McEwan destroys the structure he has set up and tells us it was all fiction. But we *knew* it was fiction." See Brian Finney, "Briony's Stand against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 27, no. 3 (Winter 2004): 70.

²¹ Richard Robinson, "The Modernism of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 492. Alistair Cormack makes a similar point, arguing that McEwan uses *Atonement* to attack "static, morally disengaged, plotless modernism." See Alistair Cormack, "Postmodernism and the Ethics of Fiction in *Atonement*," in *Ian McEwan*, ed. Groes, 77.

a critique of historical discourse through its creation of a space for heterogeneous histories and experiences to be expressed. For example, in my first chapter on *Ulysses*, I discuss how Stephen Dedalus must learn to counter the oppression of dominant historical narratives, such as England's control of Ireland, through the navigation of counterfactual possibilities that open up an imaginative space for individual engagement with history. In Chapter Three's study of Cold War fiction, I discuss the operation of counterhistorical strategies, which draw upon the counterfactual's ability to contain multiple narrative paths, and illustrate my argument with a study of how Graham Swift's *Waterland* parallels major events with "minor" ones of marginalized individual experience. In doing so, *Waterland* promotes individual interactions with history through the elevation of localized, regional sensibilities, thus weakening the narrative dominance of established discourses. In this chapter, I argue that McEwan and Barnes build upon and reshape this modernist counterfactual strategy so as to give the individual a way to interact with contemporary historical processes that shape the cultural and political landscape of the twenty-first-century world. Here, the novelists respond to the peripheral state of Britain on the level of the personal and the national, as the act of counterfactually theorizing how to atone for past actions reverberates through the individual narrative and outwards to the consideration of how to atone for the actions of a British state that has lost its status as world power.

For the narrators of *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending*, the novel functions as the central way in which to imagine the minds of others. This process is the key ethical stance of the two texts, as the narratives develop through Briony Tallis and Tony Webster's attempts to recognize, inhabit, and empathize with the minds of those whose lives they have affected. As David O'Hara writes of *Atonement*, "Briony, in the end, imaginatively alters and recreates the

past in order to reconfer empathetic value on those victims of history, the forgotten and the dead.” I understand O’Hara’s argument as suggesting that this empathetic imagining offers a counterfactual reparation for the past; he writes that by imagining the “possible life” that her victims were never able to have, Briony “pays her respect to the hindered, unrealized possibilities of history.”²² In *Atonement* and *The Sense of the Ending*, the narrators realize the grave consequences of their limited perspectives and use the novel form to rewrite their own histories to begin to give those silenced perspectives equal weight within the narrative. In contrast to my emphasis on marginalized authors in Chapters One, Two, and Three, McEwan and Barnes occupy privileged positions within the cultural sphere. This chapter studies a reversal of the dynamic of the previous three chapters, as those in a position of cultural dominance begin to recognize their diminished stature and then revise their historical narratives so as to recognize and include the perspective of those who have been harmed by their actions.

As I have already established elsewhere in this project, counterfactual imaginings have the potential to be political, ethical acts. In this chapter, I explore how the novels’ narrators make use of counterfactual reasoning and imaginings to confront their past and to begin to understand how to atone for it. The counterfactual thus offers a process for realizing one’s guilt and for theorizing reparation through an acknowledgement of subject positions outside of the self. I argue that these actions are a model for the responsible navigation of the complicated landscape of contemporary global politics. These two novels thus offer methods of engaging with the self and the world that are the foundation of an ethical practice, rooted in counterfactual thought, that is suited to the political, cultural, and social realms of the twenty-first century.

²² David K. O’Hara, “Briony’s Being-For: Metafictional Narrative Ethics in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 52, no. 1 (2011): 95.

The Sense of an Ending

Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* is a study of the challenges of using counterfactual thought in a reparative manner. I discuss Barnes's work first in order to highlight the range of the use of the counterfactual in contemporary literature; while Barnes's novel questions its power, McEwan's novel is able to more successfully incorporate its reparative potential. Throughout the novel, Tony Webster, the narrator, struggles to create a narrative of his past and to adjust to a disruption of that narrative. In this way, *The Sense of an Ending* is a meditation on uncertainty on two levels: the struggles of Tony to come to terms with the repercussions of his past actions, and the diminished cultural authority of Britain to shape and control the narrative of history. The novel begins by establishing the retrospective position of its narrator while also undermining his authority over the narrative to come. From the opening sentences onward, the reader is immediately privy to the capriciousness of Tony's mind. When he introduces the opening list of his memories, he notes first that they are in random order, and he concludes this list with the caveat that the last memory is not one he actually ever saw or experienced. This imagined scene – an image of the bathtub in which his friend Adrian has committed suicide – has now become a part of how he understands the past, a process he calls “time's malleability” (3). In what follows, Tony repeatedly frames the retelling of his personal history with the qualification that he is increasingly uncertain of the difference between what actually happened and what he has imagined. In this way, he shows the counterfactual's fusion of the actual and the possible as a natural human quality and, as Tony characterizes it, a central element to how our memories operate, particularly as we age.

Furthermore, the novel's circular investigation of time is motivated by a concern for the preservation of the past as a way to resist either the past being forgotten or being reshaped into

something that it never was. For example, Tony hopes that through the discovery and preservation of historical evidence such as a will, a diary, and various letters written by him and by others, he will be able to assemble a clear and authoritative framework of the past. However, this concern is itself shaped by a fear of erasure, as Tony fears his mental capacities are beginning to decline. These intertwined issues – aging, mortality, the slipperiness of memory – reveal an unsettled relationship between the subject and the narrative of its past that I argue is representative of Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In both *The Sense of an Ending* and *Atonement*, this unsettledness forms an opportunity to imagine and explore what happens when the actual and the possible become indistinguishable. As these acts become one and the same, one can creatively interact with the past, offering a strategy for understanding others through imaginatively occupying their perspectives. However, *The Sense of an Ending* approaches this process with a tone of deflation and defeat. As Tony introduces the subject matter of the novel – his childhood friend Adrian who committed suicide – he notes that he “is not very interested in his schooldays” and feels no nostalgia for this period of his life. But he feels compelled to begin the narrative during this time period, as it is when he first meets Adrian, and thus explains that he will “return briefly to a few incidents that have grown into anecdotes, to some approximate memories which time has deformed into certainty” (4). Then noting that he cannot be sure of what actually happened, but only of the impressions such events have left on him, he begins the narrative. Tony’s understanding of the past as a realm of continual change represents a burden, not a liberation, and here I explore how Tony is a representative figure for the diminished position of Britain on the world stage.

In what may be a marker of this genre of counterfactual fiction, *The Sense of an Ending*’s opening scene is a history lesson. As I discuss in Chapter One with *Ulysses* and in Chapter

Three with *Waterland*, in these texts the history lesson becomes a forum for the discussion of ideologies that shape theories of history. Here, in this opening scene, Adrian is new to the school and the teacher calls upon him to give a description of Henry the Eighth's reign. Adrian responds that he is not versed in the period, but offers a comment that targets the nature of historical narrative: "But there is one line of thought according to which all you can truly say of any historical event – even the outbreak of the First World War, for example – is that "something happened"" (5). This comment then prompts a debate, in a later history class, over the origins of World War I, specifically whether or not the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand was the central instigating event. This question sparks varying responses, ranging from a classic counterfactual reaction – without the assassination, the war would not have occurred – to a teleological perspective that the war was inevitable. Again, Adrian is invited to give his opinion, and his reply offers a commentary on Tony's project of reconstructing his own past to understand the perspectives of others. Adrian first challenges the nature of ascribing responsibility for an action or event as a way potentially to escape blame – either one person is totally responsible and everyone else is innocent, or the event itself was destined to occur and no one's actions can be singled out as the core cause. Instead, he offers his understanding of historical causation: "It seems to me that there is – was – a chain of individual responsibilities, all of which were necessary, but not so long a chain that everybody can simply blame everyone else." He continues by explaining that even this theory is more a reflection of his own perspective than a fair analysis of what actually occurred, for what is really at stake when one tries to understand the past is "the fact that we need to know the history of the historian in order to understand the version that is being put in front of us" (13). This subjective understanding of history as a range of potential narrative paths frames the project of *The Sense of an Ending*, both

in Tony's effort to understand his own past and as a reflection of Britain's decentered relationship to its own historical narrative.

The Sense of an Ending provides Tony's attempt to reconcile two different versions of his personal history, an effort that divides the narrative into two parts. In Part One, Tony recalls his youth, from his teenage years through college, and focuses on his friendship with Adrian and his first serious girlfriend, Veronica, whom Tony meets at college. At first, these two subjects seem to have no relation to each other, until Tony interrupts his narration and questions the logic of his narrative's development. He then reveals that after he and Veronica broke up, he received a letter from Adrian informing him that he and Veronica were now seeing each other. However, Tony repeatedly undermines his comprehension of these past events. For example, after describing Adrian's letter, he notes that he did not keep the letter, and that he feels he must "stress that this is my reading now of what happened then. Or rather, my memory now of my reading then of what was happening at the time" (45). Disrupting what at first appears to be a straightforward narration, Tony shows his explanations to be a distorted palimpsest of impressions. His self-conscious presentation of his unreliability may be a way to protect himself from blame, for in Part Two the reader learns that Tony's reaction to this news – in particular, the letter he writes back to Adrian and Veronica – may have set into motion a series of events that he was unaware of until much later. Part Two opens with Tony's receipt of a letter from a law firm, informing him that he has been left five hundred pounds and two documents in the will of Veronica's mother, Sarah Ford. Tony only met Sarah Ford once, when he stayed with Veronica and her family for a weekend during college. The first document is a letter from Mrs. Ford to Tony, letting him know that she has left him a memento of Adrian's; she also apologizes to Tony for how her family treated him so many years ago, and notes at the close of her brief

letter that she believes that the last months of Adrian's life were happy ones. The second document that he has been left is at first unknown, as Veronica refuses to give up possession of it, but Tony soon learns that it is Adrian's diary. From this point forward, the narrative proceeds as a kind of mystery, as Tony investigates why Mrs. Ford had Adrian's diary and why she left it to him.

The narrative structure of *The Sense of an Ending* encourages a second reading, as its final pages reveal information that significantly alters one's understanding of the events theretofore described. At the novel's close, Tony learns that Adrian and Mrs. Ford had an affair and she gave birth to a child, who now lives in a home for the mentally disabled. Veronica blames Tony for this series of events, for at one point she shows him the letter he wrote to Adrian after learning of his relationship with Veronica, in which Tony, in a scathing tone he had forgotten he employed, angrily urges Adrian to consult with Mrs. Ford about Veronica's damaged capacity to maintain a relationship. The issue of blame and guilt for past actions, first raised by Adrian in their history class, has now become the narrative's central concern. As Tony attempts to recalibrate his understanding of the past over the course of the narrative, he continually references Adrian's theories of history. The discussions that take place in the history classroom, scenes that Tony uses to organize Part One, now reverberate throughout the narrative as a whole. Adrian defines history as "that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (18). As he sees it, history emerges out of a lack – the absence of proof or a clear recollection. In this way, this openness offers an opportunity to imagine an explanation that satisfies one's desire for narrative coherence. Yet over the course of the novel, as Tony struggles to understand the perspective of the victims of his actions, this process of historical invention increasingly disturbs him because

he sees it as too often self-serving. He is shocked by what he has forgotten or what he has convinced himself to forget, and he is lost as to how fully to recover an alternative perspective. This struggle increasingly brings Tony to doubt his own sense of self, a process that becomes a commentary on the larger state of contemporary historical narrative and understanding.

Part Two opens with a reflection on the process of aging, as Tony considers how when one is young, one always imagines what the future may hold in terms of what one's life will be like, yet as he notes, one never "[imagines] yourself looking back from that future point." As one gets older, Tony observes, one's past becomes an increasingly uncertain realm – a space of continual change – as well as something of which one may not be proud. One discovers, for example, that "as the witnesses to your life diminish, there is less corroboration, and therefore less certainty, as to what you are or have been" (65). Such statements capture the immediacy of Tony's guilt and remorse, as here Tony is not yet able to move past his regret and misunderstanding of himself and others. In this way, *The Sense of an Ending* offers a portrayal of guilt in an unprocessed form, as reflected in the novel's narrative structure of short sections with multiple breaks and pauses. This staccato rhythm contributes a sense of doubtfulness and hesitancy to Tony's thought processes as the novel works toward a questioning of the moral and ethical costs of power, of both the self and the nation, while also lamenting the loss of that power.

Tony then shifts to a discussion of his relationship to contemporary history, noting that he "[reads] a lot of history, and of course I've followed all the official history that's happened in my own lifetime – the fall of Communism, Mrs. Thatcher, 9/11, global warming – with the normal mixture of fear, anxiety, and cautious optimism." However, he notes that he has "never felt the same about it – I've never quite trusted it – as I do events in Greece and Rome, or the British

Empire, or the Russian Revolution.” It is notable that Tony includes the British Empire as an example of distant history, for it implies that British imperialism is part of a bygone era that does not exert a defining influence on contemporary British culture and politics. He speculates that the reason he feels he can trust his understanding of such historical events and concepts is that “I just feel safer with the history that’s been more or less agreed upon.” Here, Tony’s uncertainty over his personal history extends to his contemporary moment for, as he explains, “the history that happens underneath our noses ought to be the clearest, and yet it’s the most deliquescent” (65). To Tony, it is contemporary history that is the most difficult to grasp, for as with his understanding of his own life, he has come to recognize that he cannot fully trust his perceptions.²³ In many ways, Tony expresses here a perspective that is in opposition to my dissertation’s argument that one-sided narratives of “official” history are oppressive because they limit one’s involvement in historical imagining, and that interacting with a more open, “deliquescent” history empowers the individual to imagine alternative historical possibilities and narrative paths. Here Tony is nostalgic for certainty, whereas many of the other texts I have discussed – for example, *Ulysses*, *Waterland*, and *The English Patient* – call for the opposite. However, rather than being an oppressed outsider, Tony until this point has only benefited from a one-sided narrative on his past as it has shielded him from the consequences of his actions. This passage’s connections between the personal and the political suggest that Tony’s struggles to come to terms with his past parallel similar struggles on the part of the nation, and thus speak to the state of twenty-first-century Britain as one of newfound humility and loss, due to the nation’s diminished role in global politics and its weakened hold on the developmental direction of history. As Tony’s understanding of himself comes undone, he hesitates to embrace this new

²³ Such statements recall the argument of the novel’s namesake, Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*. See footnote #2 for a brief discussion of the relationship between Barnes and Kermode.

uncertainty as he feels it makes him vulnerable and open to criticism. In contrast to the more forceful and hopeful *Atonement*, here Barnes uses Tony as a figure for the nation in order to explore the difficulties of embracing a counterfactual solution to the moral and ethical dilemmas of Britain's diminished power.

Tony's uncertainty of his sense of self is the root cause of this hesitation, for he suddenly feels he cannot trust his own memories and cannot formulate a clear way for him to own up to past actions and then begin to atone for them. Thus, he comes to understand the processes of memory as counterfactually driven. As he attempts to adjust to the perspective of his past that casts him as the instigator of Adrian and Mrs. Ford's affair, he notices that he has begun to remember things he has long forgotten. In response to these "new" memories, Tony feels that "it was as if, for that moment, time had been placed in reverse. As if, for that moment, the river ran upstream" (133-4). At first, Tony feels hopeful that he may possess within himself the ability to rewrite his past and proceed forward with a new narrative of his life. However, this feeling dissipates, for if he cannot control this process, then he does not feel he can fully wield the creative and ethical power of the counterfactual as a reparative force. In this way, Tony is not empowered by counterfactual thought; instead, he can only recognize that he has repressed such alternative narratives and perspectives until forced to remember them. Perhaps it is this fear of the return of such alternative narratives that makes him uncomfortable with contemporary history, for as shown by my study of other novels in this dissertation, its unsettled nature may signal the possibility of challenges from those who have been disempowered or marginalized. *The Sense of an Ending* suggests that coming to terms with guilt over the past – whether as an individual or as a nation – will be a damaging and humbling process, and thus the novel ends

with an expanded awareness of the accumulated repercussions of one's past actions and does not foresee a narrative resolution.

As Tony begins to alter his accepted narrative of his past, he becomes increasingly preoccupied by the gaps in his memories that he now sees as marks of his elision of responsibility. He constantly comments that he lacks "evidence" for what he believes he remembers, and wishes he had kept key documents, such as the letter that Mrs. Ford writes to him after he and Veronica break up. He believes that such documents could help him disrupt his patterns of belief in order to rewrite a clear and authoritative narrative of his past through which he can then understand and accept his guilt. Tony initially puts his trust into the unchanging nature of historical documents as a way to counter the dissolving effects of memory over time, for as he notes, "time doesn't act as a fixative, rather as a solvent" (69). He begins to fixate on Adrian's diary, still in the possession of Veronica, that he has inherited from Mrs. Ford, describing it as potential "evidence," and furthermore, "it might be—corroboration. It might disrupt the banal reiterations of memory. It might jump start something – though I had no idea what" (84-5). Tony views the diary as a type of counterfactual possibility – that it could also, in a way, help him reverse the river of time. Yet when Veronica sends him a photocopied page of the diary, which Tony's lawyer terms a "fragment of the disputed document" (93), the receipt of this direct evidence does nothing to help clarify Tony's memories. Written as a type of philosophical proof with numbered paragraphs, Adrian begins with a question of "accumulation" and then asks, "To what extent might human relationships be expressed in a mathematical or logical formula?" (93-4). Adrian, it appears, is undertaking a project similar to Tony's – to try to theorize human relations rationally in order to pinpoint those responsible for their outcomes. Yet as Adrian struggles to apply mathematical logic to relations that are often "logically improbable"

(94), he then decides to switch frameworks and “express matters in traditional narrative terminology.” The last sentence of the diary page is a fragment, and begins as follows: “So, for instance, if Tony” (95).

In his diary, Adrian is conducting counterfactual thought experiments that implicate Tony in an unknown equation. The mystery of this “what if?” scenario plagues Tony, as he wonders what Adrian wishes he had not done and, moreover, what event Adrian wishes had never happened. Yet Tony misreads the diary passage, initially taking it to be Adrian theorizing his own suicide. At the end of the novel, Tony finally comes to understand that Adrian is theorizing his own affair with Mrs. Ford, which produced a baby – all of which Adrian traces back to Tony’s suggestion that he consult Veronica’s mother in the angry letter Tony sends to Adrian and Veronica after he learns they are seeing each other. Again, Adrian’s early discussions of history are useful here, for after he tells their teacher that history is “that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation,” he continues by criticizing the historian’s constant lack of direct evidence, such as testimonies by those involved. Their teacher, Master Hunt, counters Adrian’s logic, suggesting instead that historians have always lacked direct evidence and make do with other methods of investigation, for in fact, he explains, “historians need to treat a participant’s own explanation of events with a certain skepticism” (20). In a way, Tony falls prey to the logic about which his history teacher warns him and his classmates. Though he does finally get a snippet of Adrian’s direct testimony in the form of his diary, his misreading of it only further delays Tony’s reprocessing of the past. This effect suggests that understanding the perspective of another – the core aim of the ethical use of counterfactual thought – requires a complex and thorough process, and is not one that will easily be accomplished only by the reading of a firsthand account.

Indeed, Tony comes to understand that counterfactual imaginings are central to growing older. As he comments, “when we are young, we invent different futures for ourselves; when we are old, we invent different pasts for others” (88). This statement looms large over the narrative as a whole, for it expresses that the longing to undo the repercussions of one’s actions is rooted in the desire to understand the lives of others. The novel thus presents remorse as a central motivating factor of counterfactual thought, and Tony uses the imagery of the reversed river to demonstrate that point: “What if by some means remorse can be made to flow backwards, can be transmuted into simple guilt, then apologized for, and then forgiven?” (117). Tony’s retrospective position offers a lesson to the contemporary diminished state of British power, as his process of coming to terms with himself and his past becomes a process of understanding those one has affected. In an observation that recalls Tom Crick’s protests against the concept of revolution in favor of a continual return to the past in *Waterland*, Tony recalls how someone once told him that his favorite times in history are when things are collapsing, for “that meant something new was being born.” Tony asks himself whether or not this idea of revolution and rebirth also holds true for the individual life, and ultimately decides that both historical and personal change do not operate in such a way. Rather, “just as all political and historical change sooner or later disappoints, so does adulthood” (115). He understands that neither the self nor the nation can leave the past behind, but at this point both lack the power to remake themselves into something new. Instead, he recognizes that he must reassess his past in terms of his guilt and responsibility, a process that requires him to accept his diminished stature so as to move beyond his own individual perspective.

The novel closes with a somber reflection on the ethics of counterfactual thought – in essence, if it is possible to use the counterfactual responsibly so as not to elide but to come to

terms with one's guilt. Previously, Tony has approached the counterfactual potentially as a way to escape his guilt. As he describes it, he thought that he "could go back to the beginning and change things... [He] had been tempted, somehow, by the notion that we could excise most of our separate existences, could cut and splice the magnetic tape on which our lives are recorded, go back to that fork in the path and take the road less travelled, or rather not travelled at all" (142-3). At the end of the narrative, he comes to see this desire as potentially irresponsible – a way to ignore the past instead of confronting it.²⁴ Tony's distrust offers a reflection on the history and practice of counterfactual imaginings, and reinforces a core tenet of my argument that in order for the counterfactual to be a reparative force, one must not replace one past with another. Instead, it is the interaction between multiple narrative alternatives that restores a fullness to the past – as a realm of unrealized possibilities, like Joyce's room of the infinite possibilities – and can allow for a more full understanding of subject positions outside of the self.

The Sense of an Ending closes upon Tony's final realization that Adrian's son is not the child of Veronica but of her mother. The counterfactual question that Adrian asks in his diary – "So, for instance, if Tony..." – now haunts him, and he thinks, "I knew I couldn't change, or mend, anything now." Though Tony cannot undo the past, he again moves toward a reconsideration of his life and the consequences of his actions, both known and unknown. He thinks about the fact that when one gets close to the end of one's life, or, he clarifies, close to "the end of any likelihood of change in that life," there is time to ask oneself, "what else have I done wrong?" With this question in mind, Tony then returns to his muddled memories, listing them in random order as in the novel's opening passage. Yet now, these images seem to him as

²⁴ This realization recalls Leopold Bloom's belief in the importance of plausibility when considering counterfactual alternatives. For example, in the "Eumaeus" episode of *Ulysses*, Bloom refuses to fully engage in a conversation that imagines the return of Charles Parnell, the fallen Irish leader. I argue in my first chapter that Bloom believes that one must consider the consequences of imagined alternatives in order not to be caught up in an alternative vision that does not offer or envision a path toward a more liberated future.

fully inadequate representations of the past, for he then reflects on “what I couldn’t know or understand now, of all that couldn’t ever be known or understood” (163). Though this passage expresses a feeling of defeat, Tony does not fully give up on his investigation of the past. The final image of the novel is that of the river reversing its path – an image that reverberates through the entire narrative. Though Tony has come to realize the limitations of his knowledge, he still feels the urge to look backwards and try to answer the question of what else he has done wrong.

The novel closes with several brief sentences, the language of which echoes Adrian’s theories of history, that encapsulate the experience of this process and describe Tony’s new understanding of his past: “There is accumulation. There is responsibility. And beyond these, there is unrest. There is great unrest” (163). Though he is unsure of whether he will ever find a way to move beyond his guilt, he is compelled to understand it further – a sentiment that seems particularly poignant to our contemporary era. *The Sense of an Ending* closes with the awareness that a reconsideration of the past may bring more uncertainty than clarity. This uncertainty comes from an acceptance of one’s lack of control over narratives of the past – a humbling gesture that is also an acknowledgement of the consequences of one’s power.

Atonement

As a product of a retrospective position at the end of the century, *Atonement* offers both a personal history of its narrator and a cultural and political history of Britain. The novel encompasses the events of World War II – an era that has come to stand as Britain’s great moment of power and glory – through Briony’s imagining of the perspective of Robbie in Part II, and the subsequent archiving and preserving of this era of history in the Imperial War Museum archives, which Briony visits in the novel’s Coda as part of her research for the novel. The

attempt to unsettle a singular perspective on the past drives the novel's depiction of this process of historicizing, which I argue is representative of Britain's post-imperial decline and shrinking global status over the course of the twentieth century, and a subsequent need to recognize alternative perspectives outside of the dominant narrative.

Briony's maturation as an author, from the composition of her play *The Trials of Arabella* that opens the novel to her completion of the final draft of *Atonement* as revealed in the Coda, develops towards an unselfishness that allows her to move beyond her own subjectivity to occupy the minds of others. This connection between creative projection and morality suggests that the novel is a form particularly suited for such ethical imaginings. The publication context of *Atonement*, which appeared in September 2001, with its first reviews alongside articles reacting to the terrorist attacks on New York City, has become a key element through which critics argue that the novel's investigation of the imagination as the source of ethical and moral thought is especially relevant in the twenty-first century.²⁵ Through several pieces written for *The Guardian* on his personal reaction to the events of 9/11, McEwan has actively positioned himself as, in the words of Dominic Head, a "kind of global moralist" by establishing a connection between imaginative projection and morality to try to explain the unthinkable violence of September 11. In one such article, McEwan remarked, "If the hijackers had been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers, they would have been unable to proceed... Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of

²⁵ For example, Brian Finney argues that the novel is part of a larger response to the violence of life in the second half of the twentieth century, post-World War II and the threat of nuclear war, and uses the novel's publication context of 9/11 to frame his reading of the novel. He then suggests that the novel's "attempt to imagine the feelings of others is perhaps the one corrective that we can make in the face of continuing human suffering." See Finney, 81-82. Peter Boxall includes McEwan's *Atonement* in his discussion of the relationship between "late-historical experience and late fictional style in the early years of the twenty-first century, as writers struggle to situate themselves in the new century, to work out how to respond to a time that seems suddenly recalibrated." See Boxall, 697-8.

our humanity.”²⁶ McEwan suggests here that this type of empathetic imagining is a basic human act that could prevent violence instigated by political and cultural divides. This type of imagining is also the defining element of the work of an author, and Briony strives to fully inhabit this role over the course of the novel.

Thus, I argue against readings of *Atonement* that portray Briony’s counterfactual imagining of Cecilia and Robbie living a long and happy life together as a morally questionable act.²⁷ Such critics are unable to understand what is often pejoratively referred to as the novel’s “metafictional” turn – the revelation of Briony’s decision to fictionalize a happy ending for Robbie and Cecilia – as instead a central part of the novel’s exploration of ethical and moral modes of being.²⁸ I agree with David O’Hara’s rejection of such readings of *Atonement*, particularly with his reading of the ending as metafictional as hindered by an understanding of metafiction as only a postmodern gimmick that holds no ethical stake.²⁹ Instead, O’Hara argues that McEwan shapes the continuous development towards Briony’s final draft as a “creative process through which different possibilities of being are made communicable.”³⁰ I would add to O’Hara’s reading that Briony’s culminating act as an author – to move beyond her own subjectivity by imagining a life for Robbie and Cecilia – is not solely a result of the decline of her mental powers. Thus, I do not take Briony’s embrace of the counterfactual at the end of her

²⁶ Head, *Ian McEwan*, 161.

²⁷ For example, Dominic Head writes that *Atonement* is “radically ambivalent about establishing a model of desirable ethical behavior and responsibility,” and that the chief effect of the novel is to “question the morality of the author figure seeking to establish truth.” Therefore, he concludes that the novel’s disclosure of its fictional status via Briony’s revelation is antithetical to the ethical concerns displayed in the rest of the novel, as if Briony is only continuing to lie only in order to console herself over the consequences of her actions. See Head, *Ian McEwan*, 160.

²⁸ For example, Jerome de Groot sees the novel as a key example of “historiographic metafiction” in the tradition of Rushdie and Fowles. Its ending, he argues, reveals the novel to be a “tissue of fictions and lies.” See de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London: Routledge, 2010), 106-108.

²⁹ See O’Hara, 87-88.

³⁰ O’Hara continues by stating that “rather than enacting any loss of faith in narrative, [McEwan] instead submits narrativity as that which puts the self into interactive and meaningful contact with the Other and the world-at-large.” O’Hara, 91.

life as insincere, as she has little to lose, or as not willful, as if it is only a symptom of her dementia. I argue that this juxtaposition of moving beyond the self and the slow dissolution of one's own consciousness addresses a larger cultural dynamic at work in contemporary Britain, as the novel parallels Briony's decline and the larger decline of British power, alongside the effort of both to come to terms with the violence and consequences of the actions that produced that power.

The depiction of Briony as a budding author in Part One establishes the relationship between the ethical potential of narrative form and the contemplation of the minds of others. The key scene that explores this connection is when Briony watches Robbie and Cecilia from the window of her old nursery as they struggle over a vase at an outdoor fountain: Cecilia tries to fill the vase with water, Robbie tries to help, a piece of the vase breaks off and falls to the bottom of the fountain, and Cecilia strips down to her underwear and plunges into the fountain to retrieve the broken pieces. However, the reader has already witnessed this scene in the previous chapter, and therefore is aware of Briony's misinterpretation of the action, which she attempts to frame as a scene from a fairy tale. Her inability to understand the complicated sexual dynamics at work between Cecilia and Robbie is a key reason for Briony's accusation of Robbie as the rapist of her cousin Lola. Before Briony goes to the window, she sits on the floor, frustrated over the progress of the rehearsals of the play, *The Trials of Arabella*, that she has written in honor of her brother Leon's visit home. Briony's vision of her play has been corrupted by the interpretation and rendition of its actors; earlier in the chapter, she struggles to listen to her cousin Jackson read his lines poorly, and begins to understand "the chasm that lay between an idea and its execution."³¹ This moment of quiet in the nursery, coming after Briony's disappointment over

³¹ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 16. All other references to this text will be to this edition and will include page numbers.

the failed realization of her artistic vision, sparks a meditation on consciousness and theory of mind – the ability to attribute mental states to others. As Briony sits, she bends and straightens her finger, wondering “how this thing, this machine for gripping, this fleshy spider on the end of her arm, came to be hers, entirely at her command” (33). This thought leads to a contemplation on the relationship between mind and body via the mysterious origin of her finger’s movement, and she then wonders, “Was everyone else really as alive as she was? For example, did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony?” Here, Briony takes the first step towards imagining the minds of others by acknowledging the possibility that other people possess a hidden world of consciousness. This possibility overwhelms her, for if true, then “the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone’s thoughts striving in equal importance and everyone’s claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was” (34). Before this realization, Briony used her imagination solely to fulfill her own fantasies and limit the influence of others. In this passage, she begins to recognize that the imagination can also be used to acknowledge and understand multiple perspectives and narrative possibilities. This realization becomes the novel’s key ethical stance, as it offers a method of real-world engagement that refuses to elevate one’s own beliefs and experiences over those of others - a position that McEwan echoes in his post-9/11 comments.

At this early age, however, Briony is not entirely convinced that other people possess the complicated inner life that she does, and when she walks to the window and sees Robbie and Cecilia at the fountain, she still attempts to interpret the scene as part of a fairytale, imposing her vision of *The Trials of Arabella* onto her surroundings. However, Briony soon realizes that her fairytale framework does not explain the reality of Robbie and Cecilia’s interaction, and at this

moment, the narrative voice becomes weighted with the knowledge and guilt of the older Briony as author: “Briony had her first, weak intimation that for her now it could no longer be fairy-tale castles and princesses, but the strangeness of the here and now, of what passed between people, the ordinary people that she knew, and what power one could have over the other, and how easy it was to get everything wrong, completely wrong” (37). In what reads as a declaration of a modernist aesthetic, Briony’s authorial voice charges this moment of misinterpretation with the burden of regret, as it foreshadows Briony’s wrongful accusation of Robbie and all its ensuing consequences. This shift in narrative voice develops into a statement of intention regarding the writing of the novel itself, as Briony’s realization that her perspective is only one of many prompts a vision of a new artistic project based on the scene she just witnessed: “She could write the scene three times over, from three points of view.” The ethical imperative to imagine and respect the minds of others thus shapes what is to become a lifetime project, for “[s]he need only show separate minds, as alive as her own, struggling with the idea that other minds were equally alive. It wasn’t only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you.” Briony then identifies narrative as the central realm wherein one can actualize this belief, for “only in a story could you enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value.” Rather than framing Briony’s work as a novelist as self-fulfilling, fiction enables a movement beyond the self through the recognition of the separate and independent nature of the minds of others. Briony calls this imaginative exploration “the only moral a story need have” (38).³² Brian Finney writes that the practice of fiction has real-world implications, for “when novelists force us to understand the constructed nature of their characters, they invite us

³² In an interview, McEwan states, “I look on novels as exploratory, forms of investigation, at its broadest and best, into human nature.” See Ian McEwan, “A Novelist on the Edge,” interview with Dan Cryer, *Newsday*, 24 April 2002, p. B6.

simultaneously to reflect on the way subjectivity is similarly constructed in the non-fictional world that we inhabit.”³³ In this way, *Atonement* works to teach the reader how to respect others, a lesson that McEwan has clearly marked as increasingly important in our contemporary world.

Before the close of this scene, Briony carefully situates the ethical work of her novel as having a counterfactual origin. Having turned away from the window after Cecilia emerges from the fountain and walks inside the house, she returns to her perch and looks down on the empty lawn. The only trace left behind from the interaction between Robbie and Cecilia is the wet patch on the gravel where Cecilia got out of the fountain. This patch, a sexual sign, has now evaporated, giving the passage a temporal framework, and all that remains now are memories in the minds of Robbie, Cecilia, and Briony: “Now there was nothing left of the dumb show by the fountain beyond what survived in memory, in three separate and overlapping memories. The truth had become as ghostly as invention.” After her epiphany that fiction can honor the independence of the consciousness of others, Briony now recognizes that there are multiple ways, or truths, to understand the scene at the fountain, and that in order to know a truth other than her own, she must imagine or invent it. This mingling of fact and fiction, which offers an awareness of other possibilities, is the defining element of the counterfactual. Briony acknowledges the creative freedom and ethical potential of fiction, for “the scene could be recast, through Cecilia’s eyes, and then Robbie’s” (39). Yet Briony delays the writing, walking away from the nursery to continue the rehearsals of her play.

The complex temporality of this passage, in which the novel anticipates its own production, recalls that of *Ulysses*, as both narratives reimagine the past when the novels are still a future possibility. It is fitting, then, that once Briony writes a draft of the fountain scene, “Two

³³ Finney, 76.

Figures by a Fountain,” and submits it to the literary magazine *Horizon*, the editors and readers, including Elizabeth Bowen, recognize it as a distinctly modernist project – perhaps even to a fault, as the editor Cyril Connolly writes to Briony that it may “[owe] a little too much to the techniques of Mrs. Woolf” (294).³⁴ Connolly’s major criticism is that the piece dwells too long in observation and psychological description and lacks narrative structure and tension.

Connolly’s suggestions for revision target the consequences of Briony’s actions, with which she has not yet come to terms: “If this girl has so fully misunderstood or been so wholly baffled by the strange little scene that has unfolded before her, how might it affect the lives of the two adults? Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion?” (295). While “Two Figures by a Fountain” does move towards inhabiting the characters’ different perspectives, it does not empathetically explore the perspectives of others in terms of their experiential knowledge. At this point as an author, Briony has not yet used the creative capacity of fiction to theorize reparation; instead, she dwells in the aesthetic rather than developing a moral standpoint as an author. Rather than reading this moment as a criticism of modernism, as many critics have done, I argue that McEwan is responding to the very trend in criticism of calling modernism apolitical.³⁵ Briony’s revision of “Two Figures by a Fountain” becomes, as David James calls the aim of McEwan’s fiction, “a reassessment of the politics and potential of earlier twentieth-century innovations.”³⁶

³⁴ A recent article that explores the larger literary and historical contexts of *Atonement*, specifically the literary magazine *Horizon* and the writings of its editor, Cyril Connolly, is Ana Mitrić’s “Turning Points: *Atonement*, *Horizon*, and Late Modernism,” *Modernism/modernity* 21, no. 3 (September 2014): 715-740.

³⁵ For example, Richard Robinson argues that through Briony’s story, “Two Figures by a Fountain,” a piece that represents modernist aesthetics, McEwan is calling attention to “the moral responsibility of telling stories.” As Briony’s writing does not take on this responsibility, McEwan thus “indicts modernism as a whole.” See Robinson, 473.

³⁶ David James, *Modernist Futures*, 137-8.

As Ana Mitrić notes, the arrival of Connolly's letter on the same day as the arrival of wounded soldiers from Dunkirk at the London hospital where Briony is training as a nurse works as a catalyst to accelerate Briony's development as an author.³⁷ Yet Briony has already started to contemplate this confluence of private and public history. Earlier in the day, before the arrival of the soldiers and the letter, she sits in a London park with a fellow nurse, thinking about how her accusation of Robbie ultimately sent him to fight in France: "If something happened to Robbie, if Cecilia and Robbie were never to be together... Her secret torment and the public upheaval of war had always seemed separate worlds, but now she understood how the war might compound her crime" (271-72). Briony begins to understand that her accusation of Robbie has real-world consequences, ones that connect her actions to larger historical events and movements. It is this type of connection, theorized here in an early stage, which furthers my argument that *Atonement's* use of counterfactual reasoning and imaginings work to bridge personal and national histories. At this point, however, Briony is afraid to continue this line of thought, wishing instead "to have someone else's past" (272). Her guilt still serves as a limitation, and she has not found a way to move beyond other than to wish for her past to be erased. This reaction echoes Tony Webster's struggles in *The Sense of an Ending* to come to terms with his own guilt and to understand the past from a perspective other than his own. In contrast to her carefree friend and fellow nurse, whose future Briony imagines as a path of discovery and potential, "To Briony, it appeared that her [own] life was going to be lived in one room, without a door" (272). This image of her future as a static, limited space is the opposite of Joyce's "room of the infinite possibilities," which stands as *Ulysses's* model for its counterfactual fusion of the

³⁷ See Mitrić, 727.

actual and the possible. This contrast points to Briony's need for a similar approach to history, which *Atonement*, as her future writing project, will eventually become.

After the receipt of Connolly's letter, Briony has a chance to imagine beyond herself when a head nurse orders her to tend to a French soldier, knowing Briony can speak French. Dying from a severe head wound, Luc speaks to Briony as if he knows her from his hometown of Millau. At first Briony corrects him, feeling it "wasn't right to lead him on" (289), and tries to tell him that they are not in Paris but in London, and that she has never been to Millau. However, after loosening his bandages and seeing the "mess of brain" underneath, she relents and does not attempt to correct him anymore. Instead, she begins to speak to him as if she had visited his family's bakery in Millau, and when he asks if she loves him, she hesitates but responds yes. For, as she thinks, "No other reply was possible. Besides, for that moment, she did. He was a lovely boy who was a long way from his family and he was about to die" (292). Here, Briony participates in the conversation by acting the role that Luc has created for her. As David O'Hara notes, "Where she [Briony] was once so apt to hijack the narratives of others, reconstructing them to fit her own vision, she now relinquishes her authority."³⁸ In this way, she allows the imagination of another to control their relationship, knowing what comfort this will bring to Luc. This creative gesture generates true empathy and feeling, for she states in that moment she does love Luc. Moments later, Luc seizes forward out of bed and falls onto Briony. As she holds him up while he dies, she whispers to him her first name, knowing that doing so is a violation of a key tenet of nursing. By sharing with Luc her real identity while also having willingly acted as if she were his lover, Briony discovers her ethical standpoint as an author.

³⁸ O'Hara, 83.

Without losing her sense of self, she can imagine beyond herself in order to connect empathetically with another.

Briony's interaction with Luc is a key generative moment for her later composition of Part II of the novel, which is written from the perspective of Robbie during the retreat to Dunkirk. The reader can see Briony beginning to practice the authorial imagining that underlies all of *Atonement* when she returns to her room at the end of her day, after she has received the letter from Connolly but before she has opened it. She thinks about Luc, who died earlier that night, and imagines "the unavailable future" (293): a life in Millau as Luc's wife, living near his family's boulangerie, laughing with his sisters, and being loved by Luc. The phrase "unavailable future" connotes a type of counterfactual possibility that becomes accessible through the imagination. Laura Marcus writes that time in *Atonement* functions as a medium of pathos, particularly within the narratives of Robbie and Cecilia. She notes that these two characters are often shown in the present, imagining a future in which the present will become the past. Yet upon a second reading of the novel, the reader knows that they will never live out that future, and Marcus connects this "mode of anticipated retrospect" with the phrase "the unavailable future," used to describe Briony's imagining of a life with the dead Luc.³⁹ In this way, Briony begins her path towards authorship by offering a future to those denied it, beginning with Luc, through her own creative thought.

Briony develops her engagement with "the unavailable future" throughout the long rewriting of her novel, resulting in her final draft in which Robbie and Cecilia are given a life together. The knowledge imparted through imagining an "unavailable future" – by putting the actual (the deaths of these characters) and the possible (the lives that Briony imagines for them)

³⁹ See Marcus, 87-88. I agree with Marcus that this mode of "anticipated retrospect" is a medium for pathos, but she also states it is a medium for irony as well, which I disagree with.

alongside one another – creates a sense of temporal doubling. This doubling, formed through the novel’s engagement with counterfactual thought, subtly emerges at moments when Briony consciously alters what happened and imagines a different possibility. I call this technique “counterfuturity,” a term that captures Briony’s efforts to reimagine the past so as to allow for other possible futures. In contrast to Tony Webster, who does not seem interested in the future, Briony is able to balance her admissions of guilt with a reparative vision through this technique. For example, when Briony decides to go visit her sister on her day off from the hospital to tell Cecilia that she is ready to recant her statement against Robbie, the narrative projects the possibility of two Brionys, one walking towards Cecilia’s flat and one going back the way she came: “She left the café, and as she walked along the Common she felt the distance widen between her and another self, no less real, who was walking back to the hospital. Perhaps the Briony who was walking in the direction of Balham was the imagined or ghostly persona” (311). At the end of the novel, Briony reveals that she never went that day to visit Cecilia, who was mourning Robbie (who had recently died of septicemia on the Front). Briony, as author, carefully constructs the above passage to uphold the actual and the possible, both of which, she notes, are equally real. Her imagining of this visit, which forms the final installment of Part Three, is her attempt to understand and honor Cecilia’s experiences. This ethical act concludes with the final events of Part Three, which ends with Briony descending alone into the Balham Underground station. At the close of the novel, the reader learns that Cecilia was killed in 1940 in a bombing of that same tube station. Thus, Briony imaginatively projects herself into what Cecilia’s last moments might have been like.

In this way, it is clear that long before the revelations of *Atonement*’s Coda, the novel maintains a sustained engagement with the counterfactual, though this engagement is more

apparent to the reader upon a second reading. Rather than taking the Coda as a postmodern trick, *Atonement* should be seen throughout as theorizing the ethics of imagining foreclosed possibilities, an action that allows one to occupy outside perspectives. What the Coda principally serves to do, then, is frame this imaginative effort within the national context of the decline of Britain as a world power. The Coda takes place over the course of a single day, a framework familiar from Part One of the novel, as well as a parallel to such classic modernist works as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses*. This particular day is Briony's seventy-seventh birthday, and the section opens as Briony journeys across London to the archives at the Imperial War Museum library, where she concludes the research that helped her write her novel. The second half of the day takes place at her childhood home, the site of Part One, which has now been made into a hotel. There, she and her extended family have gathered for her birthday celebration. The juxtaposition of these two journeys – to sites of national and personal memory – reveals in both an anxiety over the preservation of the past and an acknowledgement of the consequences of being the dominant power, whether that is on a national or individual level.

The Coda opens with Briony's explanation of her decision to visit the archives one last time. As she puts it, "It suited [her] peculiar state of mind" (333). Her mind, she then reveals, is undergoing "a series of tiny, nearly imperceptible strokes" (334), for just yesterday she received a diagnosis of vascular dementia. Her memory is increasingly beginning to fail her, a process that will continue until she will not remember anything at all, and her body will shut down. As she puts it, she is "fading into unknowing." This threat frames her cab ride across London, a trip that she describes as "uncomfortably reflective" (335). Her journey serves as a minor history lesson, both as a tour of the famous sites of London and of her own life, as she is forced to remember those she has known who have died as she passes near their homes. The archive, then,

is where she wishes to be in light of her medical diagnosis, for it is a comforting place to her, a space of both preservation and of creative interactions with history, and her work there distracts her from her own failings of memory. Yet upon her arrival she is again confronted with the consequences of her actions as a child, for as she enters the museum the Marshalls – her cousin Lola and her husband Paul Marshall, the man who attacked her – are leaving. The Marshalls, now millionaires, are planning to give a large grant to the museum through their foundation; much like Briony's earlier reflection that the war may compound her crime of false accusation, here again is an example of the repercussion of her past actions, the union of Lola and Paul Marshall, interacting with and potentially influencing the shape of Britain's national history. Rather than the archives forming a static repository, here we see political and financial elements at work in the construction and maintenance of cultural memory, as the Marshalls themselves have benefited from controlling the representation of their own past – Paul's rape of Lola as the instigator of their marriage.

Furthermore, Briony is also involved in the production of the archive. As she leaves, she donates letters from an old colonel who has edited her manuscript for an accurate portrayal of its war scenes, and at the end of the novel she reveals that the letters of Robbie and Cecilia are also housed there, presumably donated by her as well. McEwan, too, worked in these same archives during the writing of *Atonement*, for in his Acknowledgements he thanks the staff of the Imperial War Museum for their help. The archive is a site of both fictional and historical production, and the novel is careful to show how these processes are not separate but intertwined. For example, Briony's process of writing her novel, in particular Part Two's wartime scenes, can only be successful if the fictional details are believable, and thus she turns to the archive; the same holds true for McEwan's novel, a point that addresses the cultural function of historical fiction. It is

not only in the archive where one can learn about the past, for fiction offers the capacity for an imaginative interaction with history. Furthermore, it is significant that McEwan, and implicitly Briony, choose to focus their fiction on the era of World War II – as does a work I discuss earlier, Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*. I suggest here that for McEwan, World War II is representative of Britain’s past status as a world power, a period which has now conclusively come to an end. *Atonement*’s attention to historical detail, and within the novel, the Marshall Foundation’s donation to support the archive, reveal a larger cultural shift towards preservation of this age in light of the diminished status of Britain in the twenty-first century. The obsessive notes of Mr. Nettle, the colonel who edited Briony’s manuscript, further supports this point. He is intensely invested in the correct representation of the war, so much so that it has become a personal mission, as Briony calls him “something of an amateur historian.” For example, in one letter he corrects Briony’s use of “on the double” for “at the double,” in a tone that Briony calls both “irascible” and “helpful” (339). The repeated connections between Briony’s revision of her personal history and the national narrative of Britain suggest that, like Briony, Britain must also come to terms with the moral and ethical costs of its own power.

Underlying Mr. Nettle’s meticulousness is a pleasurable obsessiveness, which Briony participates in as well when she explains that she loves his “pointillist approach to verisimilitude, the correction of detail that cumulatively gives such satisfaction” (339). Yet also at work is a fear of impermanence. Like Tony Webster of *The Sense of an Ending*, Mr. Nettle obsesses over the preservation of historical accuracy in order to retain control over the narrative of the past and to counter the dissolving effects of memory over time. Ultimately, Mr. Nettle is afraid that the individual experience of a World War II soldier will be forgotten and perhaps co-opted by cultural representations such as Briony’s novel. This fear of forgetting also underlies the

Imperial War Museum – an institution founded in 1917 to document the contemporary events of World War I, and which over the century has expanded to represent subsequent international conflicts in which Britain has been involved. The museum narrates a history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Britain as an imperial power, which is no longer an accurate depiction of the country. The museum then functions as a repository for representations of Britain’s dominance, which prompts a reconciliation of the preservation of Britain’s past with the deflation of British power and the consequences of British dominance. The museum, as a cultural space, is then a key site in which Britain’s new world status can be negotiated. This dynamic also characterizes Briony’s interactions with her own past, as well as her own declining mental state, and her strategy to cope with her declining powers and the consequences of her actions comes to stand as a model for how Britain must also confront its past.

As Briony knows that she cannot change the past, she ultimately chooses to compose a narrative that acknowledges and occupies the perspective of those whose lives she has affected. This counterfactual narrative offers a reparative gesture by imagining the lives that Robbie and Cecilia might have led, and in this way she is not essentially concerned with truth but rather with moving beyond her own subjectivity and into the minds of others. As a way to own up to this approach, throughout the Coda she reveals how in her novel she has altered the past. For example, when she passes St. Thomas’s Hospital, the location of Part Three, on her taxi ride, she comments that during the war she actually worked in three hospitals and decided to fuse her experiences into one place, calling this change “[a] convenient distortion, and the least of my offenses against veracity” (336). After she leaves the museum and is headed back home, she thinks back on Colonel Nettle’s corrections and states, “If I really cared so much about facts, I should have written a different kind of book” (340). Yet she also knows that fiction can have an

effect on the real world, in a way that warrants the novel's counterfactual imaginings as not trivial fictionalizing but as the foundation for an ethical and moral worldview. Her major concern about publishing her novel involves the Marshalls, for her publisher has warned her that because of the accusations against them in the book Briony cannot publish until they are dead. Due to Lola's good health despite her advanced age, Briony realizes that she will not be able to publish her novel within her own lifetime. Thus, her novel acquires a sense of incompleteness and deferral – she closes the novel by positing the possibility of a new draft and a new ending – that is reminiscent of the unfinished status of the narrators' memoirs in Sam Selvon's *Moses Ascending* and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*. As with those novels, this incompleteness carries a type of openness and political force, in that the narrative continually gestures towards alternative possibilities and weakens discourses based upon a singular narrative structure.

For Briony, the past is not a permanent record but a space of continual change. With the news of her diagnosis, this perspective has become a personal one. Now aware of her ongoing loss of memory, Briony wonders, after waking from a nap on the car ride to the Tallis house, "What portion of my mind, of my memory, had I lost to a minuscule stroke while I was asleep? I would never know." This realization produces a "sensation of shrinking" (342), as Briony feels she is losing her conception of her own identity. This sense of diminishment and erasure also shapes Briony's first impressions on returning to her childhood home for the first time in twenty-five years. The house has now become Tilney's Hotel, the temporary home of others, perhaps a comment on how we readers will also pass through by imaginatively inhabiting the world of the text. As cultural commentary, the country house as a symbol of past eras of British power has now been emptied out. As Briony enters the grounds she is struck by what is gone: the parkland trees, the surrounding woods, the ivy on the house, and the small lake. She cannot even spot

where she comforted her cousin Lola after the attack – a comment on how the event only now exists in memory and through Briony’s reimagining. Yet once inside, she begins to accept these absences, and her impulse to reimagine and remake returns; though she is still troubled by the absence of the lake, she comments, “it could be restored one day perhaps.” She also begins to take comfort in the new form of the house as a hotel, thinking “the building itself surely embraced more human happiness now, as a hotel, than it did when I lived here” (344). Once the birthday celebrations begin, she is also surprised by the growth of her family, as the room is filled with over fifty people of all ages. This sense of perpetual expansion and possibility shapes the novel’s final scenes, in which several children of the family perform *The Trials of Arabella*, Briony’s childhood play from Part One. Here, the initial aesthetic impulse that begins the novel is completed at last. In contrast to the failed rehearsals in Part One, during which Briony is frustrated by the interpretations of the actors superseding her authorial intentions, this performance reminds Briony of her earlier egocentric self while also delighting her in its resurrection. This vision of creative possibility – of a text being reinterpreted by those born long after its conception – suggests that her novel will also live on long past her.

As a closing gesture, Briony also examines the use of fiction to confront the real – a central tenet of the counterfactual. Here, Briony explains that the purpose of her novel, from the draft written after “Two Figures by a Fountain” up to the version finished in 1999 that the reader has presumably just read, has been to reveal her crime and the involvement of the Marshalls in covering it up to preserve their reputations. This purpose serves as the novel’s central lesson to the nation – that instead of covering up the past, as the influential Marshalls have done, the country must confront its past and the consequences of its now dissipating power. In this way, Briony views her novel as “a matter of historical record.” She rejects the relegation of fiction to

a realm in which one must not interfere with the real world, but rather should, as it has been suggested to her, “displace, transmute, dissemble” such matters so that the fictional work cannot be said to be connected to reality (349). Instead, she has positioned her novel to do just the opposite, and this objective does not fail because of the alternative ending that she writes for Robbie and Cecilia. Briony then finally explains that it is only in her last draft that Robbie and Cecilia are reunited, rather than showing Robbie’s death in the war or Cecilia’s death in the Balham Underground bombing. By presenting the reader with these two alternatives, the novel becomes a form of counterfactual imagining that engages with the actual and what might have been. Her fiction becomes a space in which one can imagine against the real in order to engage ethically with the ramifications of one’s actions. In doing so, the novel serves as a form of reparation, or, in Briony’s words, “a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair” (351). Through the reader’s understanding and imaginings of these counterfactual alternatives, one develops a more full understanding of human experience. As Kathleen D’Angelo writes, McEwan’s reader learns to “observe, question, investigate, and, finally, to feel.” This lesson, D’Angelo suggests, is increasingly important in a contemporary world that is shaped by capitalist forces that promote uncritical consumption.⁴⁰ I would add to her point that the need to recognize alternative possibilities and perspectives outside of a singular narrative or point of view is also a way to navigate ethically the shifting political and cultural landscape of the twenty-first century, a lesson that the novel directs at the British nation.

⁴⁰ Kathleen D’Angelo, “‘To Make a Novel’: The Construction of a Critical Readership in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*,” *Studies in the Novel* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 103. D’Angelo also notes that Paul Marshall is the novel’s representative figure of capitalism, and who has benefited from passive consumers.

As the final part of my study of the function of the counterfactual in twentieth- and twenty-first-century British literature, *Atonement* and *The Sense of an Ending* present two contrasting responses to the process of ethically engaging with the ramifications of one's actions through counterfactual imaginings. In both, the narrators' experiences are also directed outwards at the national consciousness. *Atonement* offers an ultimately hopeful vision of developing a fuller understanding of human experience and of the contemporary world, while *The Sense of an Ending* offers a more somber and defeatist vision of the process of disempowerment. These responses, provoked by the subject position's oscillation between dominance and marginality, speak to the complexities of a reconsideration of the shape of historical narrative. By closing my dissertation with these two novels, I show that counterfactual thought remains a central way for the self to engage with larger cultural and historical processes, as these texts acknowledge the diminished role of Britain among the world's political, economic, and cultural powers. These two novels also draw upon the heritage that I trace over my project – of the counterfactual as an aesthetic and ethical force – and make its processes central to understanding the contemporary era that is marked by increasingly radical and divisive politics. In an age in which the future is increasingly uncertain and threatening, the message of these two novels – to try to move beyond the self in order to understand others – offers a lesson to all globally aware citizens.

AFTERWORD

Throughout my dissertation, I have shown how novelists use the counterfactual to question and challenge the values and institutions that define their contemporary political, social, and cultural landscapes. My study locates the rise of this technique, within the British tradition, during the modernist era and traces its persistence along with its reworkings across the twentieth- and into the twenty-first centuries. In closing, I would like to briefly discuss a recent popularization of the counterfactual in both the literary and cultural spheres. The works under review here – Kate Atkinson’s novel *Life after Life* (2013), and the recent Amazon television series *The Man in the High Castle* (2015), an adaptation of Philip K. Dick’s now classic alternate history novel from 1962 – are both explorations of the counterfactual possibilities inherent in the Nazis’ rise to power. As shown by Gavriel D. Rosenfeld’s *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (2005), the tradition of alternate histories of Nazism has grown increasingly since its establishment in the postwar years. I briefly discuss Rosenfeld’s book in my Introduction as one of his major arguments, directed specifically toward his fellow history scholars, is that the subject of counterfactual or alternate histories is deserving of serious academic study. As he writes, the rise of alternate histories reflects the “progressive discrediting of political ideologies in the West since 1945.” Furthermore, while first recognizing that the most popular subject of alternate histories is Nazism, Rosenfeld argues that the variety of ways in which such histories recast the origins and ends of the Nazi regime can offer either a validation or criticism of the contemporary moment.¹ While my dissertation argues for a more specific role of counterfactual thought within the British literary tradition, within this Afterword I broaden my perspective to address another facet of the cultural work that the counterfactual

¹ See Rosenfeld, 6 and 13.

enables in Western culture. I suggest here that the recent mainstream interest in counterfactual scenarios involving the Nazi regime offers a way to reflect on the key political issues that have shaped the past and present of our contemporary political landscape, in particular, as represented in the work of Atkinson, the West's relationship with the Middle East. Furthermore, in *Life after Life* and *The Man in the High Castle*, individuals are potentially able to change the course of history through a knowledge of the counterfactual – a further development of the argument that the counterfactual can function as a form of reparation.

Kate Atkinson's novel *Life after Life* tells the story of Ursula Todd, born on February 11, 1910, in her family's country home outside of London, and proceeds by exploring numerous variations on her life story. The narrative is structured as a series of alternative possibilities of Ursula's life and death, beginning with her death at birth in the novel's opening chapters. Her mother, Sylvie Todd, goes into labor during a major snowstorm that prevents the family doctor or a local midwife from traveling to the Todd home. Ursula is stillborn, strangled by the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck. This brief chapter closes with the lines, "Darkness fell," and variations on this phrase repeat throughout the novel following Ursula's other possible deaths, such as drowning in the undertow of the Cornish sea, being murdered by an abusive husband, dying during the Blitz in London, and taking her own life during the last days of the assault on Berlin during World War II. By closing each segment of Ursula's life with variations on the original "Darkness fell," Atkinson signals to her readers the presence of the author's organizing consciousness. Yet for Ursula, the compounded experience of multiple lives and multiple deaths begins to develop into a shadowy awareness of other possibilities.² She begins to sense the impending danger to herself and for others, and at times tries to prevent, and thus

² Alex Clark writes in *The Guardian* that "Ursula carries within her a vague, dimly apprehended sense of other, semi-lived lives." See "Life after Life by Kate Atkinson – Review," *The Guardian*, March 6, 2013.

control and alter, the impending outcomes. For example, she chooses to push her maid down the stairs so that she cannot travel to London where she would then contract Spanish influenza. Ursula feels the premonitions as types of echoes, in that her future is also part of her past. Her often drastic reactions in response to them soon prompt her family to take her to a psychiatrist, Dr. Kellet, who introduces Ursula to the concept of reincarnation as well as to Nietzsche's theory of *amor fati*. While in his office, she thinks to herself that these premonitions "belonged to that world of shadows and dreams that was ever present and yet almost impossible to pin down." Her conception of this realm evokes Joyce's "room of the infinite possibilities," one of the dominant tropes of my dissertation. When Dr. Kellet asks her if she believes that these premonitions signal the existence of another world, she responds, "Yes. But it's this one as well."³ In this way, Ursula understands that these possibilities are intricately bound up with the reality of the world she lives in – a recognition of both the actual and the possible, which is the foundation of counterfactual thought. At other points in the novel Ursula describes time as a palimpsest, as layers of possibilities blend and interact but never erase one another. This description of time recalls in particular the temporal layering in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, which in my third chapter I discuss as a strategy to promote the fluidity and freedom of the present moment in order to resist the violence of totalizing temporal structures.

As the novel progresses, Ursula gains an increased awareness and understanding of the interconnected workings of these counterfactual possibilities, and she develops a type of agency that allows her to responsibly navigate them. With this knowledge and control, she sets her sights on one particular mission: to kill Hitler before his rise to power. In many of its various permutations, Ursula's life path intersects with the rise of the Nazi regime. In one narrative

³ Kate Atkinson, *Life after Life* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013), 156. All subsequent references to this text will be to this edition and will include page numbers.

thread, Ursula studies German at school and then travels to Europe, staying with families and gaining experience teaching English. Through one family she stays with in Germany, she goes on a field trip with the Bund Deutscher Mädel, the girls' equivalent of the Hitler-Jugend. At one point, she befriends Eva Braun, Hitler's mistress, and is even invited to stay at Hitler's Berghof as his guest. On the other extreme, Ursula lives in London during the Blitz and joins the Air Raid Precautions (ARP) Department, helping to rescue people from collapsed buildings after nightly bombing raids. In one story line, she dies in a collapsed building; in another, she lives. These sections of the novel recall the wartime fiction of Elizabeth Bowen and Henry Green, a resemblance that suggests the ways in which Atkinson is participating in a metamodernist discourse in that she is engaging with the forms and techniques of modernist aesthetics in order to further contemporary social and ethical goals.⁴ As Ursula's life paths weave in and out of both sides of World War II, Ursula begins to learn how to navigate them so that she avoids danger. By the end of the novel, while starting life over as a young girl once again, she begins to formulate a plan. She envisions herself as "both warrior and shining spear... a sword glinting in the depths of night, a lance of light piercing the darkness," and she thinks, "There would be no mistakes this time" (508). Her goal is to make the necessary decisions that will lead to her friendship with Eva Braun in Berlin in 1930, thus allowing her to approach Hitler in a café and shoot him using her father's old revolver. Indeed, the novel's first chapter, which directly precedes the tale of the stillborn birth of Ursula, presents this assassination scene, during which

⁴ As I discuss in my Introduction, "metamodernism" is a term coined by David James and Urmila Seshagiri in their 2014 *PMLA* article, "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution." In the article, they argue for a return to a period-specific definition of modernism that retains a historically and culturally specific referent to the art and culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As James and Seshagiri write in their defense of a return to periodization, "we need to retain periodicity not to shore up a canonical sense of when modernism began, the moment from which it cast its influence, but to establish a literary-cultural basis for charting the myriad ways that much twenty-first-century fiction consciously engages modernism through the inheritance of formal principles and ethicopolitical imperatives that are recalibrated in the context of new social or philosophical concerns." James and Seshagiri, 92.

Hitler's guards also kill Ursula. Beginning the novel with this episode casts its repercussions not only over the rest of the narrative but also into the world of the reader.

As Rosenfeld writes, there is a deep-seeded allure to the premise that the world would be a different place if Hitler could have been killed before becoming Chancellor of Germany. Narratives that explore this possibility emerge out of a "belief in the power of individual agency to shape historical events, and ... have expressed a certain degree of discontent with the present that, more often than not, has reflected the Third Reich's enduring traumatic legacy."⁵ Indeed, the premise of *Life after Life* is that Ursula can change the outcome of history, not only through major events such as Hitler's assassination but through a combination of "minor" decisions and actions that lead her to that café in Berlin in 1930 as well as affecting the lives of others. This combination of major and minor events evokes in particular my work with *Waterland* and *The English Patient* in my third chapter. In another narrative segment of *Life after Life*, set in 1967, Ursula is now fifty-seven years old, unmarried and near retirement. Her physical state recalls that of Briony Tallis of *Atonement* and Tony Webster of *The Sense of an Ending*; she lives alone in a London flat, and has recently begun to suffer from terrible headaches. At one point, she even wonders whether the headaches, along with her premonitory dreams and sensations, are the first signs of dementia. In this segment, she did not kill Hitler – otherwise, she would not be alive – but in a conversation with her nephew, she speculates on the possible outcomes of such an act. This discussion takes place in the context of contemporary conflict abroad, as this narrative thread begins with a news broadcast of ongoing events occurring during the Six Day War between Israel and Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. The outcome of the Six Day War, in which Israel was clearly the victor, allowed the Israelis to seize territories on the West Bank and Gaza

⁵ Rosenfeld, 273-4.

Strip, tripling the area under their control and bolstering their military presence in the region. When Ursula and her nephew, Nigel, discuss the possible consequences of Hitler being murdered, their conversation begins with Ursula asking, ““If Hitler had been killed, before he became Chancellor, it would have stopped all this conflict between the Arabs and the Israelis, wouldn’t it?”” (473). Ursula and Nigel then go on to speculate about other resulting consequences on the world stage: the emergence of the United States as the major world power post-World War II and the decline of Britain as an imperial power. These questions, along with the origins of Arab-Israeli conflict, albeit initially framed in the context of late 1960s politics, are at the center of the novel’s counterfactual imaginings. Through these characters’ line of questioning, Atkinson suggests that this type of speculation and imaginative experimentation offers a way for her readers to begin to interrogate the origins of our contemporary political and cultural condition, in particular the West’s relationship to Middle East conflict.

The question of how a work employs the political potential of such counterfactual imaginings has been the underlying issue in the critical response to the Amazon-produced television series *The Man in the High Castle*. Upon its premiere in the fall of 2015, many critics jumped to discuss its narrative in comparison to its source text, Philip K. Dick’s novel from 1962. In both, the Nazis won World War II, and America has been partitioned between Nazi Germany, which controls the East Coast, and Imperial Japan, which controls the West Coast. From these critical discussions emerged one central consensus: that the television series subverts the political critique of Dick’s novel, which concentrates on a group of characters living in the Japanese-occupied Pacific States, in favor of a more action-packed storyline that focuses on a resistance movement fighting the Nazi regime. As Adam Kirsch writes in *The New York Review of Books*, the novel offers an exploration of racial supremacy and the colonial experience by

examining “how (white) Americans, so used to independence and supremacy, learn to think of themselves as subservient and second-rate.”⁶ Laura Miller of *Slate* offers a similar opinion, as she writes that Dick’s work is “one of the best mid-20th-century American novels about colonialism and its corrosive effects on the human psyche,” and compares it to novels about the effects of British colonialism such as V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas* and Hari Kunzru’s *The Impressionist*.⁷ Furthermore, Noah Berlatsky argues that Dick’s novel offers unsettling parallels between Nazi-occupied America and the America of present day, in that what is so disturbing about *The Man in the High Castle* is how familiar its dystopia seems. As he writes, “That truth, or at least one possible truth suggested by Dick, is that there is no radical disjunction between his alternate history and our own... Dick’s novel suggests, disturbingly, that the defeat of the Nazis did not, in fact, truly transform the world.”⁸ In this way, the overlap between the actual and the possible is at the crux of Dick’s criticism of contemporary America: by imagining this alternative path, one is able to gain a critical perspective on America’s inherent racism.

The Amazon series of *The Man in the High Castle* focuses instead on the disorienting effects of its portrayal of an occupied America; its viewers are constantly shown how much worse the world would be if the Nazis had emerged victorious. The television series also adds an element that Dick’s novel lacks: an insurgency that is dedicated to fighting the fascist regimes on both coasts. The resistance movement offers an action-based narrative, for as many have noted, Dick’s original novel turns on the internal drama of the psyches of occupied Americans.⁹ The

⁶ Adam Kirsch, “The World Turned Upside Down,” *The New York Review of Books*, January 14, 2016, 58.

⁷ Laura Miller, “No Heroes,” *Slate.com*, November 24, 2015.

http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/11/amazon_s_the_man_in_the_high_castle_based_on_the_philip_k_dick_novel.single.html [accessed January 15, 2016].

⁸ Noah Berlatsky, “*The Man in the High Castle* – When a Nazi-Run World Isn’t so Dystopian,” *The Atlantic*, January 22, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/01/man-in-the-high-castle-when-a-nazi-ruled-world-isnt-so-dystopian/384708/> [accessed January 10, 2016].

⁹ See Kirsch, 58.

television series focuses on Juliana Crain, a young woman whose sister is involved in the resistance movement and who gives Juliana a banned newsreel, called *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, before Japanese police shoot her in the street. The aim of the resistance movement is the distribution of these newsreels; the one that Juliana watches shows news footage of what we, the viewers, recognize as the “true” version of our own world in which the Allies are victorious. The series follows Juliana as she takes up the mission of her sister and travels to the “neutral zone,” a strip of territory near the Rocky Mountains between the German and Japanese holdings, to meet up with a resistance contact in order to pass the newsreel on. In Dick’s novel, the possibility of an alternative history takes the form of a novel, also titled *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, that Juliana reads and becomes obsessed with, even going so far as to travel to Wyoming to meet with its author. In Dick’s version, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy* offers yet another historical alternative in which the United States, strong from avoiding the attack on Pearl Harbor, and Britain, whose empire does not collapse in the years following World War II, are pitted against each other in a Cold War for global control. Instead of comparing and contrasting two alternatives, Philip K. Dick offers multiple possibilities, thus casting doubt on the inevitability of any narrative as the “true” outcome. By the end of season one, the television series is moving in this direction as well, as the characters discover more newsreels that show other narrative paths – for example, an atomic bombing of the West Coast, and Stalin still alive in 1954. Our final sighting of the films is a scene at Hitler’s mountain home, where he houses a library of such films and is seen watching one that shows the Allies winning World War II. When asked what these films depict, Hitler answers, albeit with a heavy-handed gesture, ““What might have been.”” The last episode closes with the implication that these multiple possible worlds are connected, as one character sits meditating on a park bench in Japanese-occupied San Francisco

and opens his eyes to “our” reality – a San Francisco flush with American pop culture, showing us that we are now in a world in which the Allies won the war.

Yet what the newsreels of the television series centrally offer to the characters, and to the show’s viewers, is the belief that somehow their counterfactual imagery has the power to overthrow the Nazi regime and also to change the course of history. When Juliana watches the newsreel for the first time she is brought to tears, overcome by the opportunity to believe that the world could be different. Indeed, when characters do watch the films, the camera focuses on their reactions rather than showing the films’ imagery, thus implying that what matters is the effect these films have on the individual rather than the images themselves. After other characters see the film, they also come to believe that they contain the power to change the past and thus also change the present. In Episode Two, titled “Sunrise,” a resistance fighter being held in prison tells Frank, Juliana’s boyfriend, that the films ““can change the world,”” and that they show ““the world not as it is, but as it could be.”” Their power is revolutionary, as it forms the core of the series’ resistance movement, and potentially reparative –and as I have argued throughout my dissertation, counterfactual thought can function as a form of reparation. Furthermore, the resistance movement’s use of the newsreels recalls the power that Ursula Todd of *Life after Life* eventually gains: the power of individuals to change the course of history. While *The Man in the High Castle* series is weakened at times by melodrama and cliché, its redeeming quality is its conception of the newsreel – in essence, a form of counterfactual imagining – as a way to overthrow fascism. As one character puts it, these films ““help kill Nazis.”” I would suggest that this type of political force, which promotes the agency of individual thought over the power of ideological institutions and global corporations that increasingly dominate our world, underlies the increasing popularity of the counterfactual in

today's literature and culture. While its multiple narrative paths may also appeal to a technology-saturated culture that favors continuous shifts in attention and point of view, my dissertation shows that such devices also have a deep political and aesthetic heritage that has helped shape the course of literature and culture from modernism to today.

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