Self-Doubt:
Revision and the Late Modernist Crisis of Conscience

David Frederick Alan Isaacs

UCL, PhD Thesis
Declaration:

I, David Frederick Alan Isaacs, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed,
Abstract

The thesis explores the textual manifestations of late 20th-century anxieties about continuities between forms of literary authority and forms of sovereign power. Focussing on three authors – Philip Roth, J.M. Coetzee, Geoffrey Hill – who regard themselves as heirs and benefactors of traditional literary authority, but who write with a consciousness of its dubious foundation, it identifies as a common response to those anxieties a self-conscious aesthetic of self-doubt and self-criticism, in which the form of a given work becomes inseparable from its own ethical interrogation. It is a revisionary aesthetic, one founded in the processes of negation, correction, substitution that constitute textual revision and manifest in the use of its tropes and effects. The aesthetic fosters an approach to literary text that favours the provisional over the conclusive: the text is always inadequate, always in need of improvement and correction. The thesis sets out to test the intuition that this revisionary reflexivity is not merely a formal or rhetorical device but stems from genuine authorial anxiety and obstruction: that the struggles of composition, its knots and aporias, become the organising principles of the finished (but unfinishable) texts. Its methodology is therefore genetic. It reconstructs the genetic histories of some of these authors’ major works and, by tracing their negotiations with their own authority, attempts to excavate narratives of composition. It observes in each archive the development of a program of extensive revision that harnesses authorial doubt as a motor of creativity. It finds, with remarkable uniformity, that the texts are narratives of their own revisionary geneses, that they tell the story of the getting-it-right of their coming-into-being. The doubt becomes the form. The thesis suggests, finally, that this revisionary ethic may function to allow the authorial will to power to coexist with a perpetual unlearning of sovereignty.
Impact Statement

This thesis presents a considerable amount of previously unseen material from the manuscripts and notebooks of three major and much-studied 20th-century authors: Philip Roth, J.M. Coetzee and Geoffrey Hill. The material endorses, often broadens and sometimes challenges what we know, or think we know of them. Further, its methodology constitutes the speculative reconstruction of compositional process; the material is not presented statically, that is, but is enlivened, opening up new possibilities for our understanding of each author. It should be of considerable interest, therefore, to anyone engaged in the study of each.

Genetic criticism is a burgeoning academic discipline but its fundamental principle – that, as Finn Fordham has it, ‘formation shapes content’ – is hard, given the many necessary restrictions of archival research, to substantiate or prove. This thesis, which has had privileged access to a series of well-catalogued and thorough archives, constitutes an attempt to do both and hopes, therefore, to impact the discipline, and the general study of manuscripts.

Putting the individual accounts in dialogue with one another suggests the development of a particular kind of authorship in the later 20th century, an authorship of intense ethical self-interrogation that questions the responsibilities, limits and possibilities of writing and the writer. The thesis has things to say, then, about later 20th-century authorship in general, which it hopes will impact any study of 20th-century culture.

The ethical questions these authors have spent their careers responding to centre around issues of contemporary urgency: questions about authoritarianism, totalitarianism, the controlling function of language; questions about race, gender, sexuality, gender identity, about representation and appropriation; questions about privilege and authority; questions about the proper relation between the human and the non-human. These questions have immediate academic application but they also dominate contemporary popular culture and news cycles. The opportunity this archival material presents to witness such committed thinkers working through
answers to such questions at such proximity is, therefore, of both academic and general interest.

As the sales figures of writing manuals, writing memoirs, and the continuing popularity of author events will attest, the public hunger for insight into authorial process, routine and habit is considerable. The accounts contained in this thesis have plenty of such insights from the notebooks and drafts of some of the recent greats and may, therefore, satiate some of that hunger.

Finally, the thesis constitutes a tacit advocacy of second thoughts. The mediums in which public debate is increasingly carried out tend to lionise first thoughts and shut down the possibilities of reconsideration and revision, demanding apology and contrition for transgression and error, manufacturing scapegoats rather than providing modes of development and rearticulation. Through considering in detail how the process of thinking again can form the basis of an ethic, the thesis hopes to draw attention to some of what might be lost when it is only first thoughts that count.
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A note about the archives.

The Philip Roth archive is housed at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The J.M. Coetzee archive is housed at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas. The Geoffrey Hill archive is housed in the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds. When referencing the archives, I follow as closely as possible both the catalogue marks of each library and the organisational habits of each author; I have tried to be as thorough as I can. When it is interesting, useful or possible, I reproduce the marks of manuscript revision; when it is disorienting or obfuscating, I do not. When I do not, and when it is not indicated in the text, I indicate in the footnote whether I have incorporated them in the quotation ‘(rev. inc.)’ or omitted them ‘(rev. om.)’. All quotations from handwritten texts are based on my own transcriptions; the inevitable errors are mine.

All web addresses were last accessed on 10th September 2019.
‘Only the hand that erases can write the true thing.’
- Meister Eckhart
Chapter One
Introduction

i. ‘writing-in-the-tracks’
In Michael Haneke’s punishing *Funny Games* (1997), a comfortable nuclear family are interrupted on their summer holiday by two young men, Peter and Paul, who, for their own enjoyment, torture and eventually kill them. Peter and Paul are modelled on the classic American comic double act – they call one another ‘Tom and Jerry’, ‘Beavis and Butthead’ – and they commit their acts of violence in a self-consciously playful style: they wink at the camera, they gurn and quip. The effects of that violence, however, the sufferings of their victims, are grim, drawn out and gruelling to watch. If one were to read the film according to a rigid allegorical schema, the two men might represent the culture industry and their victims the real; the film’s meaning would be located in the disunity of the two. At one point, the mother, Anna, mounts an escape attempt. Unnoticed, she takes up a shotgun that Paul has momentarily set down and shoots Peter dead. Only slightly irritated, Paul looks for the family’s television remote, finds it, and, pointing it like a gun, he rewinds the film. The scene plays out again. This time, Anna is not so lucky. Revision, the implication is, is mightier than the gun.¹

Haneke has spoken, unpleasantly, of *Funny Games* as itself an act of violence, an attempt to ‘rape the viewer into independence’.² Disturbed by what he regarded as the increasing cultural dominance, in the 1990s, of ultra-violent cinema, he wanted to bring his audience face-to-face with some of the implications of the violent images we (to his mind) unthinkingly consume; to redirect his audience’s gaze, that is, from the image to the real. The only ‘morally appropriate’ response to the film, he has implied, is to walk out of the cinema.³ *Funny Games* was designed as a corrective to American popular culture but American audiences made a lucky escape: as the film was in German it did not reach its intended audience.⁴

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¹ *Funny Games*, dir. by Michael Haneke (Castle Rock Entertainment, 1997).
⁴ [Anon.], ‘*Funny Games*: Michael Haneke interview’ on cinema.com <http://cinema.com/articles/5600/funny-games-michael-haneke-interview.phtml>
Undeterred, like Paul, Haneke simply rewound the film. He remade it, a decade later, ‘shot’ for ‘shot’, with a few minor variations and one key difference: *Funny Games* (2007) is now in English.5

The uncanny re-echo of the film’s diegesis in its revisionary afterlife may be more coincidence than revelation but it occurs at a nexus of power and authorship that forms the starting point of this thesis. In his film, Haneke critically dramatises a relation that has preoccupied many 20th-century writers and filmmakers: a relation between aesthetic representation and the abuse of power. Something of the relation is memorably and influentially expressed, in textual terms, in Kafka’s ‘In the Penal Colony’ (1919), which centres around an elaborate machine for executing ‘criminals’ by carving the text of their supposed transgression repeatedly onto their body, regardless of their guilt or innocence, until they are killed by (re-)redefinition.6 Text, here, is a tool of power that functions as a forceful revision: to write is to write over the lives of others; to revise is to strengthen one’s grip on that power; to have the power of ultimate expression is to have the ultimate power. For Haneke, inured to the power structures of the film set, the best the artist can hope for may be that his work constitutes a liberating, rather than an oppressive, act of violence.7 But the authors in whom this thesis is interested – Philip Roth, J.M. Coetzee, Geoffrey Hill – have, I want to argue, sought to rethink the authorial relation to power by considering not only the ethical implications of writing, of their writing, but also the ethical implications of rewriting, and by placing their own practices of textual revision at the centre of their ethical aesthetics (or, their *poethics*). Each has developed, I will endeavour to show, an aesthetic of radical self-doubt and self-criticism that fashions itself around their revisionary processes – that stems, that is, from real authorial doubt – and leads to a text conceived not as a forceful overwriting but as a continual seeing again, thinking again, re-imagining, making new – a text which, as Coetzee has it, ‘as one of its habitual motions glance[s] back

7 ‘His work’: a note about pronouns. As I am writing, in part, about anxieties and forms of cultural domination, the masculine pronoun may not be inappropriate. I do not mean to be essentialist and it is worth stressing the obvious – that it is not always or only men who engage in such a way with the power dynamics of their work. But men occupy this thesis; to a large degree (and I will have more to say about this below) it is a project that explores different literary engagements with the ‘straight white male’ and therefore I will employ the masculine pronoun when I consider this model of the author, unless there is specific reason not to do so. For balance, I will use the feminine pronoun in all other instances in which I posit a hypothetical writer, reader, thinker or doer. This is, I think, an imperfect solution.
skeptically at its premises’ – and precludes the possibility of an authoritative final revision. Text, for each, becomes a perpetually provisional process, its truth positioned in an always-receding future: no expression can be ultimate. Revision becomes a way of dissolving force, dissolving overpowering, a way of inscribing powerlessness.

The thesis began with an observation about writing and power; it hopes to arrive at something approaching a conclusion about writing and power. It does not proceed, however, as an exploration, an analysis, or even really a thinking about power, though those processes lie beneath its methodology and on occasion rise to the surface. My methodology has been genetic: I have attempted to reconstruct the genetic histories of some of these authors’ most self-interrogating works and, in order to trace their negotiations with their own authority, to excavate narratives of composition. Genetic work of this kind – which imagines a teleology rather than a play of signification – necessitates painstaking reconstruction of process and thus requires an openness to the archive, a willingness to follow where it leads. In an interview with David Attwell in 1992, Coetzee describes his critical approach in an essay about the development of verb tense in Kafka’s ‘The Burrow’ – ‘Time, Tense, and Aspect in Kafka’s “The Burrow”’ (1981) – as a ‘writing-in-the-tracks’, a textual burrowing behind his subject.9 There is perhaps a degree of idealism in the conception but it is a model to which an archival researcher, in particular, might aspire, whilst acknowledging its impracticality. As an archival researcher, a reader of a mass of text that few will be fortunate enough to encounter first-hand, I am obliged to provide a reading text before I can provide the reading. I am first, therefore, a track-finder. A writer’s drafts, however, accommodate an infinite number of possible paths. While the author visible in a published text may proceed with the illusion, at least, of singularity, unity and command (even when attempting to disperse some of that unity and unloosen some of that command), the author visible in the archives proliferates. By some metrics there are as many authors in the avant-texte as there are separate moments of creativity. I have sought to

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9 Ibid, p.199.
reconstruct from this proliferation the procedures of an individual subjectivity as it folds back on itself, encounters its own past estranged, attempts to make sense, as though from the outside, of its own impulses, assumptions and prejudices, as it chisels and yokes its disparate self-fashioning. I have attempted to allow these processes to speak for themselves before fitting them into argument or narrative (before, that is, exerting revisionary power over them). As I hope will be evident in the following chapters, the subject of writing and power is never too far from view in my authors’ archives but, as I have attempted throughout not to construct my accounts according to a prefabricated narrative framework (perhaps an impossible task), my focus in the chapters that follow may be at a tangent to the subject as I set it up in this introduction.

That said, the balance between allowing the archive to speak, and speaking for it, is a difficult one, and I am not sure I have always got it right – or rather, I am sure I have not always got it right. My accounts are, inevitably, my accounts, offered as only one possible version, amongst untold others, of a text’s coming-into-being. I have attempted to make no claims for which I cannot produce evidence – patterns of revision, elucidative marginalia and extra-textual comment, identifiable thematic shifts – but the narratives and arguments I offer are inevitably selective. I hope the thesis proceeds with a degree of self-consciousness about the necessary distortion that selection entails, the speculative nature of any teleological reconstruction, and the fact that it is formally committed to work against the phenomena it, finally, wants to advocate: inconclusion, provisionality, divestment of authority. The self-consciousness may not always be evident, however.

My methodology has been eclectic. The arguments I present are the result of a process of intuition, scholarly investigation, critical research, close reading, and trial and error. Usually the point of departure has been a hunch, based on my reading of an author, that a given text’s genesis has been particularly knotted, anxious or

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10 My success in doing so has been directly affected by the authors’ individual habits of organisation. Coetzee, for instance, writes the date every time he sits down to work, whether writing fresh or revising: one can therefore trace the precise order of his compositional processes. Roth and Hill, on the other hand, do not. Hill writes more or less linearly in his notebooks, so one can at least be fairly sure of sequence, even if a reconstruction of teleology is necessarily more impressionistic. But Roth shuffles and scatters his drafts: a page from one ends up in another; a chunk from the beginning of a first draft finds its way into the middle of a fourth; drafts which appear later in the archive were clearly written before what is presented as a first draft; whole sections of certain well-known novels turn up in drafts of others begun decades earlier. My Roth chapter, therefore, can only speak in more general terms.
obstructed. I have then read through the drafts of that text, and the surrounding archival materials, taking close notes, and thinking about possible patterns of anxiety and doubt (a thematically-related cluster of changes, a common catalyst for second thoughts, moments when a text breaks off, or is particularly heavily worked at). I would usually, then, set about close reading the revisions, mounting provisional narratives and arguments as I do so. I would consolidate those arguments by reading criticism, investigating context, and attempting to reconstruct something of the author's intellectual life at the time of writing by following the breadcrumbs in notebooks and marginalia and then, for example, looking into the kinds of texts they appear to have been preoccupied with at a given time. I would then attempt to fit my arguments about individual texts into wider, biographical and critical frameworks.

To different degrees, these authors write with an awareness that language has a life of its own; their compositional processes often work deliberately in collaboration with language, acknowledging its autonomous agency and feeding its independent unfolding back into their conception of the work's design. When I write of their processes, therefore, I do not mean to suggest psychological insight, to suggest thought process, so much as to track the changes visible in the writing. I will have more to say about this below, but it is worth remarking, at the outset, that, while there is presumably plenty of overlap between an author’s cognitive processes and the evolution of literary thought visible on the page – and that therefore I will sometimes, perhaps unconsciously, use the language of one to describe the other – it may be impossible to map the overlap and so my reconstructions will necessarily exist in a hinterland, the realm of genetic criticism, between biographical speculation and purely textual exegesis. That is, although I attempt constantly to apprehend the author in motion, I ultimately find the author to be absent and unknowable.

ii. ‘The shame of being a man – is there any better reason to write?’

The emergence, across the arts, in the latter half of the 20th century, of an aesthetic of doubt and failure has been well documented. In her introduction to Failure (2010), a collection of writings on the subject, Lisa Le Feuvre describes an increasing
aesthetic concern in the period with ‘[t]he inevitable gap between the intention and realization of an artwork’ and a growing literary misgiving that the expressive and representational claims of text may be illusory, a construction of language; after the Second World War, she writes, many artists ‘turned their attention to the unrealizability of the quest for perfection.’ Implicit in Le Feuvre’s account is a suggestion that such work focuses on a quality of failure intrinsic to the aesthetic object. Conversely, in Text/Countertext (1996), which focuses on the postmodern novel, Marie A. Danziger pathologises the doubt, figuring it as the result of a kind of performance anxiety, a ‘loss of self-esteem’ with a fear of ineffectuality, irrelevance and bad reception at its core. Danziger describes the emergence in post-war fiction of an ‘anxiety experienced by any earnest narrator that his audience might react with a withering “So what?”’ and sees in the work of her selected novelists – Beckett, Lessing, Roth – a ‘fear of disappointment’ manifest as an ‘embarrassed self-consciousness’. Danziger’s lens is decidedly Freudian. ‘Obsessive fear of reader disapproval,’ she writes, ‘is almost certainly a logical extension of the Oedipal fear of the authoritarian parent.’ But it is never entirely clear if she means to pathologise her authors, their narrators, their characters, or simply the textual effects of their work, and her diagnosis can therefore seem nebulous; ‘almost certainly’, here, is a tellingly hesitant intensifier. (Her account of the textual effects of the doubt, however, will be germane.)

Danziger’s diagnosis of an infantile fear of disapproval from an ‘authoritarian parent’ as the basis of postmodern doubt presupposes an anxiety about not being good enough and casts the writer in a subservient role. Early in her book, though, she touches on a different kind of doubt:

Instead of a heady confidence in the power of their words to elicit belief, [Beckett, Lessing and Roth] are likely to experience a sensation akin to shame. At best, there is the desire to apologize for the inevitable distortion their fiction entails; at worst, that apologetic urge turns to fear of reader disapproval combined with guilt – not

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13 Ibid.
only toward the reader, but toward the characters whose actions are manipulated
and the “real-life” prototypes of those characters, whose lives are misrepresented
in an effort to make them more novelistic.\textsuperscript{15}

Incorporated in the structures of her authors’ anxieties, in other words, is an
uneasiness about their own authority; they are themselves authoritarian. It is not
only an anxiety about failure that informs these writers’ work, then. A Beckett text
may, as Le Feuvre suggests, manifest profound doubts about the possibilities of
mimesis, signification or reference, may, as Danziger suggests, manifest doubts
about its own inadequacies, but it is invested, too, I want to argue, in an ethics of
literary authority predicated on a confidence in its success, in precisely its ‘power
[...] to elicit belief’. In Beckett’s late, short play \textit{Catastrophe} (1982), written on the
occasion of Václav Havel’s imprisonment, a director, ‘Director’, seated in an
armchair, orders an unnamed female assistant to make small alterations to the
posture and attire of a hooded figure – who, dressed in ‘old grey pyjamas,’ in James
Knowlson’s words, ‘recalls images of the concentration camp or holocaust victim’\textsuperscript{16} –
always making sure that the audience cannot see the figure’s face.\textsuperscript{17} The play’s
dramatic effect, as well as its political resonance, rely on a shared belief in the power
of the artist; the director is a proto-Haneken luxuriating authoritarian, his
revisionary manoeuvres to be condemned not because they fall short of their
aesthetic aims but because they are all too successful in remaking reality. The figure
may lift its head at the end – the real may resist – but that is not the play’s lasting
impression. Rather differently, when Moran, in \textit{Molloy} (1951), ends his ‘report’ with
his famous self-cancelling revision – ‘It was not midnight. It was not raining.’ – its
comic, disruptive effect on the reading experience relies on a shock of negation that
is only made possible, first, by the reader’s investment in an imagined world – by,
that is, the preceding words’ power to elicit a kind of belief – and, second, by the final
two sentences’ seemingly unquestionable (\textit{because corrective}) aura of truth: the
world in which it was raining and midnight may be revealed as an illusion, but this
new, negatively-defined world, in which it is neither raining nor midnight, seems all

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid, p.3.
the more palpable, concrete as a result. To be sure, those final sentences foster a lingering epistemological uncertainty, and may thus destabilise the literary project, but, in the moment of first reading, their immediate effect (an effect on which any subsequent uncertainty relies) is oddly to reaffirm its efficacy. The fiction is not, in other words, guilty of failure. But it is guilty of lying. When an apparently unmediated authorial voice interrupts B.S. Johnson's *Albert Angelo* (1964) in order to come clean about its ethical transgression – 'fuck all this lying' – it is, once again, not because the text is not working but because it is working *too well*; once again, though there is no reason to trust it, the voice feels, in the moment of interruption, *because* it is interruptive, palpably real. The issue is less the failure of mimesis than its ethical corruption. As Johnson put it in an introduction to a collection of his shorter prose, either ventriloquising or quoting his friend Philip Pacey (it is not quite clear),

Telling stories is telling lies is telling lies
about people is creating or
hardening prejudices is providing an
alternative to real communication not a stimulus
to communication and/or communication itself
is an escape from the challenge of coming
to terms with real people.  

The association of the figure of literary authority with the authoritarian or abuser of power is not, of course, new; I think, for example, of Iago, of Milton's Satan, of Browning's artist figures – men who murder to create. As William Hazlitt wrote of *Coriolanus* in 1817, the language of poetry 'naturally falls in with the language of power [...] Its front is gilt and blood-stained'. But the association gained a new intensity during the first half of the 20th century as new forms of authoritarianism rose, facilitated in part by a colonisation of public language with new techniques of

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publicity founded on the insights of Freudian psychoanalysis, and as public forms of language therefore came to seem corrupted. Archetypes of literary authority were accordingly recast. ‘Orpheus who moved stones,’ wrote W.H. Auden in 1948, ‘is the archetype, not of the poet, but of Goebbels.’

Auden had a highly developed sense of the ways in which language can ‘elicit belief’ – can distort, mask and divorce an individual from reality – and of the things that can be done with words. As Edward Mendelson has written, for Auden, ‘a writer’s pride in his power over words was all too easily transferable into pride in his power over his readers.’

Auden’s famous expression of poetic doubt – ‘Poetry makes nothing happen’ – is anxious less about any political inefficacy intrinsic to poetic language than that poetry should make nothing happen, should seek to make nothing happen; less because it does not work than because it can work too well. For Auden, as Mendelson has charted, revision became a way of renouncing authorial power; he ‘repeatedly rejected his most compelling metaphors, and called attention to his own artifice’, a process which Hannah Sullivan has wittily described as ‘Prospero using his rod to break his rod.’

Roth, Coetzee and Hill all conceive of a potential relation between literary language and power similar to that of Auden. ‘Print,’ says Eugene Dawn in Coetzee’s first book, Dusklands (1973), ‘is the hard master with the whip; print-reading is slave habit.’ And, like Auden, they all find a (different) response to the anxiety, as I will argue in the chapters that follow, in their own revisionary practices. But their long careers have coincided with radically shifting thinking about authorship, and the association of literary authority and authoritarianism has therefore gained, in their work, new dimensions. As discourses such as poststructuralism, postmodernism and deconstruction saw the writer and the author slip out of identity, so the literary authoritarian became not (or not only) a persuasive individual, a Goebbels, but a diffuse, impersonal, imperious force working invisibly through the text, present in its pores as ideology. To utter, now, was powerlessly to repeat structures of power. Simultaneously, in other academic sectors, the question

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23 Ibid, p.103.
of who the writer is became a crucial term in the interpretation of text. The ‘straight, white, male’ basis of literary authority was systematically challenged, even dismantled, at the same time that these authors were building their careers, if not their aesthetics, on its scaffolding.\(^{28}\) As traditional modes of representation, ways of looking and standardised frames began to seem narrow and even repressively subjective, anxieties emerged about what one’s identity permits one to say, about appropriation, and, most extremely, that merely having a voice while others do not might constitute an unpardonable transgression, even before a word has been uttered. ‘The ability to write – ‘Timothy Bewes has modified Deleuze; ‘is there any better reason to feel ashamed?’\(^{29}\) (Deleuze: ‘man presents himself as a dominant form of expression that claims to impose itself on all matter’, thus: ‘The shame of being a man – is there any better reason to write?’\(^{30}\)) The aesthetic of self-doubt in which this thesis is interested is thus one concerned about what power structures might be speaking through an utterance, about the impossibility of simple and sincere expression, but it is also inextricably bound to a certain high cultural status, a status built on external structures of confidence; indeed, the doubt can be curiously inseparable from a strident, even belligerent confidence. (Each author I focus on has enjoyed a rare eminence: ‘greatest living’ is (/was) an epithet regularly applied to each, and each has a lengthy list of decorations and awards.)

In part, what I am attempting to identify is an anxiety about not having suffered, and about the proper literary engagement with those who have. Behind all these authors’ work one can hear variations of what Jeffrey Wainwright has identified as the central question of Hill’s career: ‘what does the moral luck of living this life, not theirs, mean for him, for his readers and for our polity?’\(^{31}\) (Wainwright’s ‘moral luck’ is a useful term: less nebulous, perhaps, and less accusatory, but no less severe than the currently favoured ‘privilege’.) Not having suffered can even become, in their work, a kind of torture, a substitute for worldly suffering. In Roth’s

\(^{28}\)All my authors are ‘straight men’; Roth’s ethnic identity is, as we shall see, more complicated. I hope it will be understood, at any rate, that in repeating the categories of ‘straight,’ ‘white,’ and ‘male’, I am not subscribing to their determinative or essentialist functions but describing a cultural development which provides a crucial context to these authors’ work. Nor am I suggesting that these authors subscribe to the ideas about authorship I am reducing here to summary; to different extents, they may or may not. The specific currents of the ideas’ influence on their writing will, I hope, be evident in the chapters that follow.


\(^{30}\)Quoted in ibid.

The Anatomy Lesson (1983), the Roth-like novelist Nathan Zuckerman is paralysed by chronic pain. Despite (or, because of) the comfort and ease in which he lives – a result of the literary status he has gained – the physical act of writing has become unendurable:

He had silence, comfort, time, money, but composing in longhand set off a throbbing pain in his upper arm that in no time at all made him sick to his stomach.32

Zuckerman’s chronic pain is a physical manifestation of an ethical paralysis (the suggestion, in ‘sick to his stomach’, of moral outrage, of moral self-disgust, is perfectly pitched). A first-generation Polish Jewish immigrant born in the 1930s, Zuckerman is conscious that his story could have been a different one. He feels compelled to tell the stories of those who did not have his luck – partly because they are, simply, better stories – yet his conscience prevents him from doing so. To write about the sufferings of others would be to appropriate those sufferings, to rewrite them in his image, to repeat and reshape them for his own advantage, to make them his:

Though people are weeping in every corner of the earth from torture and ruin and cruelty and loss that didn’t mean that he could make their stories his, no matter how passionate and powerful they seemed beside his trivialities. (138)

Zuckerman is not qualified, or even permitted, to tell those stories precisely because he has the ability, the freedom and the status to do so. It is within this double bind that these authors locate much of their work. (Zuckerman has not learnt, as Roth has, to harness the doubt and, rather than work against it, to use it to fashion his literary aesthetic.)

The particulars of their moral luck differ considerably. Roth, born in New Jersey in 1933, Hill, born in Worcestershire in 1932, and Coetzee, born in Cape Town in 1940, have not-suffered in markedly different ways. Each had a just-about working-class and provincial childhood, which may have contributed to their slight removed perspective on the literary mainstream, but their political situations are

different. Roth and Hill are of the generation whose adolescence coincided with the post-war coming-to-light of the realities of the Nazi death camps – whose ‘awakening,’ to quote Christopher Ricks indelicately on Hill, ‘into the atrocity of adult life was an awakening to this unparalleled atrocity’. For Roth, the Holocaust was geographically and politically distant but ethnically and tribally close; for Hill, the reverse. The work of both is engaged with the question of how to address this particular violence from their respective distances. Coetzee’s adolescence was dominated rather by the policies of apartheid, instigated in his tenth year by a government voted in by members of his father’s tribe, and his moral sense thus formed more by an awareness of a different racial violence, an awareness cast, too, against contemporaneous global movements towards decolonisation. The difference between the three political contexts is considerable; I hope that in the chapters that follow I attend to local detail with sufficient nuance. But the work of each bears a remarkably similar guilty conscience about having been untouched by the acts and structures of violence that dominated their formative years (having even, in Coetzee’s case, supposedly, benefitted from them) and they have developed remarkably similar responses. Often arising from the ethical impulse to bear witness, their work can be subsumed by a guilty consciousness of their moral luck, which – along with the attendant and intractable ethical dilemmas – becomes, instead, the focus.

The condition I am outlining is something akin to what Timothy Bewes has called the event of postcolonial shame. Bewes’s interest is in the postcolonial novel but the shame he describes is, for him, global. He uses the designation ‘writing after Auschwitz’ to situate the phenomenon, though he recognises the inadequacy of the designation – an inadequacy which, he argues, may in fact prove its validity. By ‘writing after Auschwitz’, Bewes means any late-20th-century writing whose passage is obstructed by ‘ethical reflections on aesthetic problems, such as the possibility of art after Auschwitz or after colonialism, or the question of whether the subaltern can speak’ – all of which will recur in this thesis. ’Writing after Auschwitz,’ Bewes argues, is marked, inevitably, by shame. It is a shame from which not even survivors

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34 Bewes, The Event of Postcolonial Shame, p.43.
are spared; as Bewes has paraphrased Primo Levi, surviving Auschwitz is ‘testament to the fact that there was more that one could have done to resist; a person’s life, his or her very existence, is a cause of shame.’\textsuperscript{35} As Bewes conceives of it, shame is not ‘a psychological phenomenon, adjacent to guilt’ but a non-subjective structure of feeling that emerges in the act of writing.\textsuperscript{36} ‘[S]hame does not pre-exist writing,’ he writes, ‘nor is it encoded in the text, awaiting our interpretation to tease it out.’\textsuperscript{37} It is not reducible to the personality writing, nor to the personality reading, nor to the historical circumstances in which the text was composed, nor to the events it depicts, nor to any combination of these.\textsuperscript{38}

Rather, shame is the ‘dynamic’ of ‘the tension between the aesthetic and the ethical claims’ of the text; it is an ‘event of incommensurability’.\textsuperscript{39} The writer, after Auschwitz, is caught between an ‘obligation to write’, on the one hand, to bear witness, and, on the other, ‘the impossibility of doing so innocently’.\textsuperscript{40} ‘[N]either one thing nor the other,’ he writes, ‘the obligation nor the impossibility is shameful, but the conjunction – historical and subjective at the same time – is intensely so.’\textsuperscript{41} Shame is ‘frequently apparent as a chronic anxiety toward writing itself’, and fosters a literature that ‘begins to constitute itself formally out of a sense of its own inadequacy’, of its ‘profound ethical complicity.’\textsuperscript{42} Rather than engendering a failed aesthetic, shame instead engenders one in which failure and success are in tension: success in one realm, the ethical or the aesthetic, means failure in the other, both inevitable. Bewes’s fascinating study is occupied with the writing process yet he does not investigate those processes and is thus perhaps liable to see in the guiding authorial presence visible in a published text an avatar of authorial process. This is not always inappropriate, but I hope that my genetic accounts might complicate, if not undermine, the clarity of Bewes’s understanding.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, pp.20-21.  
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, p.6.  
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, p.23.  
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, p.22.  
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, p.39, p.3.  
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, p.42.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, p.7, p.21.
It is not only the positions from which they speak that foster these authors’
aesthetics of self-doubt; it is also the forms they have been given to speak through.
Each sees himself as the heir and benefactor of a post-Enlightenment literary
tradition whose forms are insufficient for addressing an ‘after Auschwitz’ reality.
Like Goethe’s beloved oak tree left to flourish inside the grounds of Buchenwald,
post-Enlightenment literary tradition can occupy, in their work, a position of
peaceful coexistence, even complicity with the violent culmination of what they
might regard, after Adorno, as the Enlightenment’s instrumental logic. In Hill’s long
poem *The Triumph of Love* (1998), an account of whose genesis will form a large
part of my Hill chapter, both Buchenwald and the subsequent critical discourse
about its horrors have faded from memory, but the oak endures:

I do not recall which
depth-camp it was that sheltered Goethe’s oak
inside the perimeter. I cannot
tell you who told me or in what footnote
it sat hidden […]

The implied poet in these lines may be one for whom poetic tradition remains robust
(*robustus*: made of oak) after Auschwitz, but that is not the case for Hill himself –
who, one has to assume, can recall the name of the camp. Elsewhere in the poem, he
imagines an artist figure working, with the help of an assistant, to perfect an image
of a dying Jew, his tenor not far from that of the Director in Beckett’s *Catastrophe*:

From the *Book of Daniel*, am I correct?
Quite correct, sir. Permit me:
refocus that Jew – yes there,
that one. You see him burning,
dropping feet first, in a composed manner,
still in suspension
from the housetop.

It will take him for ever
catch at this instant
of world-exposure.
In close-up he maintains appearance –
Semitic ur-Engel –
terminal agony none the less
interminable, the young
martyrs ageing in the fire –
thank you, Hauptmann Schauspieler.
Run it through again and for ever
he stretches his wings of flame
upon instruction. (244)

As in *Catastrophe* – or, indeed, *Funny Games* – revision (here, refocusing; running it through again) is a way of taking ownership, such that it is hard to tell if the poetic voice belongs to memorialist or Nazi. Hill is a memorial poet, an elegist, for whom elegy is self-serving and memorial a corrupted medium, complicit in that which it pretends to address: it is, for Hill, a consolatory, static form that benefits only the survivors by fixing the victims of violence in stone, holding them separate, so that they need not form any part of a social consciousness, of present tense experience – famously, Hill brands Britain a ‘nation with so many memorials but no memory’ (261) – and the logic of the violence that engendered their deaths remains uninterrupted. In his sonnet sequence, ‘An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England’, published in his collection *Tenebrae* (1978), Hill engages with, and writes from within, a nostalgic English pastoral tradition – a poetry of the Augustan poets, of the Country House. Discussing this sequence, Hill has described how

the sad serenity and elegance of the eighteenth-century country house landscape
was bought at a price: not only the sufferings of English labourers but also of Indian peasants [...]44

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The serenity and elegance of the aesthetic Hill has inherited, in other words, is founded on acts of violence held out of the picture; his purpose, in this sequence, as he describes it, is to make visible the shadow of that violence, to bind, ‘in the texture’ of the poetry, a ‘celebration of the inherited beauties of the English landscape’ to ‘an equal sense of the oppression of the tenantry’ such that they become inseparable, bound often in a single word. One of the solutions Hill offers to the question of memorial, then, is a form of self-distrust, holding the aesthete and the ethicist in mutually-reinforcing tension, somehow both divided and indivisible, each failing where the other succeeds, and allowing the transgressed-against to be felt in their exclusion.

In his revised collected works, Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012, Hill prefaces the sequence with a new epigraph, taken from Osbert Sitwell’s Laughter in the Next Room (1912), in which Sitwell quotes Evelyn Waugh:

In the valley at our feet, still half hidden in mist, lay farms, cottages, villas, the railways, the colliery and the densely teeming streets of the men who worked there... [Sir George] turned and spoke in the wistful, nostalgic tones of a castaway, yet of a castaway who was reconciled to his solitude. ‘You see,’ he said, ‘there is no one between us and the Locker-Lampsons’. (125)

We do not tend to think of Hill a postcolonial poet yet his choice of this quotation – in which Waugh casts Sir George as a Crusoe-like island-dweller – implicitly draws the colonial project into the serenity of the English landscape tradition. Hill implies a connection between the kind of sovereignty and economic self-determination that Crusoe is often thought to represent and a mode of writing that writes over reality, revising out of the landscape the less fortunate. It is a kind of writing that Coetzee investigates in his academic book White Writing (1988), in which he describes the Afrikaans farm novel’s tendency to imagine, like Waugh’s Sir George, an empty, rather than a peopled landscape, a genre into which ‘[b]lindness to the colour black is built’. The literature of empty landscape’, he writes, ‘is [...] a literature of failure,

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45 Ibid.
of the failure of the historical imagination. It is a form of ‘white pastoral’ that ‘marks off for itself, and defends, a territory “outside” history where the disturbing realities of land and labour can be bracketed off.’ Coetzee has engaged throughout his career in a revisionary relationship with this tradition – revisiting, for example, Olive Schreiner’s *Story of an African Farm* (1883) in both *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) and *Disgrace* (1999). But it is less the lonely farm-dweller than, as in the Waugh quotation, the lonely island-dweller, Crusoe, who sits at the heart of his ethical engagement with the attractions and inadequacies of inherited literary forms. For Coetzee, the European novel – the form around whose inheritance he most fashions his authorial identity – developed as colonial propaganda, a ‘vehicle’ invented by ‘Europe’s merchant bourgeoisie [...] in order to record and celebrate its own ideals and achievements’, and is thus singularly unfit for addressing a postcolonial reality (if such a thing exists). He might agree with Timothy Bewes, who writes that the colonial enterprise and the realist novel ‘cannot be separated ontologically; for the novel [...] emerges from the same disparity between subject and object as colonialism itself.’ Yet, for Coetzee, there is no literary form which is not implicated, or which does not implicate him, in colonial logic and, rather than reject the model he has inherited, he embraces it, even prefacing his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, ‘He and His Man’ (2003), with a recollection of his first reading of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), aged eight or nine, ‘with the fullest attention’: unmistakeably a formative moment. Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986) seeks a similar effect to Hill’s sonnet sequence, rewriting that originary novel so as to allow the subaltern a kind of presence that is neither appropriation nor rewriting. This unsummarisably intricate novel, of which I will have more to say in my Coetzee chapter, a nest of indeterminate rewritings, opens with a woman’s, Susan Barton’s recollection of being cast away on a island whose only inhabitants are a man named Cruso and his tongueless slave, Friday. (Susan Barton is in fact a character from another Defoe novel: *Roxana* (1724).) Much of the final third of the novel focuses on her relationship, after rescue, with a writer called Foe whom she wants to tell her story.

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48 Ibid, p.11.
and who, for his part, wants to tell only Cruso’s, slyly writing her out of the narrative. The voiceless Friday is the novel’s real focus, however, the reality from which it cannot escape. Much of Susan’s narration is focussed on interpreting him, on deducing his meaning: indeed, her constantly attempting to fit him into prefabricated narratives becomes an extension, even a condition of his enslavement. An early entry from a notebook Coetzee kept while drafting the novel, before he began to write about Friday, is suggestive of how his own authorial struggle might have influenced the fiction:

He wants to write a novel about Roxana’s daughter and her relations to Defoe. But there is the story in the newspaper of a boy beaten to death in SWA, photographed with a chain around his neck. Presumably this was someone’s son too. “Somewhere someone was crying.”

Coetzee’s ‘he’, concerned about ‘someone […] crying’, is close to Zuckerman in The Anatomy Lesson, concerned, as we have seen, that ‘people are weeping in every corner of the earth’. ‘He’ also appears to be biographical: the photograph he refers to is a real one, which, as Andrew Dean has documented, recurs in Coetzee’s notebooks throughout Foe’s drafting. In a later note, he writes: ‘a writer who cannot go on with the story of Susan and Defoe because of the boy who was beaten to death’; even while working on the final draft, he reminds himself: ‘Go back to the SWA photograph’. Friday appears to have emerged – from Coetzee’s engagement with this real suffering, a suffering which occurs on the other side of his moral luck and makes the story he is trying to tell seem trivial, evasive – as an embodiment of postcolonial shame. He is the reality written out of the form Coetzee has inherited but who now, ‘after Auschwitz’, with the force of his silence, derails and destabilises it. Dean has noted that Friday develops a mysterious scar around his neck. It is the murdered boy’s scar, its presence in the novel a devastating equivalent of the single footprint that appears on Crusoe’s island in the source novel.

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In part, *Foe* attempts to dismantle the structures of literary sympathy that the eighteenth-century novel placed at the centre of narrative fiction. In *On Sympathy* (2008), Sophie Ratcliffe traces, through the 19th and early 20th centuries, the development of thought about what it means, in literature, to know or imagine the experience of another. Ratcliffe writes of how certain authors (focussing on Browning, Beckett and Auden) have attempted to 'show an awareness of the story of misacknowledgement and misunderstanding' effected by certain kinds of literary sympathy by 'return[ing] to' and 'salvag[ing]' the 'deformed slave' Caliban in retellings of *The Tempest*. A similar process is at play, I would suggest, in Coetzee's attempts to 'salvage' Friday. In a discussion of George Eliot, Ratcliffe describes the unstable relationship between sympathy and knowledge, suggesting that the former is often, in narrative fiction, mistakenly cast as a basis for the latter. But for Eliot, she writes, sympathy involved ‘a sense that there might be a larger understanding, beyond her own vision.’ Thus, sympathy is more properly conceived of as ‘an ideal emotion or understanding based on a lack of knowledge, and the presence of wonder.’ It entails not only a realization that we ourselves may be the object of other people’s feelings and emotions, but […] that our world-view is not necessarily definitive, that it may be one which is bedevilled with prejudices, and that there may be other worlds, if only worlds of ideals and imagination.

Ratcliffe’s authors regularly come up against an understanding that the kind of sympathy that assumes knowledge of the other, and which can be experienced as compassionate insight – the kind of sympathy that literary forms can offer – can amount in reality to no more than ventriloquism, a display of revisionary power. ‘[H]owever much sympathy a human attempts to feel,’ Ratcliffe writes, ventriloquising a Browning letter,

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56 Ibid, p.18.
58 Ibid.
this sympathy inevitably turns into thinking that the other is, in the words of the epigraph to the poem, 'such a one as thyself'. Sympathy [...] is more akin to mimicry, a display of power, and such powers are evidences of human weakness.59

Such an understanding informs much of Roth's work, culminating in Mickey Sabbath’s abusive puppetry in Sabbath’s Theater (1995). It is an understanding perhaps most powerfully dramatized, though, in the story of Anne Frank in The Ghost Writer (1979), whose genesis I will explore at length in my Roth chapter. For Roth, Frank is a totemic figure who, like Coetzee’s Friday, has suffered on the other side of his moral luck. In one of this complex novel’s available fictions, she has survived the war and is in hiding in Massachusetts, aghast at the public response to her newly-published diaries, feeling ‘flayed’ by the exhibitions of sympathy in the theatre, in the newspapers, from tourists visiting her home, stepping intrusively into her hiding place.60 Roth would no doubt agree with the poet of The Triumph of Love who instructs a future-tense editor to, '[c]hange insightfully caring to pruriently intrusive', (250) or another Hillian speaker, who says, of the way in which the tourist industry has sentimentalised the Second World War, '[t]his pity is shameless'. (200)

For Roth, as we shall see, Frank has become a blank on which people can inscribe their fantasies of virtue; as an individual historical entity she has been lost in a proliferation of infinite revisioning. In writing her, in giving her a second life, Roth is of course himself engaged in an abuse of power, a revisionary mimicking: this transgression will be crucial to his work. Indeed, all three of my authors’ attempts to apprehend otherness can collapse into a dramatization (and perhaps a record) of solipsistic failure. Hill cannot memorialise a child murdered at Auschwitz in ‘September Song’ without making ‘an elegy for myself’; (44) Coetzee’s efforts sympathetically to understand Lucy Lurie in Disgrace give way to a dramatization of what, in a late draft, the novel refers to as ‘a failure, a failure of everything: of the imagination, of human sympathy, of moral energy’.61 But it is through their fashioning of an archivally-authentic revisionary aesthetic, I will argue, that these authors go some way toward opening up a space in which the other – whether it be Friday, Frank or the child murdered at Auschwitz – might find a kind of presence,

59 Ibid, p.121.
60 Philip Roth, The Ghost Writer (London: Vintage, 2005), p.152. All further references will be to this edition.
without falling into the postmodern trap of, in Derek Attridge’s words, ‘reduc[ing] otherness to sameness’.62

These authors are not iconoclasts. Each has developed a densely intertextual style that invokes romantic and modernist literary authority while acknowledging that it is no longer available, desirable or appropriate (or, as in the case of Hill’s ‘translations’ of the fictional Spanish poet Sebastian Arruruz, never existed (69-79)). But there is a certain nostalgia, in their work, for a status of kingly or oracular authority – a nostalgia, too, for the possibilities of serenity, simplicity, consolation. The inherited tools may be inadequate, may be complicit, but, for each author, they are still, in their way, attractive, and there are no others honestly available. Awake to the sins of the fathers, they would nevertheless deem it dishonest not speak in their fathers’ languages. To different degrees, and perhaps not always, their work responds sympathetically to the dismantling of literary authority, yet each, having no alternative, continues to invoke that which is not there. Their work represents in arrested motion something like the fateful moment of doubt when the Road Runner, having run off the cliff yet somehow still aloft, thinks to look down and, in looking down, falls. They are not iconoclasts, then, they do not seek to smash the old forms from the outside, but to inhabit them differently. As I will show in the chapters that follow, it is in their harnessing of the compositional processes of revision – manifestations of doubt, anxiety and shame – that each finds a hopeful way to proceed, allowing the literary forms they inhabit to open, unravel and, while bringing their internal mechanisms to light, allow something of the outside in.

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I do not mean to have suggested that these authors are never, at their writing desks, overcome by anxieties about their abilities and gifts, their inadequacies or failures. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that they frequently are. Roth kept a children’s alphabet set on his writing desk so that, when the anxiety was too great, as he has framed it, he could break down sentences and words into their constituent parts, ‘reduce it to its childish terms’, and learn to write again.63 Hill, discussing the infrequency of his critical output in the first half of his career, but also taking in his

63 The Book Review Show, BBC4, 1 July 2011.
early poetry, has described a ‘chronic anxiety’ that left him ‘simply afraid to put down the next sentence’. This more personalised doubt is certainly on view in the work, as it will be in my chapters, but my emphasis falls elsewhere, not least because turning it into a subject of criticism would require expert psychological insight. I do not mean, either, to have suggested that the kinds of ethical doubt I have been describing are purely abstract; they can be, as we shall see, agonisingly personal. Nor is it always possible, in truth, to separate the two kinds of doubt – the personal and the ethical. As will, I hope, be evident throughout this thesis, the two are part of the same energy, an energy which both pushes the work into the future and provides resistance.

Nor is doubt the whole story. The impulse to write is, fundamentally, a confident one. It is an impulse to be in the world, to speak and be listened to, to emanate. ‘You write,’ writes Hilary Mantel, ‘to impose yourself on the world.’ The writing process may regularly be characterised as a uniquely anxious one; doubt may well, as Zuckerman has it in The Anatomy Lesson, be ‘half a writer’s life. Two thirds. Nine-tenths.’ (268) But Roth also, as anecdote has it, began each day of his early career shouting, ‘Attack! Attack!’ into the mirror. ‘I want […] to possess my reader,’ he said in an interview with Hermione Lee. I do not mean, then, to privilege my authors’ self-doubt. In an article about a collaboration between Jasper Johns and Samuel Beckett, Mark Prince has wondered whether an aesthetic of doubt constitutes ‘a literal courting of failure along with all its attendant chaos’ or ‘a crystallization of the gestures of uncertainty within a coherent, even marketable, form’; is there, he asks, ‘space for self-consciousness in a genuine state of helplessness?’ It is a pertinent question; anyone suffering from real, all-encompassing self-doubt would surely, simply, not write. In a recent Newsnight interview, the television writer Sally Wainwright suggested that a socially-conditioned self-doubt is what prevents less well-educated children from putting pen to paper. When asked why so much television is still written by men, she replied,

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68 Mark Prince, ‘Feint Art’ in Failure, ed. Le Feuvre. p.53.
I think it comes does to self-belief and confidence. [...] It’s a class thing as much as it’s a gender thing. [...] I talk in schools from time to time and I’m always shocked by how clear it is that children in state schools just don’t have the same confidence as children in private schools.**69**

This should be of concern to anyone seriously engaged with literary culture. Further, as I hope to have suggested, the structures of literary authority to which these authors are able – still; just – to adhere license them to foreground and *play with* doubt in a way which is unavailable to other writers. Indeed, Sianne Ngai has convincingly argued that anxiety is an affect reserved for ‘the male knowledge-seeker’.**70** Tracing the ‘epistemological cachet’ that anxiety has acquired in ‘Western intellectual history’, and considering the Freudian denial of anxiety to female subjects (‘We can hardly speak,’ she quotes, ‘[...] of castration anxiety where castration has already occurred’) Ngai argues that ‘anxiety’s privileged status in the literature and philosophy of the twentieth [century]’ as a ‘key for interpreting the human condition is accompanied by its being secured as the distinctive – if not exclusive – emotional province of male intellectuals’.**71**

I am wary of being essentialist but it does seem to be the case that writers who have not inherited the same structures of authority as Roth, Coetzee or Hill are often more engaged with manufacturing a performative stance of confidence, a stance that brings authority into being, than with voicing their self-doubt. The gang-rooted bragging culture of much mainstream hip-hop may be a case in point. Hip-hop authority is often earned through a performed silencing of an imagined opponent. In the blunt refrain of 2017’s most successful hip-hop track, ‘HUMBLE’, Kendrick Lamar repeatedly instructs his listener to, ‘Sit down, bitch/Be humble.’**72** In the same year, Britain’s most successful rapper, Stormzy – ‘a young king crowned early [...] who must take confidence in himself’, as Zadie Smith has it in a *New Yorker* article, responding to his 2019 Glastonbury performance in an elaborate

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**69** *Newsnight*, BBC2, 30 May 2019.


Shakespearean language of sovereignty — raps, in his then most successful song, ‘Shut Up,’

Man tries say he's better than me,
Tell my man, ‘Shut up!’
Mention my name in your tweets,
Aye, rudeboy, shut up!
Better than me? Shut up!

and rather more politely, in the refrain of ‘Big For Your Boots’, he tells an imagined opponent, ‘You’re getting way too big for your boots.’ Yet Lamar and Stormzy work to amplify other, silenced voices. ‘Everybody lack confidence, everybody lack confidence,’ Lamar raps in 2015’s ‘i’, which functions as a kind of pep talk to a downtrodden community, and whose lower case title sits in stark contrast to the capitalised ‘HUMBLE.’ And, for his part, while repeatedly dramatizing the silencing of other voices in his work, Stormzy has established his own Penguin Random House imprint, #Merkys Books, and an affiliated literary prize whose purpose, according to the press release, is to ‘promote stories that aren’t being heard’. It is common, too, for female rappers to appropriate these specifically masculine stances of confidence in images whose frequent anatomic impossibility suggests the extent to which they are to be understood as manufactured stances, in dialogue with their assumed moral luck. ‘Pussy so good I say my own name during sex,’ raps Cardi B in 2018’s affirmatively titled, ‘I Do’; ‘If you wasn’t so ugly I’d put my dick in your face,’ raps Nicky Minaj on 2012’s ‘Come on a Cone’. More wittily, Noname has recently re-appropriated some of these tropes, rapping, in the also affirmatively-titled ‘Self’ (2018), ‘My pussy teaches ninth grade English,/My pussy wrote a thesis on colonialism.’

75 Stormzy, ‘Big For Your Boots’ on ibid.
76 Kendrick Lamar, ‘i’ on To Pimp a Butterfly, Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015.
Again, I do not mean to make any essentialist claims about emotional experience, but to note how frequently these stances of confidence, like my authors’ stances of doubt, are reliant on a shared, often foregrounded understanding of the particular dimensions of an artist’s moral luck – or that of the artist’s community – and, accordingly, the degree to which their authority must be earned rather than inherited. It is a subject that has begun to recur in literary memoir, too. In Things I Don’t Want to Know (2013), a revision of Orwell’s ‘Why I Write’ (1946), Deborah Levy writes of the need for female writers to fashion a confident authorial persona, regardless of the reality of their emotional experience: ‘Even the most arrogant female writer has to work overtime to build an ego that is robust enough’.79 Levy praises Marguerite Duras’s ‘hard-earned ego’ and writes that, as a woman, ‘to become a writer I had to learn to interrupt, to speak up, to speak a little louder, and then louder, and then just to speak in my own voice which is not loud at all.’80 Again, performing confidence brings it into being. In The Argonauts (2015), Maggie Nelson writes of the ‘gendered baggage’ of self-doubt and describes how, in revision, she works to edit out any evidence of that doubt:

My writing is riddled with [...] tics of uncertainty. I have no excuse or solution, save to allow myself the tremblings, then go back in later and slash them out. In this way I edit myself into a boldness that is neither native nor foreign to me.81

Neither native nor foreign, both manufactured and authentic, editing into boldness is, of course, something we all do. What is worthy of note, though, is that Nelson herself connects the process to her gender. And while I would not suggest that Roth, Coetzee or Hill start off bold and work their way towards hesitancy – would not suggest, in fact, that they do anything much different to Nelson at the level of the sentence – I hope to show that a certain kind of revisionary hesitancy does, indeed, become, for them, a virtue. In an interview with the Paris Review, Toni Morrison says of her novel Jazz (1992) that she wanted to ‘re-represent two contradictory things – artifice and improvisation’, on the one hand presenting a wrought object and, on the other, imitating the revisionless sprezzatura of jazz, which she relates to the

80 Ibid, pp.18, 107.
condition of boldness required in African-American self-narrative; it is a way of
telling a story, Morrison says, which does not have ‘the luxury of revision’.\textsuperscript{82} Roth,
Coetzee and Hill have that luxury.

iii. ‘finality without end’

‘Every work, every novel tells across the fabric of its events, the story of its own creation, its own story.’\textsuperscript{83} ‘[T]he very composition of the work is an unconscious self-portrait of the writer in the act of creating the work.’\textsuperscript{84} ‘[E]very sentence contains a ghostly commentary on its own processes.’\textsuperscript{85} It may be impossible to test the universalism of such claims, but the premise – that the product is allegory or metonymy of the process – can be applied to even the least apparently self-conscious of texts with a remarkable rate of success. In \textit{Reacher Said Nothing: Lee Child and the Making of Make Me} (2015), Andy Martin sat with James D. Grant, who writes as Lee Child, while he wrote the latest in his Jack Reacher series, \textit{Make Me} (2015). Reacher is an ex-military policeman with no home or purpose, an American outsider and wanderer with a maverick’s sense of natural justice – part outlaw, part flâneur. A Reacher novel often begins when he arrives in a new place, to which he has often travelled for the slightest of reasons (in the case of \textit{Make Me}, because he is taken with its name: Mother’s Rest). There, Reacher notices something irregular; he investigates. The clues accumulate until, eventually, he uncovers a criminal plot (in \textit{Make Me}, a snuff film operation masquerading as an underground euthanasia centre) in which he has by this stage become so embroiled that he can only extricate himself by bringing it to light. Martin shows the extent to which the Reacher narrative is a mirror of Grant’s process. With ritual certainty, Grant sits down to write a new book on 1\textsuperscript{st} September every year, with no plans, no ideas. He writes a first sentence, a first paragraph – often more for its feel, its music or patterning than for its content – and investigates its resonances in the hope that he might find in it


\textsuperscript{84} Frederick Jameson on Georges Simenon, quoted in ibid, p.30.

something suggestive of a narrative drive. From there, as initially clueless as Reacher, he writes the novel in sequence, always interrogating the material for the future it might hold, until, as both he and his man slowly and simultaneously piece it together, a plot emerges. A Reacher novel is a *roman à clef* of its own making. Reacher, a man of unshakeable confidence and improbable masculine prowess, is housed in short sentences, declarative jabs that have no time to question their assumptions or to query the signifying capacities of language. The books begin, and proceed, in a cloud of unknowing, but there is very little *doubt* in them – indeed, their comfort in unknowing relies on what Martin terms a ‘*sublime confidence*’.86 Likewise, Grant writes almost without revision. He writes a novel in one go, over about six months, tinkering with the prose at the end of each day, but rarely, after that, looking back. The novel unfolds in something like real time: the final copy he turns in at the end is the first draft. Martin was granted unprecedented access to the writing process. Genetic critics are usually scavengers after the event; I can think of no other example of a work of fly-on-the-wall genetic criticism. To be sure, as Martin is always keen to demonstrate, Grant’s being observed changes considerably the outcome of the process; the feedback loop is fascinatingly drawn. Yet the observer effect only reinforces what this important, evidential book tells us: that the relation between the writing process and the textual product can be one of close and elaborate affinity.

It is an assumption of this thesis that, as Finn Fordham has it, ‘formation shapes content.’87 But the texts in which I am interested are texts in which formation becomes content. Roth, Coetzee and Hill have all responded to their doubts and anxieties about the power relations of writing and rewriting, about the problem of ‘writing after Auschwitz,’ in Bewes’s terms, by bringing to light the compositional manifestations of that doubt – the processes of (self-)negation, (self-)substitution, (self-)correction, and (self-)reformulation that constitute manuscript revision – and fashioning a literary aesthetic from their tropes and effects. In Marie A. Danziger’s terms, such a revisionary text emerges as an attempt to ‘pre-empt the potential disdain of the sophisticated reader,’ and ‘incorporate disapproval into the structure...

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87 Fordham, *I Do I Undo I Redo*, p.31.
of their novels." There is, in such a text, always a ‘countertext’, real or implied in which, the implication is, any reader’s concerns are, or will be, addressed. Marked by a ‘ceaseless self-renewal of their texture’, postmodern texts are thus narratives, as she describes Beckett’s trilogy, ‘about the attempt to make corrections in order to get it right’. It is, to my mind, an astute account of a new kind of text that emerges in the post-war period. But, once again, the question of who exactly is in Danziger’s sights – author, narrator, character, textual effect – arises. Like Bewes, her narrative is occupied with assumed authorial process but has no access to the drafts or manuscripts. In the chapters that follow I will endeavour to show that the revisionary reflexivity of these texts is not merely a formal or rhetorical device, as Danziger’s account may imply, not merely a strategic incorporation of readerly disapproval, but that it stems from the actual struggles of composition – its knots, obstructions and aporias – and that those struggles become the organising principles of the finished (but unfinishable) texts – that, in a reversal of the Lee Child formula, the doubt becomes the form. Thus, when the narrator of a Coetzee novel says, ‘There is a scene in the restaurant, mainly dialogue, which we will skip’, there is likely to be a fully-written restaurant scene which Coetzee has decided to delete. When the voice of an editor breaks into Hill’s The Triumph of Love to mark a lacuna – ‘[possibly a lacuna – ED]’ – there is likely to be a corresponding deletion in a draft of the poem. When a character in a Roth novel abandons the draft of a book he is working on, there is likely to be a corresponding abandoned draft in the archive. Once again, this is not necessarily a new procedure; when a particularly knotty plotting issue in Sterne’s drafting of Tristram Shandy leads to a comic anecdote about a knot so tight it cannot be unknotted, something of the same principle is at work. But for the remainder of this introduction I want to consider what may be new – or, at least, historically particular – about these revisionary texts.

In her influential The Work of Revision (2013), Hannah Sullivan suggests that revision itself is an historical phenomenon, only becoming a fundamental tool of

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88 Danziger, Text/Countertext, p.7.
89 Ibid, pp.16, 27.
90 J.M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello (London: Vintage, 2004), p.7. All further references will be to this edition.
writing at the turn of the 20th century. Prompted by material developments such as the increasing availability (and lower cost) of paper and ink, and technological improvements in the publishing process, including cheaper typesetting and storing and the invention of the personal typewriter, and [...] a culture of patronage that allowed for multiple sendings of proof and a relative lack of concern for economic profit[,] modernist writers, beginning for Sullivan with James, tended to use revision not only as a method of ‘adornment or encrustation’, as had previously been more common, but ‘as a way of getting below the surface to the passionate heart of the matter’. Modernists, Sullivan writes, revised overtly, passionately, and at many points in the lifespan of their texts. They used revision [...] not for stylistic tidying-up but to “make it new” through large-scale transformations of length, structure, perspective and genre.

Indeed, she suggests that the use of revision as a fundamental compositional tool was modernism’s chief literary innovation, a revolutionary break from tradition ‘comparable to collage in painting or deviations from classical tonality in music’. Expressed in summary, Sullivan’s narrative may seem somewhat too neat but she does not quite claim that writers had never before extensively revised – Wordsworth is one obvious exception whose work she explores. Rather, she claims that, as revision became easier, more quotidian and democratic, so it acquired a central role not only in compositional practice but in a new understanding of text and authorship. Romantic poets, she writes, had tended to imagine the text existing in its fullest form in the past, in pre-linguistic shape, and even the first rendition on paper as already a transcription of a waning

93 Ibid.  
94 Ibid, p.33.  
95 Ibid, p.2.  
96 Ibid, p.3.  
97 Ibid, p.2.
imagination. Revision was, consequently, a threat to a work's organic unity and freshness.98

Thus, despite his practice, Wordsworth was ‘more penitent and guarded than modernist writers about describing the work of ongoing revision.’99 At the turn of the 20th century, Sullivan writes, ‘the future-oriented avant-garde turned around [the romantic] teleology so that the ideal text could be imagined as existing just out of grasp’.100 No longer a belated mystic, the author acclimatised to and by revision became an agitated striver, never able to reach her destination; text became a future-directed event, a matter of second thoughts.

For Sullivan, writing practices and theories of authorship are mutually reinforcing and mutually influencing. Other recent genetic critics have argued similarly about writing practices and theories of self. In I Do I Undo I Redo (2010), Finn Fordham seeks to ‘enable the beginning of an elaboration and an explanation of some of the ways we have come to compose our senses of our selves through textual processes'; to 'call for an emphasis on the role of writing processes in the recomposition of notions of subjectivity through attention to manuscripts'; and to trace how an author's ‘reflections on writing processes [...] find their way into the content of the writing itself.’101 '[T]heories of mind, memory and consciousness', he writes, have always

... drawn on metaphors of textual technologies [...] Representations of the self and theories of the self issue from the processes behind textuality and they often take their form from the processes of composition.102

Thus in the 20th century, as revision became integral to the writing process, so theories of self inevitably began to draw on metaphors of revision – from Freud's early-century 'mystic writing pad' ('providing,' in Sullivan's words, 'both a receptive surface that can be used repeatedly and the capacity to retain permanent traces') to Daniel Dennett's late-century 'multiple drafts' theory of consciousness ('a process,'

98 Ibid, p.3.
100 Ibid, p.3.
101 Fordham, I Do I Undo I Redo, pp.74, 35, 42.
102 Ibid, p.16.
writes Dirk Van Hulle, ‘of editorial revision, in the absence of a single narrative that counts as the canonical version’). For Fordham, then, a modernist self becomes, through revision, a revisionary process, a future-directed event. It therefore follows that a modernist text should become more hospitable to representations of rewriting and rethinking within its textures. Indeed, towards the end of her book, Sullivan argues that a ‘late modernist’ style emerges as a result of ‘the anxiety [...] that a waning modernism has cast in its wake’, a style which, rather than ‘[push] revisionary labor [...] under the surface or away from the final frame of the text,’ works instead to make its revisionary labour ‘visible in the text’.

It is to this kind of text that Dirk Van Hulle directs much of his attention in *Modern Manuscripts* (2013). Van Hulle borrows from cognitive science the concepts of the ‘extended mind’ and ‘enaction’, terms describing the notion that thought, and therefore subjectivity, occur not in a purely internal realm but ‘in constant interaction with an environment’. The drafts, notebooks and other materials collected in an author’s archive, Van Hulle suggests, form a constituent part of the author’s ‘Umwelt’ – another borrowed term, referring to an organism’s particular model of its environment, a realm of unconsciously lived experience that is part external physical terrain and part biologically-determined cognitive construction of that terrain. ‘During the process of literary composition,’ Van Hulle writes,

> many writers either intuitively or consciously exploit the interaction with their manuscripts as an activating part of the creative process. In this sense, writing is a form of thinking.\(^{106}\)

An archive is not only a record, or trace of an author’s cognitive processes, that is, but is ‘part and parcel of’ those processes.\(^{107}\) Thus, of Beckett’s ‘Comment Dire’, he writes, with a perhaps falsely binary logic, it is ‘not about a cognitive process, it is that cognitive process itself’.\(^{108}\) Our minds, Van Hulle writes, quoting Daniel Dennett, ‘are the “product” of narratives, “not their source”.’\(^{109}\) The study of revision thus

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109 Ibid, p.245.
becomes the study of the creation of mind. And, as for Fordham, an author’s methods of revision become determinative of her revisionary conception of mind.

Taking Beckett’s *L’Innommable* (1953) as his test case, Van Hulle suggests that ‘late modernist’ text can be characterised by the way in which it allows its textual revisions and fictional consciousness to coinhere, bringing to the text’s surface ‘a constant dialectics of composition and decomposition, narration and denarration’ that is simultaneously an authentic record of compositional process and a fictional representation of the construction and the processes of mind:

The dialectic of composition and decomposition can be found in every genetic dossier that consists of multiple drafts. As a late modernist, Beckett made this process transparent in the structure of his published texts [...] 110

That the realities of *L’Innommable’s* coming-into-being and its miming of the perpetual construction and deconstruction of consciousness are allowed significant overlap is suggested, for Van Hulle, by the fact that the manuscript ends at the bottom of the very last page of Beckett’s notebook. ‘For a novel of more than 260 pages,’ he writes, ‘this is either an extraordinary coincidence’ or Beckett ‘allowed his narrator to go on until the limited material space prevented him from going on.’ 111 If late modernist texts are ‘about a sense of unending rather than ending, a sense of “work in progress” or even of “continuous incompletion” rather than of completion,’ 112 then such circumstantial ending becomes necessary, fostering a peculiar time scheme that allows for what Moran in *Molloy* describes as ‘finality without end,’ and which Peter Boxall glosses as ‘a time which is complete but which nevertheless continues to go on, as Beckett’s work is always both over and still in train.’ 113 Similarly, the novel’s prose is characterised, Van Hulle argues, by *epanorthosis* – the rhetorical trope of assertion and self-correction – which, he writes, ‘performs Dennett’s cognitive “editorial process” *within* the “horizontal” structure of the text’. 114 To illustrate the point, Van Hulle traces the development of

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110 Ibid, pp.199, 212.
111 Ibid, p.205.
a sentence which begins ‘Comme elle, elle’, and seems, in the manuscript, to run into trouble: ‘Comme elle, elle ce que ça peut être la brut ce que, j’attends...’ In its published form, the sentence records the hesitation, the doubt, the negation (if not their specifics), issuing in a dissolution of fiction and an emergence, an affirmation of selfhood: ‘Comme elle, elle non, pas comme elle, comme moi.’ There is, Van Hulle concludes,

a direct link between the cancellation in his manuscript and the epanorthosis in his text, between the “self” as a form of continuous narration and the narration as continuous incompletion; between the repudiation of selfhood and the technique of denarration or “narrative self-erasure”; between the “I” as a succession of individuals and the narrative as a series of multiple drafts, as in Dennett’s multiple drafts model.

Beckett’s cognitive processes, the circumstances of the writing and the ontology of its fictional consciousness are, for Van Hulle, indivisible.

The implications of Van Hulle’s fascinating account will not be my focus, but I do want to remark on the way in which, in these revisionary texts, life and writing move closer together, creating the impression of an uncannily disembodied, not entirely fictional subjectivity, an authorial shadow inhabiting the diachronic structures of the language. Sullivan notes that ‘autobiography is a genre or mode particularly prone to revision’. She writes:

The aspectual structure of retrospective life writing – its twin focus on the present moment of writing and the past remembered – has a structural similarity with revision as the process of going over and remaking for the present a text already accomplished in the past.

A reformulation of her observation might also be possible: that the fashioning of a revisionary text of the kind I am describing often turns writing autobiographical in a particular, and peculiar way – such that, as Sarah Dillon has it in The Palimpsest

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115 Quoted in ibid.
(2007), ‘[l]ife and writing exist in a palimpsestuous intimacy that queers the very notion of the “fictive” and the “autobiographical”.’ In Sianne Ngai’s account of anxiety, anxiety is, like Timothy Bewes’s shame, ‘not a pre-existing inner condition’ expressed through writing, but is rather a feeling ‘formed and even “shaped” by the means used to project,” discharge,” or “expel” it, is ‘inextricably bound up with [the] dislocating and externalizing function.’ Anxiety, Ngai argues, is a ‘structural effect of spatialization’. It could be, then, that it emerges as a result of the spatial dimensions of Van Hulle’s revisionary writing-as-thinking, an affect thus as attached to text as it is to writer. At any rate, as in Van Hulle’s example from Beckett’s trilogy – ‘Comme elle, elle non, pas comme elle, comme moi’ – it is common for late modernist fiction to collapse into a life-writing of textual immediacy (recall, too, B.S. Johnson’s interruption). It is an intriguing fact of all my authors’ careers that, as we shall see, their harnessing of revisionary struggle leads – almost immediately, almost directly – to the creation of an anxious ‘alter-ego’, whether it be Roth’s Nathan Zuckerman, Coetzee’s John Coetzee, or the direct but peculiarly unlocatable ‘I’ who speaks Hill’s later poetry, all of whom become dominant presences in the work at a moment when the question of how to apprehend and represent the other becomes particularly urgent.

The revisionary text each develops is something like what Julia Jordan, in ‘Error and Experiment in the 1960s British Novel’, would characterise as a ‘pentimental’ text. A term from art history, ‘a pentimento is a “repentance” [...] an errant image that provides a record of an earlier version of that picture’; it is a ‘visible error’, which acts as an expression of ‘painterly re-thinking, remorseful or relieved’. Unlike the traces of the past that emerge in a palimpsest, however, in a pentimental artwork ‘traces of errors and accidental forms are not buried “below” [...] but exist alongside the final form of the artwork.’ Pentimenti ‘allow a picture

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119 Sarah Dillon, The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p.115. Dillon uses the metaphor of the palimpsest predominantly to investigate Kristevan intertextuality and is keen to stress its inadequacy as a term for describing the presence of a text’s genetics in its surface: as ‘there is no necessary relationship between the texts that co-inhabit the space of palimpsest’, she writes, ‘the palimpsest does not properly figure the relationship between a text and its sources, including its own earlier drafts.’ [47 – emphasis in original] Dillon’s caveat is salutary, and I have mostly avoided the word, though I am comfortable with a degree of elasticity in my metaphorical language and one or two instances may have slipped through.

120 Ngai, Ugly Feelings, p.222.

121 Ibid, 212.


123 Ibid.
to exist in a condition of open-endedness’, fostering a conception of the artwork as ongoing process, an art of the project, ‘denying finitude and singularity’. They ‘celebrat[e] the incomplete and the accidental’ and thus incorporate diversity and possibility; different possibilities, different versions, coexist. A literary equivalent, Jordan writes, might be ‘a text that contains its own multiple drafts, that maintains its errors or that allows for or acknowledges its unrealised textual possibilities.’ It is a species of prose writing [...] in thrall to revision – revision not necessarily in the service of perfection, but instead as a marker of the continual impossibility of that perfection.

A pentimental text suggests, therefore, that,

[i]f all attempts at mimesis in the novel must, now, necessarily fail, then the perfection we pretend to find in the ‘finished’ text was always a lie; the text is always in transit. Or, put another way, if everything fails, perhaps we no longer need to think of it as failure.

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The late (and post-)modernist conception of text as process, flux, always provisional, always incomplete, raises questions about the significance of publication which have a bearing on criticism. What might it mean to ‘finish’ a work, to artificially fix a text for publication? Should publication mark a text’s endpoint, the point at which an author relinquishes ownership, or should author and reader treat it as just another evolutionary stage? What relation does a published text have to its avant-texte? Is it necessarily an inadequate substitute, a compromise? Can a text only be read in its pure form – that is, only fully understood, fully responded to – in the archive?

\[124\] Ibid.
\[125\] Ibid, p.36.
\[126\] Ibid.
\[127\] Ibid, p.37.
In *The Fluid Text* (2002), John Bryant poses some of these questions and suggests an editorial approach appropriate to a text conceived as process. Framing his book as an intervention in the editorial theory/textual criticism debate, Bryant criticises what he perceives as the groundless meliorism of ‘intentionalist’ editing, which takes revision to be ‘a mode of aesthetic improvement’ and which argues that the editor’s task is therefore to assemble a text corresponding as far as possible to the author’s final intentions.\(^{129}\) For Bryant, revision is less deliberate than intentionalism allows, ‘revealing the writer’s condition of doubt that is inherently, perhaps irresolvably ambivalent’.\(^{130}\) Bryant subscribes, too, to Jerome McGann’s criticism of intentionalism, which McGann sees as a hangover from a romantic ideology of the heroic author, privileging notions of the writer as a solitary (male) genius and the archive as discernible trace of that individual genius. ‘[W]riters cannot work in a social vacuum’, Bryant writes; or, in McGann’s words: ‘authority is a social nexus, not a personal possession.’\(^{131}\) Bryant approves, too, of McGann’s emphasis on the literary work as historical event rather than object and his suggestion that intentionalist editing constitutes an essential de-historicisation: for McGann, as Bryant has it, ‘the editor’s function is to get to the event’.\(^{132}\) Yet, for Bryant, McGann ignores the interaction between individual and ‘social nexus’ that occurs (or, can occur) in the act of revision, which often constitutes a conscious negotiation between writer and culture. Further, revision may not reveal intention but it can reveal, for Bryant, ‘*shifting* intentions. Indeed, the fact of revision manifests the intent to alter meaning.’\(^{133}\) ‘[T]he analysis of a revision process,’ he claims,

can yield historically constructible strategies and tactics of the getting of words to approach thought, whereas the analysis of words and passages divorced from the context of their revision cannot.\(^{134}\)
The editor should not privilege a revisionary teleology but nor, therefore, should she ignore the visible decision-making of revision.

Bryant wants to define text as ‘a flow of energy’, both personal and cultural, whose fluidity is visible most of all in its revisions.135 ‘[T]he literary phenomenon,’ for Bryant, is ‘a process of shifting but equally valid moments of authorized revision’, including ‘adaptations of texts beyond the writer’s authority or control’.136 ‘[A] fluid text,’ he writes,

is any literary work that exists in more than one version. It is “fluid” because the versions flow from one to another. [...] Not only is this fluidity the inherent condition of any written document; it is inherent in the phenomenon of writing itself. [...] Texts invariably exist in more than one version, either in early manuscript forms, subsequent print editions, or even adaptations in other media, with or without the writer’s consent. The processes of authorial, editorial, and cultural revision that create these versions are inescapable elements of the literary phenomenon.137

For Bryant, texts ‘only appear to be stable because the accidents of human action, time and economy have conspired to freeze the energy they represent into fixed packets of language.’138 ‘[T]he only “definitive text”’, therefore, ‘is a multiplicity of texts, or rather, the fluid text.’139 The editor should attempt to represent that multiplicity.

Bryant’s fluid text is in many ways appealing: plural, democratic and tolerant, it is a move away from ‘the tyranny of the single reading text’.140 Further, if self, culture and history are, as Bryant suggests, all fluid texts, ‘text[s] we collectively revise’, then our learning to read the fluid text would help to ‘prepare ourselves for better understanding of social change’.141 Yet if the true text of a literary work constitutes both its avant-texte and its après-texte, then ‘the fluid text’ in fact writes the common reader out of the picture: the text in all its richness would be available only to an elite few. If ‘the fluid text’ means, further, that the necessary realities of

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135 Ibid, p.61.
138 Bryant, The Fluid Text, pp.110-111.
139 Ibid, p.2.
140 Ibid, p.112.
distribution – uniform, coherent, manageable and mass-produced editions – are
disable as undemocratic ‘accidents of human action’ rather than being
acknowledged as the conditions of democracy, then surely another thinking of text
is necessary.

In ‘Why Do Authors Produce Textual Variation on Purpose? Or, Why Publish
a Text That is Still Unfolding’ (2018), Hannah Sullivan provides what, to my mind,
might serve as a useful adjustment to Bryant. Here, she considers what publication
may mean in the age of digital production and distribution. Somewhat like Bryant,
Sullivan is invested in debunking the ‘alchemical’ conception of publication.
Publication is not necessarily, she argues, the moment at which a text becomes
public property, when an author ‘relinquishes interest in a project (thereby ceasing
to revise it)’, though very often it ‘corresponds’ to that moment, ‘and happens to be
the mechanism by which transmission of the text begins.’142 But this is, she writes,
‘by no means always the case’.143 When encountering a text on an Amazon Kindle,
for example, ‘it is almost impossible to know how many “updates” there have been
or to predict how many more there might be’, meaning a reader never knows what
version she is reading.144 ‘Publication,’ Sullivan writes, privileging authorial agency,
is only as much of an event as the author makes it.’145 The relationship between the
archive and the published text is an essentially unstable one:

Genetic material sitting unpublished in a distant archive retains its aura, remains in
a sense “alive”. But once published, it enters inevitably into the postlapsarian world
of fixity. And yet this “fixity” is mutable in turn: authors can return to published texts
and dissolve them back into the chaos of genesis; creative emendations allow
editors to do the same thing.146

142 Hannah Sullivan, ‘Why Do Authors Produce Textual Variation on Purpose? Or, Why Publish a Text That Is Still
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid, para. 20.
145 Ibid, para. 11.
146 Ibid, para. 34.
Thus, whatever form a text may take, ‘whether a burnt piece of paper full of many interlinings and crossings out, or an inscription on stone’, it is not, ‘in itself, a draft or a final form.’\textsuperscript{147} Rather,

the relationship between archive and edition is [...] one of duality. We can choose to see any given textual document or archive under different aspects, just as the peculiar duck/rabbit drawing can be seen now as a duck, now as a rabbit (Wittgenstein 1953, 194.e-202e; II.xi). The rabbit is not the opposite of the duck, but nor are the two at different ends of a continuum: the figures are congruent. To begin with, only a single perception will be available. [...] But some observers will then come to a second perception, which is the possibility for alteration between the two things, or the ability to “see something as something”. We can also imagine someone without the imagination to “see something as something” who is stuck always with the picture of a rabbit.\textsuperscript{148}

Any text, she suggests, ‘can be viewed genetically or editorially, from the point of view of variance (and... and...) or in search of the invariant (or... or...).’\textsuperscript{149} Henry James’s ‘The Middle Years’, for instance, a story that will recur in this thesis,

\textit{was} finished in 1893. It remains finished for, say, a book historian writing about the intended audience of Scribner’s magazine in 1893, or for the first-time reader who reads a plain text online translated from this format. But in 1895, it was \textit{not} finished for Henry James, and it remains unfinished, a first attempt, when placed alongside the later text(s) on a library table or in the comparative context or a variorum edition.\textsuperscript{150}

Sullivan recommends, finally, ‘the higher order understanding that both perceptions are possible, even as only one is available.’\textsuperscript{151}

Sullivan’s commonsense but precise formulation provides a useful way of thinking about the author. Genetic criticism brings to the fore questions of authorship and intention; genetic critics often feel impelled to announce whether

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid, para. 35.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid, para. 36.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid, para. 38.
they believe in an author, whether they mean to reconstruct the actual thoughts of an historical entity or explore a play of signifiers. But rather than clarifying a critic's approach, the attempt often, unavoidably, muddies it. As Fordham has written, genetic criticism is in tension with its ‘poststructuralist inheritance’; it cannot but help conjure up the figure of the writer at work which is part of a romantic critical construction that genetic criticism would prefer not to be associated with. The self is “old-fashioned”.

The editors of *Genetic Criticism: Textes and Avant-Textes* (2004) claim in their introduction, as Fordham quotes, that,

> [t]he point [of genetic criticism] is to show to what extent poems write themselves despite, or even against, authors who believe they are implementing their writerly craft; to find any uncontrolled (perhaps uncontrollable) forces that were mobilized without the author’s knowledge.

To show a text’s divergence from what an author ‘believes’ they are constructing and to know what might happen without ‘the author’s knowledge’ is confidently to model an author and claim access to her interior. Authorial presence is, it seems, an unavoidable aspect of genetic criticism, however much it seeks to trace the ‘uncontrolled […] forces’ of a text. On the other hand, a revision can create a seductive illusion of intention, can look more deliberate and directed, more decisive than it is. Further, time spent in an archive – with its hallowed, hushed atmosphere – can create a feeling of proximity and intimacy, even a dangerous kind of intersubjectivity, though the reading experience is, in fact, little different to any other. An archival researcher is, therefore, in a position of claiming privileged authorial access whilst encountering authorial absence at unusual proximity. But Sullivan’s duck/rabbit conception of text might entail a duck/rabbit conception of authorship. If ‘The Middle Years’ can be finished for the reader but unfinished for James – and if we are to keep both possibilities open simultaneously – then it follows

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152 Fordham, *I Do I Undo I Redo*, pp.24, 16.  
that we can, indeed should keep both conceptions of the author open simultaneously. That is, we can simultaneously allow for the possibility of an interpretative framework in which the author is the guiding figure and for another in which there is no author; for a text eloquent in its condition of doubt, and a text presented with final certainty.

And this might provide the best answer I currently have to the question: *what can genetic criticism tell us about a text that other forms of criticism cannot, and which might deepen an understanding and an experience of that text?* If we are not to follow Bryant in taking every stage in a text’s genesis and reception as its body, what difference can, does, or should an archival perspective make to our reading of a text? Certainly, in my experience, it is almost always the case that learning something of how a text was put together brings aspects of that text into focus which are central to its design and its bearing but may have escaped my attention, or even general critical attention. But this is not a way of reading that is necessarily reliant on genetic research. It is perhaps the value of genetic criticism that it can bring into focus at what moments in a text ‘the figure of the writer at work’ is the more appropriate, or helpful, site of authority and at what moments that authority might better be located outside the text, or dispersed, or handed to the reader.

Thus, beyond my general argument about ethical doubt, what I might propose as some of the more resonant insights of the chapters that follow stem from a kind of biographically-minded genetic reading that functions, in particular, to divorce the linearity, or teleology, of the writer’s process from a linearity, or teleology, visible in the textual product. My readings renegotiate our relationship with the figure of the author, as that figure is present in the text. For instance, Geoffrey Hill’s *The Triumph of Love* reads, quite often, as linear, discursive thought. But it is frequently intractable, even unfollowable, which means that a reading experience – at least, *my* reading experience – is dominated and obstructed by questions that attempt to second-guess authorial intention: *What is he saying? How has he got from there to here? What does he want me to understand?* In reading, in other words, I conjure up the image of a riddling and disobliging author. My account of the genesis of that poem reveals that Hill did not write it in a discursive or linear fashion, but that it is the product of play over time, a compositional process that resembles serialism more than linear thought; it is an assemblage of expressive
fragments that do not come into being in sequence but separately over a period of years and are stuck together at something close to random, often collaged in such a way as to create the impression that they do follow the contours of an individual subjectivity’s thought, but which in genetic terms do not. When I read the poem, now, questions of authorial intent are far less obstructive to my understanding; the genetic reading liberates me from the temptation to second-guess an author in order to understand the text. Bringing the author into focus in fact, in this instance, removes his (imaginary) dominating presence. Indeed, I will argue that its dispersal of authority is the poem’s achievement. Similarly, in my chapter on Philip Roth, I look into the genesis of American Pastoral (1997), which Roth began in 1972, turning out a short, feeble first draft. He put the draft aside for decades, returning to it seriously only in 1995. Rather than rebuild the novel from the ground up, or add to it in sequence, Roth wrote into the first draft, ballooning his material so that it became a far longer, denser piece of writing, but changing the already-existing dramatic material remarkably little. Although the novel may function as a performance of a linear utterance, it becomes apparent that it is a book in dialogue with itself, as two authorial subjectivities, separated by 25 years, meet in a disorderly fashion. The novel is begun by an ageing Zuckerman who has, by the end disappeared – it thus straddles the first and third persons in awkward and puzzling fashion. In Roth’s revisiting of the text, it is reframed as a novel about looking back, about nostalgia and the relation between the present and the past. My genetic reading works to fit the double valency of the narrative voice into that thematic scheme – not to suggest that the book can only be read genetically, but to call for a more intuitive reading, responsive to the aspect of voice rather than its deviation from generic norms. In my Coetzee chapter, I show how moments of temporal snagging in Disgrace (1999) – when plot or dialogue do not quite move forwards in a way that seems linear – are, in fact, moments when different drafts come into contact, creating an experience of intractability that hardly registers but contributes to a generalised feeling of unease; in this, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the novel’s unusual and troubling affect. Understood thus, it becomes a book in some way about archiving; indeed, I argue that its generic mode is a kind of archival realism, or allegory about the conditions of its coming-into-
being, whose ultimate referent is not an external, extra-lingual realm but its own genetic structures.

Perhaps these texts are merely extreme instances of what all writing is: a non-linear, temporally dispersed programme of work that seeks to create the illusion of linearity and unity. A writer such as Lee Child may write strictly in sequence, but even he looks back to smoothe over the flow of his prose. Likewise, even the most revisionary author will at times write in sequence: a paragraph, a stanza, a chapter may flow out as direct utterance and require little revisiting. One question genetic criticism can ask is: should we read those moments differently? Or: should we conceive of the author differently if we know that a particular portion of a text emerges as a direct utterance? Or, even something like: What is the difference between a direct utterance and a heavily worked-at utterance? Is there a way in which direct utterances might be at the heart of a text? Or might those moments that have been worked at again and again be, rather, the most fundamental to a text’s meaning, representing layers of thinking and rethinking, responsive to the pressures of culture, history, ethics? I do not, at the time of submission, have answers to such questions, but I can state with some certainty that the reconstruction of authorial process can function to disperse restrictive authority; by adding a new dimension to a text’s play, the reader has more room to play in.

A word about my author selection. A PhD thesis in an English department in 2019 featuring only ‘straight, white, male’ writers will, rightly, raise eyebrows. As I hope is evident by now, this project is in many ways about straightness, whiteness, masculinity – about normativity and about forms of cultural dominance – or, at least, about a particular kind of response to a particular kind of thought about those things. Still, would a chapter on Toni Morrison’s revisions not have allowed me to explore those subjects just as fully? Could it not have been as revelatory about both whiteness and blackness, masculinity and femininity? The answer is yes. But my author selection was limited not only by whose archives are catalogued and readily available – my thesis thus reliant on a particular culture of literary archiving, of canon-formation – but also (Morrison’s archive is open) by which funding bodies would agree to fund me to visit which institutions – a further pressure on the formation of a canon. I hope I have demonstrated that, though apparently disparate,
my three authors do in fact sit well together. They are all extraordinary writers whose lifelong ethical engagement with the subject of writing is astonishing in its breadth, its focus, its seriousness, its perspicacity and, not least, its poignant and expressive poetry. But I would have liked to have included – and would still like to include – other writers, other kinds of writer.
Chapter Two

‘The force of gravity’: Philip Roth’s Revisions

“There is now a theory that when the fifty billion years are up, instead of everything coming to an end, instead of all the light going out because of all the energy fizzling away, gravity will take over. The force of gravity [...] Just at the edge of the end, the whole thing will begin to contract, will begin to rush back toward the center. Do you follow me? This too will take fifty billion years, until it’s all pulled down inside that original egg, into this compressed droplet that it all began with. And there, you see, heat and energy build up again, and bang, another stupendous explosion, and out it’ll all go flying, a brand-new roll of the dice, a brand-new creation unlike any that’s been. If the theory is correct, the universe will go on like this forever.”

i. ‘a nasty narcissist lost in a highly polished hall of mirrors’

The metaphoric conception of literary production as an involuntary outpouring of bodily matter, the result of some slackening or rupture, is a common one in late modern writing. I think, for example, of Sylvia Plath’s ‘The blood jet is poetry,/There is no stopping it’, or Geoffrey Hill’s The Triumph of Love, in which Wordsworth’s spontaneous overflow is reconceived of, unsentimentally, as a medical emergency – ‘the blown/aorta pelting out blood’. (239) Later, that poem poses a related question: ‘Incontinence or incantation, the lyric cry?’ The question – whether lyric poetry is a useless, excessive and uncontrollable pouring out of internal waste (incontinence) or a ritualistic public utterance that seeks to breathe into being a kind of consciousness, to raise the dead (incantation) – speaks of a common late modernist anxiety about the relationship between subjectivity, language, and the social efficacy (or otherwise) of literary forms – an anxiety about what might be inside, how it might find its way out and what it might, or should do once it is there.

In Portnoy’s Complaint (1969), Philip Roth uses the metaphor of bodily emission to address this anxiety in a way that differs, slightly, to Plath’s or Hill’s. Alexander Portnoy – a human rights lawyer passionately committed, in his words,

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156 Ibid, p.284.
‘to the righting of wrongs, to the elevation of the unjustly imprisoned’ – is addicted to masturbation.\(^{157}\) He masturbates uninhibitedly, in private and in public, often leaving traces. His is a solipsistic sexuality: despite the occasional complicating moment of fellowfeeling, he regards his sexual partners as little more than a receptacle for his emission. For Portnoy, the world is a container waiting to be filled: “Oh shove it in me, Big Boy” cried the cored apple [...] “Big Boy, Big Boy, oh give me all you’ve got,” begged the empty milk bottle’. (15) Unlike those of Plath or Hill, Portnoy’s outpouring – his overflow – is neither spontaneous nor involuntary but a willed, if compulsive, expulsion.

Roth is concerned in this novel to establish a consonance, or parity, between ejaculation and self-narrative. At one point the two even become materially interchangeable: Portnoy takes to bed a copy of Freud’s Collected Papers, and, ‘[s]ometimes Freud in hand, sometimes Alex, frequently both’, he masturbates while ‘reading spellbound through “Contributions to the Psychology of Love”’. (170) The novel itself, structured as a therapy session, seems to enter the world as an unstoppable gush: it is a comic monologue that seeks to tell the story of the self and does not pause for breath. As its ‘punch line’ makes clear (‘Now,’ says the therapist when Portnoy finally does stop, ‘vee may perhaps to begin’ (253)), the monologue is itself onanistic, premature, beginning and ending before the real work of therapy – the collaborative fashioning of a self-narrative – can begin. And if Freudian psychotherapy is a kind of social intercourse that seeks to conjoin and socialise, then it is crucial that Portnoy never quite gets there; his true, efficacious self-narrative is perpetually deferred.

Also deferred is any fruitful sexual union. To his father, Jack’s frustration, anxious that his bloodline should continue, Portnoy’s libertarian ejaculations are not intended to bear fruit. ‘Where are the Portnoys he dreamed of?’ Portnoy wonders. ‘In my nuts,’ is his answer: locked in seed, in a perpetual future. (104) Jack sees in his son’s refusal to procreate a rejection of his identity. Identity, for this Polish Jewish immigrant, is social; it is a matter of obligations, roles and loyalties, bound by familial, cultural, ethnic and historical ties. Portnoy, conversely, wants identity to exist on its own terms: released from responsibility or origin, it should

\(^{157}\) Philip Roth, Portnoy's Complaint (London: Vintage, 1995), p.157. All further references will be to this edition.
issue into the world without fear of entanglement. As Portnoy sees it, his father's attachments to his Jewish community have obstructed his full participation in American life. Thus the son's obsessive masturbation finds its obverse in the father's chronic constipation. Every morning, Jack, 'doomed to be obstructed by this Holy Protestant Empire!' (35), is '[u]p at quarter to six [...] so as to give himself a full uninterrupted hour on the can, in the fervent hope that [...] his bowels [...] will relent'. (105) In allowing his identity to be externally- rather than internally-fished, Portnoy suggests, his father has forfeited interiority, as though such a thing can only exist if and as it enters the outside: at one point, observing his father's agoraphobia, his fear of 'going out into the world', Portnoy sees his eyes 'empty of all signs of human experience and understanding; he stands there, a blank, a thing, a body full of shit and no more.' (106-107) To participate fully in American life, to be more than a blank, a thing, a body full of shit, Portnoy believes he must fashion his identity by the force of some internal will. Only then, as another Roth character, Nathan Zuckerman, will have it much later, can he 'flood into America',158 'I want to make a torrent,' Portnoy says, 'I want to make a flood'. (45)

But he is, crucially, unsuccessful. Almost invariably, Portnoy's solipsistic masturbation is followed by the social feelings of anxiety, shame and paranoia. 'Imagine then,' he laments, 'what my conscience gave me for all that jerking off! The guilt, the fears.' (31) Far from the joyous self-affirmation he yearns for, his addiction leaves him 'perpetually in dread that my loathsomeness would be discovered.' (15) 'Why, why', he cries towards the end, 'can I not have some pleasure without the retribution following behind like a caboose!' (250) Each attempt at a self-contained and confident expression of some interior essence is followed by immediate self-doubt. He is caught, in other words, between his internally-fished American, or normative identity – the source of his confidence – and his externally-fished ethnic identity – the source of his doubt. Portnoy sees in his habit of doubt the manifestation of a deficient masculinity. He cannot fill the mould of manhood his mother has sought to impose on his formation: she tries to teach him to urinate 'in streams of water as thick and strong as rope', but he can produce only 'slender yellow threads that [she] calls “a sis”.' (45) He fears sissiness and feminization (his

158 Philip Roth, I Married a Communist (London: Vintage, 2005), p.39. All further references will be to this edition.
are the kind of ‘little yellow threads that you can sew with’ (45)) and sees around
him a world of traditional American masculine pursuits from which his self-doubt
locks him out. Of the men in his neighbourhood who play football on Sunday
mornings, men with ‘Belly! Muscle! Forearms black with hair!’, Portnoy says,
‘Nobody has to tell them to stop mumbling and speak up, never!’ (223) They are all
confidence, while Portnoy is ‘too anxious a hitter to make the high school [baseball]
team’. (63) ‘The things that other men do – and get away with!’ he later says, trying
to put his sexual habits in some kind of perspective; ‘[a]nd with never a second
thought.’ (252)

Portnoy, then, the wilful ejaculator, is also a person of belated second
thoughts. ‘[T]orn,’ as he is, ‘by desires that are repugnant to [his] conscience, and a
conscience repugnant to [his] desires,’ (122) he is caught, in Timothy Bewes’s terms,
in the tension between the aesthetic and the ethical. He puts himself into the world
with thoughtless urgency; he regrets it immediately, bowing under the resulting
weight of ‘[s]hame and shame and shame and shame’ (45) but cannot undo what is
done. His is a dilemma of composition: his self-created identity, his self-narrative,
enters the world with confidence; doubts itself when it meets external currents of
expectation; has no chance of revision; is immediately useless. The confidence is
premature. The doubt is belated. The utterance fails.

It is my contention that Portnoy’s Complaint poses a question about identity,
about American identity, that pits masculine declarativeness against unmanly
uncertainty. It is a question of self-narrative and composition, of how to tell a story
that issues from an internal will but takes sufficiently sensitive account of its
external sources; it is a question of how to get the inside outside and the outside in
in a way that does justice to both self and other. It is a question of expression and
revision. In this chapter I will attempt to show that it is a question which Roth brings
to bear on the processes of composition in the decades that follow Portnoy’s
publication and that, in Finn Fordham’s words, his ‘theor[y] of the self [...] take[s its]
form from the processes of composition.’159 By allowing an attentiveness to his
writing processes to structure their product, that is, Roth develops a revisionary
conception of identity. First, though, in order to formulate Portnoy’s question a little

159 Fordham, I Do I Undo I Redo, p.16.
more fully, I want to consider what has become something of an orthodoxy about Roth.

In The Program Era (2009), Mark McGurl attempts to trace the effect on prose fiction of the 20th-century proliferation of creative writing courses at American institutions of higher education. As more and more writers found financial security by attaching themselves to those institutions, he argues, so the everyday experience available for writers to draw upon became to a greater extent a blueprint institutional one, meaning that the range of subject matter in American fiction became decidedly narrower, reduced often to an examination of the circumstances of authorship: ‘encouraged to “write what you know,”’ he writes,

the novelist eventually is driven to represent his intimate knowledge of the writing process and its consequences, to address the fact of fiction making.160

Roth was one of the few American literary novelists of the period able to support himself with his writing. Nevertheless, for McGurl, his work epitomises this radical limitedness – a limitedness that, he writes, has been, for Roth, far from a hindrance:

the pervasive reflexivity of Roth’s many novels, however dizzying the spirals it makes, however spiritually sickening it may have become, has been anything but disabling of his writing, but is rather the motive principle of its serial continuance.161

McGurl is (superficially) equivocal about the result; Roth, he writes,

can seem by turns endlessly inventive in finding new ways to manipulate [his] few terms and to be without any imagination at all, a nasty narcissist lost in a highly polished hall of mirrors.162

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161 Ibid. In a draft of My Life as a Man, Roth concurs with McGurl: “Experience” isn’t that plentiful for writers these days’, he writes; hence the ‘turning away from fictional realism […] it is not so much that they are bored with the realistic novel, as they are bored with their lives; nothing ever happens to them worth writing about.’ [Philip Roth papers, 1938-2001, ‘My Life as a Man’ 1968-1974, MS c.1969-1970, Box 44, Folder 4.]
McGurl's language here has the tenor of a diagnosis. Its dismissive flippancy – the casual bluntness of 'nasty narcissist' – signals, to me, that the diagnosis has gained enough currency to have become a truism. When David Foster Wallace describes Roth as 'one of the Great Male Narcissists who've dominated postwar realist fiction', his capitalisation likewise suggests orthodoxy. In Adele Waldman's *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P* (2013) – a satirical portrait of a 'Rothian' novelist operating in a culture, and at a time, far less hospitable to his casual misogyny than an earlier milieu might have been – the narrator voices Nathaniel's frustration thus: 'If only, like those cock-swinging writers of the last century – Mailer, Roth, et al. – he could see the satisfaction of his desire as a triumph of the spirit.' Once again, the 'et al' carries an orthodox weight. It is certainly not a new criticism. In 1972, Roth's one-time champion, the critic Irving Howe, published an article entitled 'Philip Roth Reconsidered', in which he argued that Roth's novels enact a masculine overpowering of their subjects, that 'the writer's will crushes his fiction' and 'swarms all over the turf of his imaginary world, blotting out the possibility of multiple perspectives.' Roth's writing, for Howe, is an act of masculine sexual aggression, an 'enormous thrust of personal and ideological assertiveness.'

My purpose here is not quite to defend Roth against these charges. But I want to suggest that the combination in their expression of disproportionate emotive force, self-conscious flippancy, and an aura of orthodoxy comes from a discourse sanctioned, legitimised, invited and satirised by Roth himself. McGurl's language – 'nasty narcissist'; 'spiritually sickening'; elsewhere Roth 'suffers a sickness of circular self-consumption' – would not be out of place in *The Anatomy Lesson*, a novel, as we have seen, of self-sickness and self-diagnosis. In it, Zuckerman's ethical urges to write about the sufferings of others are belied by a state of obsessive self-absorption – 'he couldn't concentrate on anything other than himself' (10) – that becomes indivisible from the chronic pain: 'Had he kept a pain diary,' the narrator

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speculates, ‘the only entry would have been one word: Myself.’ (232) When McGurl describes Roth’s writing style, he even quotes this novel directly: Roth’s is, he writes, a singular authorial persona, where an unmistakably forceful and mostly invariant writing style – a “foaming confluence,” as he puts it in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), of “diatribe, alibi, anecdote, confession, expostulation, promotion, pedagogy, philosophy, assault, apologia, denunciation” – is matched with an obsessive attachment to a small constellation of patently autobiographical themes: masculinity, sexuality, family, Jewishness, and authorship itself.167

But this is disingenuous. Zuckerman uses these words, which occur during a drug- and alcohol-induced mental collapse, to describe an unbidden, crazed outpouring of bile – a ‘raw force pouring out of him’ (223) – engendered by a spontaneous, manic ventriloquising of his critic Milton Appel (modelled on Irving Howe) in which he plays him as a pornographer. The words may bear out Howe’s criticism, may well constitute an ‘enormous thrust of personal and ideological assertiveness,’ but Zuckerman is himself disgusted by the performance, which leads, in the novel, to silence: *The Anatomy Lesson* ends with muteness. Further, in scenes such as this, Zuckerman is in fact straining for a confidence to counter his self-doubt. Earlier, he attempts to retrain as a doctor. Medicine, he decides, is like writing novels; a doctor, like a novelist, uses narrative to investigate the inner workings of the human. But a doctor’s work is either successful or unsuccessful, ‘doable or undoable,’ thinks Zuckerman, ‘while mine is both at best and mostly not.’ (109) Her vocational virtue is undoubted: ‘Who quarrels with an obstetrician,’ Zuckerman wonders; ‘[e]ven the obstetrician who delivered Bugsy Siegel goes to bed at night with a clear conscience.’ (103) Thus, he decides, ‘The doctors are all confidence.’ (268) The flipside of the formulation, he realises, is that those writers with no moral compass also lack self-doubt: ‘pornographers are all confidence’, too. (268) The ‘unmistakably forceful’ writing style that McGurl identifies, is, then, an imitation of confidence, an imitation of assertiveness, as Zuckerman tries on the clothes of vice just as he has tried on the white coat of virtue. It is an imitation which does nothing, finally, to mitigate his self-doubt and exists in a matrix of irony that demands the reader’s disapproval. This is,

of course, precisely the ‘highly polished hall of mirrors’ McGurl describes, and perhaps he is wise to overlook the play of irony. Yet not to acknowledge that the source of his diagnostic discourse is the novels themselves – that the novels court, share and define this orthodox disapproval in an attempt to think beyond it – seems, at best, an oversight, and at worst an unjust limiting of the scope of Roth’s work.

In *The Major Phases of Philip Roth*, David Gooblar has argued, in contrast to this orthodoxy, that Roth’s novels sponsor a model of the writer as an individual ‘filled with self-doubt and self-questioning.’ Roth-the-neurotic is, indeed, another orthodoxy. As early as *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), Gooblar writes, Roth aligns himself less with figures of cocky masculinity than with more feminized, anxious men who ‘represent the figure of the artist [...] always questioning both himself and the situation’. Gooblar uses as an example the teenager Ozzie Freeman in ‘The Conversion of the Jews’, a religious doubter who, through questioning the logic of scripture, comes into conflict with the authoritarian certainty of his rabbi, Rabbi Binder. Binder, who has ‘the attitude of a dictator’ is figured, as Gooblar has noticed, in terms of artistic inflexibility and sturdiness: he is variously ‘monumental’, ‘like a statue’, and ‘like writing on a scroll’. He is, in other words, closer to the writer whom Howe deemed Roth to be.

Gooblar is surely right that in this collection Roth aligns himself not with the binders but with the freemen, ‘proto-Rothian’ writers, ‘marked off from the collective by their ambivalence, self-questioning and, often, self-contradiction’. But he does not account for the end of this story, which problematizes the binary. After he asks a particularly searching question, Binder chases Ozzie out of his Sunday school classroom and onto the synagogue’s roof. On the roof:

A question shot through [Ozzie’s] brain. “Can this be me?” [...] Louder and louder the questioning came to him – “Is it me? Is it me?” – until he discovered himself no longer kneeling, but racing crazily towards the edge of the roof, his eyes crying, his throat screaming, and his arms flying everywhichway as though not his own.

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170 Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus* (London: Vintage, 2006), pp.129, 121, 124, 129. All further references will be to this edition.
"Is it me? Is it me ME ME ME! It has to be me – but is it!" (128)

The shift in Ozzie’s punctuation belies his self-doubt: the literally self-questioning ‘Is it me?’ becomes declarative, the question marks uncurling into exclamation marks: ‘Is it me ME ME ME ME! It has to be – but is it!’ He is still asking questions but they have taken on a strange status: it is a commanding self-doubt, an assertive self-questioning. Ozzie decides to convert to Christianity but threatens to jump from the roof unless the crowd gathered below repeat his declaration after him – unless, that is, they convert too. The self-questioning ‘proto-Rothian writer’ has become the wilful authoritarian; the doubt, having hardened into declaration, has yielded a new ideology just as binding as that against which Ozzie railed.

It is an early instance of an optic that will recur, increasingly refined, in Roth’s writing, an optic epitomized in a throwaway remark early in the late novel I Married a Communist (1998). As Kasia Boddy has observed, boxing recurs in Roth’s œuvre: ‘Zuckerman and Roth […] have frequently used boxing metaphors to dramatise the many arguments, debates, and oppositions that make up their stories.’172 The artist is a pugilist, artistic creation a wounding virility. In his memoir The Facts (1988), Roth describes an unpleasantly satirical article he contributed to a college magazine as a ‘gleeful one-two punch’.173 In The Human Stain (2000), Zuckerman celebrates a concert pianist for playing Prokofiev ‘with such bravado as to knock my morbidity clear out of the ring.’174 In one of the drafts of My Life as a Man (1974), an obstructed and anxious author figure finally writes ‘a perfect page’, after which he stands up and shadow boxes before ‘triumphantly urinating.’175 In I Married a Communist, an ageing and reclusive Zuckerman has reconnected with a favourite English teacher, Murray Ringold, whom he celebrates as, ‘The man who first taught me how you box with a book.’ (27) At the very start of the novel, Zuckerman appears to reject explicitly the model of the writer as a self-doubter and self-questioner and to

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175 Philip Roth papers, 1938-2001, ‘My Life as a Man’, 1968-1974, MS c. 1968, Box 142, Folder 1, p. 78. Roth’s drafts are often disordered and out of sequence; as a result, it will not always be helpful, or possible, to give page numbers. I give them, therefore, only when it is both possible and appropriate. In my accounts of these drafts, my language might at times suggest sequence, or even cause and effect; such gestures, given the disorder, are usually speculative.
advocate unambiguously a pugilistic conception of writing when he writes approvingly of Ringold (whose name suggests both the boxing ring and the medal he hopes to win in it) that,

[t]here was more importance than perhaps even he imagined in his winning predilection for heaving a blackboard eraser in your direction when the answer you gave didn't hit the mark. (1-2)

But the importance of which Ringold is unaware might have more to do with the object being thrown than the throwing. Blackboard erasers, after all, are meant to rub out, to rethink, to revise, rather than to bludgeon and box. Accordingly, in the following sentence, Zuckerman enacts a revision of his own:

Or maybe there wasn't. Mr. Ringold knew very well that what boys like me needed to learn was not only how to express themselves with precision [...] but how to release the masculine intensities from the institutional rectitude that intimidated the bright kids the most. (2)

The image appears to advocate pugilism but encourages, too, a revisionary approach to thought and to writing – which the text enacts in its own subsequent revision. Yet the revision affirms an emphasis on the ‘release [of] masculine intensities’, an outpouring of virility. In both the image and the image’s expression, masculine self-affirmation and unmanly self-erasure are curiously imbricated. Two conceptions of writing are contained in one another.

In an interview he conducted with himself in 1973, Roth considers Philip Rahv’s 1939 essay ‘Paleface and Redskin’, in which Rahv considers a ‘disunity of the American creative mind’.176 As Rahv had it, at the turn of the century there were two kinds of American writer: ‘redskin’ writers such as Whitman and Twain and ‘paleface’ writers such as Eliot and James. (Rahv does not appear to be aware that he is writing about the male American creative mind.) His is a dichotomy between the ‘emotional’ and ‘spontaneous’ on the one hand and the ‘highbrow’ and ‘intellectual’ on the other; between the ‘lowlife world of the frontier and the big

cities’ and ‘the thin solemn, semiclerical culture of Boston and Concord’; between those writers who are ‘greedy consumer[s] of experience’ and those who stand at a moral distance from the world of experience.\textsuperscript{177} Roth argues that in the decades following Rahv’s essay, the ‘American creative mind’ saw a reconciliation of sorts, a result of the post-war influx of the working classes to universities, ‘till then almost exclusively the domain of the paleface’.\textsuperscript{178} He is himself a hybrid, a self-confessed ‘redface’. If this is a reconciliation, though, it is not in any way necessarily congenial to Philip Rahv, or even to the writers themselves. For what this “reconciliation” often comes down to is a feeling of being \textit{fundamentally ill at ease in and at odds with both worlds} [...]\textsuperscript{179}

Hence the red face: he is in a state of perpetual embarrassment.\textsuperscript{180} Roth concludes:

\begin{quote}

The redface sympathizes equally with both parties in their disdain for the other, and, as it were, re-enacts the argument within the body of his own work. He can never in good conscience opt for either of the disputants; indeed, bad conscience is the medium in which his literary sensibility moves. Thus the continuing need for self-analysis and self-justification.\textsuperscript{181}
\end{quote}

The poles of authorship are often, though not always, mapped in Roth’s work onto the binary of virtue and vice. And as Zuckerman himself tells Roth in \textit{The Facts},

\begin{quote}
The whole point about your fiction (and in America, not only yours) is that the imagination is always in transit between the good boy \textit{and} the bad boy – that’s the tension that leads to revelation. (167)
\end{quote}

For every model of the author there is in Roth’s oeuvre, there is a counter-author; for every Roth a counter-Roth. It is the tension of the optical illusion: you see either a rabbit or a duck, never both; seeing one means not seeing the other, the meaning

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid, p.254.
\textsuperscript{178} Philip Roth, ‘On the Great American Novel’ in \textit{Reading Myself and Others}, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid, Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{180} I am grateful to Roberta Klimt for drawing my attention to this implication.
\textsuperscript{181} Roth, ‘On the Great American Novel’, p.73.
in neither the one nor the other but in their combination of mutual-dependence and mutual-exclusivity.

The question of what kind of writer Roth is, what kind of writer he wants to be or advocates being, presents itself, finally, as neither a choice between two options nor their reconciliation. The answer is the bad conscience, the tension that leads to revelation. The countertext is less, as it is for Danziger, a corrective to come than a shadow of the present. There is, thus, in Roth's novels, a constant tension between confidence and doubt, virtue and vice, altruism and selfishness, narcissism and self-awareness, bravado and shame, strength and weakness, affirmation and erasure. The tension is so great, in fact, that words such as *dichotomy* or *binary* become insufficient. Rahv's 'disunity' might be better. But perhaps it is better still to think of it, as in *Portnoy's Complaint*, as a matter of movement, of choreographed contrary-motion. Every pugilistic jab should contain a wavelike retreat. The question that, for me, *Portnoy's Complaint* asks might, then, be formulated thus: how to conceive of the forward motion of expressive utterance (the motion of the boxer, of ejaculation) and the backward motion of revision (the motion of the blackboard eraser) in one movement; how to include in each gesture its countergesture; how to conceive of literary production as a bodily emission that returns to the body, that both empties and replenishes. Recalling Newton's Third Law that every force has its equal counterforce, it is a question of how to contain, in writing, something like the force of gravity – a force which both pushes and pulls and perpetually, according to the science Zuckerman espouses in his ‘cosmology lecture’ (199) at his father's deathbed, renews.\(^\text{182}\)

**ii. 'I'll never write about Jews again'**

Roth's characters are often caught between their externally-fashioned Jewish identity and their American self-fashioning. The difficult status of such an identity may be contained in the hyphenated form ‘American-Jewish’, the hyphen implying both unity and conflict, the Rothian ‘American-Jewish’ individual, like the redface, ‘sympathiz[ing] equally with both parties in their disdain for the other’. But what about Roth himself – is he an ‘American-Jewish writer’? And whose prerogative is it

\(^{182}\) Once again, I am grateful to Roberta Klimt for the reminder of Newton's Third Law.
to say? It is certainly a label he has rejected. ‘[It] is an inaccurate if not also a sentimental description,’ he said as recently as 2014, and entirely misses the point. The novelist’s obsession, moment by moment, is with language: finding the right next word. For me [...] the right next word is an American-English word.183

If authorial identity is predicated on an ‘obsession’ with ‘finding the right next word’ then it should follow that the particular character of that struggle is determinative of authorial identity. The best evidence we have for those struggles, surpassing anecdote and textual implication, is manuscript revision. Its marks are the material traces of obsession, of that which prompts return, of unconscious recurrence and conscious deliberation. In order to think about Roth’s authorial identity, and its implications for authorship in general, I look at those manuscript revisions in the following sections. First, though, I want to attempt to locate something of the unique character of his authorial struggles in anecdote and textual implication.

*Goodbye, Columbus* poses a number of questions about what it means to write as a member of a minority group. To and for whom, it asks, should the author be writing; to and for whom is the author beholden? Should the author cultivate a sensitivity to, as Roth puts it in *The Facts*, ‘the social uncertainties of a minority audience’ (125), seeking to buoy and embolden and ease passage into the mainstream? Or should the author stand at a remove from the community, seeking objectivity and enacting dispassionate scrutiny over it in the hope of encouraging moral improvement, regardless of the wounds and obstructions it may produce?184 Should the minority author, in other words, speak for or of or to their community? And to what end?

For David Gooblar, as we have seen, Roth aligns himself with those individuals who stand at a remove, claim privileged moral perspective and hope to catalyse change. When Ozzie, in *The Conversion of the Jews*, threatens to jump from

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the synagogue’s roof and commands his Jewish audience to convert to Christianity, Roth, for Gooblar, is dramatising

the ways that an individual’s actions can change the community, if that individual is sufficiently inquisitive and independent [...] This scene, with Ozzie on the roof, and his community down below, listening to him, giving credence to his ideas, even following his orders, is something of an artist’s fantasy.

Gooblar is careful not to suggest that a conversion to Christianity might constitute a positive change, but I cannot see anything as optimistic in this ending as an artist’s fantasy – not least because the crowd is partly composed of schoolchildren who taunt Ozzie and dare him to jump: a community of vindictive critics who, unaffected by the author’s words, are thrilled by the prospect of his destruction. Moreover, when his audience does do as he commands, they are captive, blackmailed with the threat of suicide into yielding to Ozzie’s will, which they do for presumably pragmatic reasons; their conversion can hardly be legitimate. If Ozzie is an author figure, then his is a species of authorship that might begin as virtuous self-questioning but ends as (literally) self-elevated coercion and fails, finally, to effect the change it high-mindedly seeks.

It is the failure that carries the weight: Goodbye, Columbus does not, to my mind, advocate any particular approach to writing ‘minority fiction’, speaking of or for or to a community, but dramatizes numerous different ways of doing so and finds them all lacking. In ‘Defender of the Faith’, a young Jewish draftee, Sheldon Grossbart, joins the army just after the end of WWII. Grossbart attempts to accrue special privileges for himself and other Jewish soldiers by appealing to what his superior, Sergeant Nathan Marx, also Jewish, describes as their ‘communal attachment’ (147) and invoking the Holocaust. It works: Marx regularly finds himself speaking for the other Jewish soldiers in order to plead their case – to arrange, for instance, for the provision of kosher (read: nicer) food. Marx’s speaking for literally fails – the kosher food never materialises – and in allowing the memory of atrocity to be turned into cultural capital, he fails morally, too. But it is Grossbart’s speaking for that constitutes the more serious failure. When the kosher food fails to

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materialise, Grossbart pens a letter to a local Congressman conceding defeat on the matter and manipulatively singing Marx’s praises. He signs the letter from his father, a Holocaust survivor, whom he ventriloquises, trading on the memory of the ‘many millions of my fellow-Jews [who] gave up their lives to the enemy’. (168) Grossbart’s speaking for is a speaking over – another kind of Rothian authorship – that uses the fact of suffering for its own benefit. The seriousness of its moral failure is clear; the seriousness of its practical failure becomes apparent when Marx, at the end of the story, cracks, cheating the system in order to send Grossbart on a mission he knows to be doomed, and thus to his likely death.

The question is not only how best to be an American, Jewish author, then, but how to be a *morally serious* American, Jewish author. Eli, in ‘Eli, the Fanatic’ is a stand-in for such an author, a lawyer called on to mediate between two Jewish groups whose claims seem irreconcilable – to *represent* Jews – and do justice to both. Eli belongs to a small 1950s community of American Jews who, fearing marginalisation, have moved away from the close-knit immigrant communities of urban New Jersey, where group identity had centred around religious observance, family structure and cultural memory, and into a more affluent suburb, Woodenton, where they hope to assimilate into the American mainstream. Members of this community are troubled by the arrival of a group of Jewish European refugees, displaced persons who set up a *yeshivah*, a religious school, in the area. The refugees, with their strange clothes and the ‘strange sounds’ (225) that come out of the *yeshivah* at night, are like figures in a horror movie, uncanny European doubles and abject reminders of what the community has tried to repress or leave behind. They threaten the project of assimilation. One of the number – a mute, unnamed man with curled sidelocks, Hasidic suit, ‘round-topped, wide-brimmed Talmudic hat’ (222) and nothing else in the world – personifies in his silence the absent presence of the Holocaust, a Jewish counterlife, in these nearly comfortable, nearly normative American lives. Eli is employed to *speak for* the Jewish community at Woodenton and formally request that the Yeshivah be shut down, threatening eviction.

In his negotiations, however, Eli begins to feel the pull of the refugees’ moral claim on him, his duty to history, and finds himself torn between the two communities, *fundamentally ill at ease in and at odds with both worlds*: ‘Too often he wished he were pleading for the other side; though if he were on the other side, then
he’d wish he were on the side he was.’ (223) He suspects that what so troubles the locals about the refugees is their visible difference: ‘If that guy would take off the crazy hat,’ he thinks, ‘everything would be all right.’ (227) And so he suggests that they start wearing ‘clothing usually associated with American life in the 20th century.’ (229) They refuse; things escalate. In desperation, Eli ends up giving the mute man his own suit, which he wears, and, with no explanation, the man’s Hasidic suit arrives one day on Eli’s doorstep. He unthinkingly steps into it and, in this new skin, ‘the skin of his skin’ (255), finds an unidentifiable voice rising inside him in pain, as though the surface dictates the interior. Eli begins to feel a pain himself: ‘It stung and stung inside him, and in turn the moan sharpened.’ (245) When he breaks out of his strange reverie, however, he discovers that ‘the pain was only a bloody scratch across his neck where a branch had whipped back’. (245) He is like the novelist of sympathy, living through the other’s pain. But his experience and the suffering of his European counterpart are incommensurate: the best he can offer is trivial, a pain in the neck (tellingly, Zuckerman’s affliction in The Anatomy Lesson).

Like Ozzie, Grossbart, Marx, Eli’s attempts to speak for, or to, or of his Jewish communities fail. If he is a figure of the author, then he is neither an ‘American-Jewish writer’, nor a writer refusing the label, but a writer who feels called upon to represent both sides of the label, attempts to do so with moral seriousness but, caught between their irreconcilable claims, can only fail.

I cannot decide if it is a mark of the book’s success or failure that so many American Jewish readers should have felt that it did not adequately speak for, or of, or to them (though, of course, there were very many who felt it did). The unflattering portrait of Sheldon Grossbart – an anti-Semitic stereotype: sly, greedy, selfish, unpatriotic – proved particularly inflammatory. One ‘eminent New York rabbi,’ as Roth refers to him, suggested, in a letter to the author, that it was ‘such conceptions of Jews [that] ultimately led to the murder of six million in our time.’ For this rabbi, it was a problem of context: ‘your story – in Hebrew – in an Israeli magazine or newspaper, would have been judged exclusively from a literary point of view’; in America, however, it constituted an act of ‘informing’.

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187 Ibid.
the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, asked, ‘What is being done to silence this man?’ and concluded, with venom, ‘Medieval Jews would have known what to do with him.’”188 Roth’s archive is full of similarly invective letters.189 In *The Facts*, he writes with relish about a symposium he attended in 1962 entitled, ‘The Crisis of Conscience in Minority Writers of Fiction’. As he tells it, the moderator opened proceedings by asking the acerbically unanswerable question, ‘Mr. Roth, would you write the same stories you’ve written if you were living in Nazi Germany?’ What followed, as Roth has mythologised it at least, was a prolonged attack from a mainly Jewish audience who surrounded him, mob-like, when he left the stage – after which he swore, he says, ‘I’ll never write about Jews again.’ (127)

Roth is of course enjoying the dramatic irony here – *Never write about Jews? Philip Roth?* – but the claim is more prophetic than the irony allows for: it would be another decade before Roth would publish a book that addressed the subject of Jewishness as directly as *Goodbye, Columbus* had. His first novel, *Letting Go* (1962), would feature a young Jewish man who marries out of the faith, prompting his parents to disown him. But, once disowned, the novel is liberated to (all but) leave behind the subject, becoming, as Roth writes in *The Facts*, ‘about the unanticipated responsibilities of young adulthood far from Jewish New Jersey’. (129) His second novel, *When She Was Good* (1967), would be about a protestant American woman, his only novel not to feature a Jewish character. These books exhibit a fragile seriousness. As Roth tells it, after the controversy of *Goodbye, Columbus*, he felt ‘my seriousness, my sense of proportion and consequence [under attack … thus] I did not have the nerve to appear frivolous in any way.’190 But when he came fully to confront the subject of Jewishness again, in 1969, a decade after publishing *Goodbye, Columbus*, it would be in a book that refused to be serious, born of a newly discovered willingness to be deliberately, programmatically perverse – subversive not merely of the “serious” values of official literary culture […] but subversive of my own considerable investment […] in seriousness.191

190 Roth, ‘On The Great American Novel’ in Reading Myself and Others, p.70.
191 Ibid, pp.75-76.
Any moral seriousness in *Portnoy’s Complaint* lies in the dramatization of its absence. Portnoy is trapped in a realm of unseriousness: ‘this is my life,’ he says, my only life, and I’m living it in the middle of a Jewish joke! [...] Is this the Jewish suffering I used to hear so much about? Is this what has come down to me from the pogroms and the persecution?’ (32-33)

If for Eli the gap between his pain and that of his European Jewish counterparts – his realm of experience and theirs – is essentially unbridgeable, then Portnoy, who is unable to register the valency of historical suffering, struggles to see a gulf at all. His is a realm in which value has been flattened by consumer culture, in which his mother can pronounce with horror the word hamburgers, ‘just as she might say Hitler’, (20) and in which atrocity is elbowed out of the frame by raucous, scatological comedy: ‘I remember’, Portnoy says of his constipated father, ‘when they announced over the radio the explosion of the first atom bomb, he said aloud, “Maybe that would do the job.”’ (3) But, of course, the two spheres cannot cohere and it is the incoherence, the disunity, that carries the weight. As Michael Rothberg has written, *Portnoy’s Complaint* is about the ‘inauthenticity of most attempts to lessen [the] distance’ between ‘the Holocaust and American life.’¹⁹² Unlike ‘Eli, the Fanatic’, the novel does not dramatise the struggle and failure to be a serious American, Jewish writer but rather enacts its impossibility.

In the wake of the inevitable uproar that followed *Portnoy’s Complaint* (and its immense success), Roth once again appeared to turn away from the subject of Jewishness. The novels that followed were just as unserious, but their unseriousness carried less moral weight and they had a mainly mainstream American focus. Roth appeared to have given up entirely on serious American, Jewish authorship. *Our Gang* (1971) (a satire about Nixon), *The Breast* (1972) (in which a man turns into a breast), and *The Great American Novel* (1973) (a screwball farce about baseball) would all be boisterously comic, ‘conscientiously grotesque, surreal, and often overwrought,’ as his biographer, Claudia Roth Pierpont, puts it, written ‘hurriedly,

while other subjects were on his mind and on his desk.’ It is to those other subjects – to that mind and to that desk – that I now turn my attention.

iii. ‘the manuscript was the message, and the message was Turmoil.’

On 22nd February 1959, Philip Roth married Margaret Martinson Williams, whom he had met in Chicago in 1956. It was a bad marriage. As we have only Roth’s testimony, I do not want to reproduce its anecdotal details. But there is one incident which it is necessary to summarise, from Roth’s perspective, as it would both dominate and inhibit his writing over the following decades. Roth came to believe that he had been tricked into the marriage. As he tells it in The Facts, he and Williams agreed to marry in late 1958 when, after having separated, Williams told him she was pregnant. (102-112) According to Claudia Roth Pierpont’s summary of the incident, Williams threatened ‘to leave the baby on [Roth’s] parents’ doorstep if he didn’t marry her.’ Feeling he had reason not to believe her story, Roth arranged for a pregnancy test, which came back positive. In Pierpont’s words, he then ‘made a harsh and desperate but perhaps predictable counteroffer: he would marry her if she had an abortion right away.’ Williams agreed and they married three months later. But in January 1962, Williams told Roth that she had in fact never been pregnant and that, [t]o obtain a positive result on the pregnancy test, she had used a urine sample that she’d bought from a pregnant woman among the down-and-out in Tompkins Square Park, a few blocks from Roth’s apartment. There had been no abortion: she had gone to the movies instead.

By the end of the year they had separated for good. The same year, Roth first attempted to write the story of his marriage but, for whatever reason, found himself unable to house the material in fiction. Eventually, he published instead When She

193 Pierpont, Roth Unbound, p.78, p.74. For a compelling account of how these novels might be seen, obliquely, to address the Holocaust, see Steven Milowitz, Philip Roth Considered: The Concentrationary Universe of the American Writer (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.173-187.
194 Ibid, p.35.
196 Ibid.
197 Ibid, p.41.
Was Good, an affectionately compassionate reimagining of Williams’s early life, an attempt to portray her as irreparably damaged by hardship and trauma. Then, in the spring of 1968, not long after publishing that novel and just before completing Portnoy’s Complaint, Roth learnt from his step-daughter that Williams had been killed in a car crash. Almost immediately he began work on another attempt to tell their story, a project that would take up the next six years of his life, while he was publishing those minor novels, and which would finally be published as My Life as a Man (1974) – a novel that provides a first response to Portnoy’s dilemma of second thoughts.

The novel is a document of an obsession. It is about a novelist, Peter Tarnopol’s obsessive and failed attempts to fictionalise a bad marriage, one that follows much the contours of Roth’s own. Towards the end of the book, Tarnopol describes the state of the 'two thousand pages of manuscript’ he has so far accumulated:

By now the various abandoned drafts had gotten so shuffled together and interwoven, the pages so defaced with Xs and arrows of a hundred different intensities of pen and pencil, the margins so tattooed with comments, reminders, with schemes for pagination (Roman numerals, Arabic numerals, letter [sic] of the alphabet in complex combinations that even I, the cryptographer, could no longer decode) that what impressed one upon attempting to penetrate that prose was not the imaginary world it depicted, but the condition of the person who’d been doing the imagining: the manuscript was the message, and the message was Turmoil.198

It would be hard to overstate just how accurate a description this is of the novel’s own drafts. It is impossible in these shuffled, scattered, voluminous papers to trace anything like a chronology. They are expressive, most of all, of a turbulent, obsessive return. For Hannah Sullivan it is often the depiction of a traumatic event that sits at the centre of autobiography’s common revisionary proliferation, ‘either through direct revision of earlier drafts, or through repetitions across a textual series’; ‘trauma’, she argues, ‘acts first as a compositional stumbling block, and then as a spur to revision.’199 And so it seems here. In an interview with Hermione Lee some

years later, Roth recalls ‘being driven quite crazy’ by this book, as he was unable to find a ‘setting’ appropriate for

the sordid scene in which Maureen [Tarnopol’s wife] buys a urine specimen from a poor pregnant black woman in order to get Tarnopol to think he’s impregnated her.200

The drafts contain attempt after attempt, revision after revision, of this scene, housed in all manner of different forms; the narrative appears simultaneously to hasten continually towards the incident and perpetually to delay its arrival. Each time it gets close, as the fictional novelist, here called Nathan Zuckerman, puts it in one draft, ‘[t]he book [...] would invariably reject the incident the way a body rejects a transplanted heart.’201 ‘What I’d like to do,’ he says elsewhere, ‘is get it right finally, cause it to disappear as an obsession. Get it out of my way so I can go on.’202

Of the eventual published version of the scene, Roth has written, in The Facts, rechristening Margaret Josie, that it

parallels almost exactly how I was deceived by Josie in February 1959. Probably nothing else in my work more precisely duplicates the autobiographical facts. (107)

*Getting it right finally*, however, proves extremely difficult. The more Roth works to get it right on his terms – aesthetic, technical, narrative – and the more conclusively absent from the record Williams’s voice therefore is, the more wrong the work becomes, in ethical terms. “‘What right have you to expose me when I can no longer defend myself!’” Zuckerman’s ex-wife, here called Roberta, asks in one draft, both voicing and enacting, in Roth’s ventriloquism, the concern: writing the story after her death means having the power of ultimate expression, however fair-minded the

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201 Roth papers, ’My Life as a Man’, 1968-1974, MS c.1969-1970, Box 143, Folder 4, pp.10-11. In the drafts, the name Roth gives his stand-in changes regularly, even within in the space of a sentence. Most commonly he is called Zuckerman. Zuckerman *does* appear in the published text, but only as Tarnopol’s creation. However, as Tarnopol only enters the drafts at a very late stage, as Zuckerman will return throughout Roth’s career, and as many of his subsequent adventures are, as we shall see, born in these drafts, I will refer to the character, as he appears in the drafts, as Zuckerman, unless he is clearly named Tarnopol. *My Life as a Man* is not a Zuckerman novel, but the drafts are.
202 Ibid. (rev. inc.)
attempt. Indeed, fair-mindedness can itself be transgressive. When Zuckerman comes to write about his relationship with his stepdaughter, he finds that to do so with honest generosity appears self-serving:

even if the truth be that in my life I was never anything but wholly devoted to the well-being and happiness of my stepdaughter [...] I feel that if I said as much in the fiction, even in the guise of an Abravanel [one of Zuckerman’s many names], I might be doing so only to manipulate my reputation in the world.

Roth’s initial response to the dilemma is to develop a drama of self-criticism. Thus he fashions a number of narrative situations and devices that allow critical voices to enter: letters from editors, ruthless psychotherapists, negative reviews, insightful students. The charge of authoritarianism, in particular, is voiced, often by female characters, in terms not unlike Irving Howe’s. “Oh nobody is anything to you,’ says one of Zuckerman’s lovers,

-- unless they’re what you want them think they ought to be! You’re so sure of yourself, Nathan, That you’re right + everybody else is wrong! […] I’m a phony and [illegible] Alexi’s a phoney, and everyone in this bar is a phoney, if he happens not to be dressed like you! I can just imagine what your fiction is like!”

(This is one of the few dated portions: March 28 1969. Portnoy’s Complaint has only just been published; Howe would not write his critique for another three years. As so often, Roth gets there first.) And it is not only by ventriloquising other voices that Roth brings self-criticism into the novel. He goes as far as he can to make his standing deplorable, pushing his transgression as far as it can go: there are numerous unpublished scenes in which Zuckerman seduces his teenage step-daughter; others, in parallel, in which he forces a fourteen-year-old sex worker to perform obscene acts. Roth begins to construct a narrative of shame, in other words, hewn less from the event to which he is continually drawn than from his anxieties about writing that event, about the ethical crux of its writing’s possibility.

203 Ibid, MS c.1968-1969, Box 142, Folder 5, p.144.
204 Ibid, Folder 4, p.67.
In one draft, the novel is to take the form of an extended *Paris Review* ‘Art of Fiction’ interview, in which Zuckerman discusses his obstructedness with an engaged interviewer. The format allows Roth, via Zuckerman, to comment astutely on the novel’s intractability. ‘Each beginning seems promising,’ he says in one answer,

seems to concentrate within it the tensions and contradictions that will lend themselves to elaboration [...] and then in a very short time the whole enterprise reeks of artificiality, and I feel as though I can put my fist right through it. And ought to.

[...] Now why is that? Is the genre dead? Or am I? Or is it this obsession -- funnelling everything into this damn grievance!206

His interviewer (here called Amy; a character who will uncannily return in *The Ghost Writer* and whose genesis I discuss at length below) is equally acute in her commentary:

I wonder if you have not lost interest in constructing a continuous conventional fiction in the realistic manner. The evidence so far suggests as much. [...] It seems as though you’d really prefer to talk, in a rather abstracted way, about fiction, than have to convey yet another “scene”.207

But if this is to be a novel of self-criticism, these criticisms cannot be allowed to stand. The interview is followed by another section in which Zuckerman, Krapp-like, listens back to the tape and then asks for the interview to be suppressed:

His remarks, he said, were “a worthless mix of pomposity and indiscretion,” [...] “I am not a theorist,” he explained, “I am not a thinker, and I’ve made a fool of myself trying to sound like one. I’ve been playing a role, either for you or for myself [...] The whole thing is false and contrived [...]”208

And then a narrative voice enters to critique Zuckerman’s critique of his critique:

207 Ibid, p.66.
208 Ibid, pp.68-69.
Given the fluidity with which he had spoken into the machine, and the pleasure he seemed to have taken in theoretical literary discussion, it was hard to believe that this post-interview uncertainty wasn’t more in the nature of role-playing than the manner in which he’d conducted the interview itself.\(^\text{209}\)

The process of self-criticism is conceptually endless, as the sheer ungovernable volume of material in the archives attests, and cannot, therefore, provide a workable model. This extraordinary, maddening document is, it seems to me, the origin of the ‘sickness of circular self-consumption’ that McGurl diagnoses. It is perhaps inevitable, then, that, finally, it collapses into furious self-address, the veneer between fiction and reality imperceptible in comments such as:

You’ve got an immense advance hanging over your head, and if you don’t deliver a full-length novel to your publisher before 1973, you’re going to have to give the whole thing back. [...]\(^\text{210}\)

Or:

In short, you are stuck, + you are sweating. You’ve been working these manuscripts since September 1968, and though under ordinary circumstances you might, as you’ve done in the past, cut your losses in time and energy, write these writings off ill-conceived and hopeless [sic], you are panicked and deparat, [sic] and figure you have no choice now but to pawn them off o [sic] your publisher as the ‘full-length novel’ promised for no later than 1973.\(^\text{211}\)

Later, the author confesses: ‘I didn’t want to make a fiction, I wanted to proclaim the victimization of Philip Roth’.\(^\text{212}\) ‘Oh, I am so sick of my fiction. So tired of making things up --’ he proclaims, sounding like B.S. Johnson; ‘Oh bullshit! Who cares?’\(^\text{213}\)
After which follows a page consisting of only one short but labyrinthine sentence: ‘Stop making me up.’

Such a process of circular self-criticism is soon unengaging, untenable: its ethical claims will not support the fiction, its fictional claims will not support the ethics. That Roth may come to think of the dilemma in the terms I laid out at the beginning of this chapter – that is, in terms not of utterance followed by correction but of the simultaneity of expression and revision – is suggested in an author’s note he writes for one projected version of the novel. In it, Roth describes the text as the first in a projected pair of novels, this one called ‘Zuckerman Bound’, followed by ‘Zuckerman Unbound’, which ‘will serve,’ he writes,

to correct what may appear to be the somewhat irregular and haphazard treatment [of its subject matter] in Zuckerman Bound [...] the pair, or if the reader will, yoke of novels, should form a symmetrical literary work [...] but ‘Zuckerman Unbound’ is presently in the hypothetical stage of its development, [so] it is of course not advisable to announce a publication date at this time.

Whether Roth intended to write a second book, it is clear he is beginning to conceive of a countertext that may exist in a perpetually-hypothetical future but functions as a corrective in the present tense: a corrective in conception rather than reality, an imaginative but efficacious counterpressure that exists in the moment and in the fact of utterance. The two epigraphs Roth places above this author’s note align the project with the concerns of Portnoy’s Complaint further, associating storytelling with bodily emission and secretion. The first, which finds its way into the body of the published text, is from a letter from Flaubert to Louise Colet:

You wrote... with a personal emotion that distorted your outlook and made it impossible to keep before your eyes the fundamental principles that must underlie any imaginative composition. It has no aesthetic. You have turned it into an outlet for passion, a kind of chamberpot to catch an overflow. It smells bad; it smells of hate.

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214 Ibid.
216 Quoted in ibid.
The second is from *Malone Dies*: ‘All the stories I’ve told myself. Clinging to the putrid mucus, and swelling, swelling, saying, Got it at last, my legend.’ Story is overflow, a putrid mucus. Elsewhere, in a remarkable unpublished passage, Roth provides an imagining of this counterpressure in terms of gravity and Newton’s Third Law:

As at birth, he seemed in single seconds to pass from a medium of one specific gravity into another. Pass is putting it mildly. It hadn’t been a simple passage to begin with – so he understood; the cord had nearly strangled him, as it had Goethe before him – and it was never that way afterwards, either: he was torpedoed, still under the waters, as out of a sub; he was flung into nothing, as out of the hand of some giant; he was evicted, as out of a tenement, into the cold; or simply set down, like a puppet, lowered by strings onto a little stage; he was popped like a button, released like a prisoner, launched like a ship, cast like a stone, banished like a traitor, revealed like a mystery, or else he just came into sweet bloom, Nathan the Petunia. Let there be Nathan, and there was Nathan, being. Only one hitch. So far each time he went catapulting from this dimension into that one, he likewise felt something drawing him back, an indefinable countermotion perfectly balanced against the energies pressing him forth. Invariably then he came to seem to himself to be halfway out of where he was, or who he was, halfway into wherever it was he was headed. What cord this time? Neither in nor out; neither here nor there; neither Zuckerman delivered or Zuckerman retracted.

In these drafts, Roth is working his way to a form that houses this condition, a form that simultaneously creates and uncreates itself, births and unbirths, constructs itself through self-undermining: a delivery that is simultaneously a retraction.

That a coherent piece of work was hewn from this process is remarkable. It is not an easy read and one suspects that Roth could not have written another novel at this pitch of claustrophobia. It is most successful, to my mind, as an early articulation of a revisionary aesthetic. It is a book about *getting it right*. It opens with an originary trauma, a scene in which the young Zuckerman’s father – a macho cobbler, a ‘striving, hot-headed shoedog’ (3) – happens to see his son’s signature on

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217 Quoted in ibid.
218 Ibid, MS 1968, Box 142, Folder 3, p.410.
his homework and, deeming it inadequate, infantile, ‘a train wreck,’ tells his son to go away and write it again and again until he, “Sign[s] it right!” (4) The rest of the novel follows on from this primary moment, continuing Zuckerman’s attempts to sign it right, even at the level of the prose, which often houses self-correction: ‘Practically overnight (correction: overnight) [...]’. (24) But, aware that to write definitively over reality is an act of power, it attempts to delay perpetually any final revision. It promotes revision as a method not of erasure and refinement but of accumulation; ‘it is in the accumulation of narratives,’ Zuckerman writes in one draft, ‘that I will be able to approximate the whole myself and my situation.’

Thus, the form itself constitutes a revisionary accumulation. The book begins with a short section entitled ‘Useful Fictions’, which contains two short stories about Zuckerman’s love affairs that are taken from Tarnopol’s archive and are, in reality, abandoned drafts in Roth’s. The stories are written by recognisably different narrators, employing recognisably different tones, and contain incompatible details. Each collapses into anxiety – ‘Salad Days’ ends, for instance, as the narrator calls for ‘an approach far more serious’ than he is able to provide, ‘deeper dredging, a darker sense of irony, a grave and pensive voice’. (31) But if ‘Courting Disaster’ provides a corrective, then it fails, too, by being more invested in satirising the young writer’s high-minded search for moral seriousness, his literary self-fashioning (‘my life surely must be more complex and subtle than that; The Wings of the Dove was’ (56)) than in telling sensitively the story of his marriage. The main body of the book consists of an ‘autobiographical narrative’, called ‘My Story’, in which it becomes apparent that the two preceding stories were attempts of Peter Tarnopol’s to fictionalise his own marriage. It pretends to provide, that is, a definitive account. But the overlap and the conflict between the three narratives ensure that they exist, in David Brauner’s words, ‘in a process of perpetual revisioning’.

There is another conception of revision that emerges during the drafting of My Life as a Man, which will have a significant bearing on the way in which Roth’s work develops. In the interview with Hermione Lee, Roth describes the books that he rapidly wrote and published alongside writing this novel – Our Gang, The Breast, The

219 Ibid, MS c.1969-1970, Box 143, Folder 6, p.4
Great American Novel – as attempts to ‘[blast] my way through a tunnel to reach the novel I couldn’t write.’ 221 He then comes up with an unusual metaphor for writing, for his writing:

It’s all one book you write anyway. At night you dream six dreams. But are they six dreams? One dream prefigures or anticipates the next, or somehow concludes what hasn’t yet even been fully dreamed. Then comes the next dream, the corrective of the dream before – the alternative dream, the antidote dream – enlarging upon it, or laughing at it, or contradicting it, or trying just to get the dream right. You can go on trying all night long. 222

It is another apt description of the drafts of My Life as a Man: they issue as a kind of phantasmagoria, scene merging into scene, character into character, ethical dilemma into ethical dilemma, future into past, reading as a process of rhizomatic rather than linear revision. Many of Roth’s most notable novels begin in this dreamwork of doubt and self-criticism: not only My Life as a Man but also The Ghost Writer and American Pastoral emerge in embryo from this attempt to write about his marriage, all of which are obstructed by the one traumatic incident and its endless return. For the remainder of this chapter, I will delve into the geneses of these two novels in order to trace the development of a practice, a style and a theory of revision that both builds on and challenges that of My Life as a Man, developing Roth’s response to the dilemma of second thoughts, and show that it is through this thinking about revision that he finds a way to be a serious American, Jewish writer.

iv. ‘What’s so wonderful about being a fucking Roth?’
Taken together, Roth’s work on My Life as a Man and his published work of the 1960s and early 1970s might suggest that he had, by this stage, given up on any attempt to address 20th-century Jewish experience with committed moral seriousness from an American perspective. But the archive houses a number of unpublished manuscripts from the same period (as well as early drafts of published

222 Ibid.
novels) that tell a different story. They reveal a writer who attempts, repeatedly and
doggedly to address the Holocaust both seriously and directly, if not always
sensitively. Immediately after publishing *Goodbye, Columbus*, for example, Roth
begins but does not finish a novel about an American Jewish businessman who
travels to Germany shortly after the war to kill, at random, a German citizen.223
Later, he writes a never-staged play, ‘A Coffin in Egypt’, based on the life of Jacob
Gens – a Lithuanian Jew who was the head of the Vilna Ghetto police and
surrendered large numbers of Jewish citizens for deportation or execution,
supposing that in doing so he would save the lives of many more.224 Most
persistently, he tries, again and again, to write about Anne Frank. As early as 1959,
he wants ‘to change her history, to have her survive, and to bring her to America’.225
A decade later, while drafting *My Life as a Man*, he conceives of a text called ‘MY
LOVE AFFAIR WITH ANNE FRANK’, which exists only in detailed synopsis, in which
Zuckerman becomes involved with an attractive woman in London who reveals
herself to be Anne Frank. For the first few pages, the synopsis engages seriously with
Frank’s construction as a ‘moral celebrity’.226 But the story breaks down when
Zuckerman begins to monologue about his bad marriage and she becomes merely a
framing device for telling that story. The moral incommensurability of their
suffering is only glanced at:

Felt self-conscious saying all this to someone whose family was killed by the Nazis.
Yet she encouraged me, recognized my pain for what it was. "That was a long time
ago," she said. "I’ve finished suffering about that. But there’s no reason why you can’t
talk." She was, in fact, enthralled [...]

But perhaps Frank’s most striking appearance in the archive, worth dwelling
on, is in the other new work Roth begins to draft alongside *My Life as a Man*, which
would take him twenty-five years to complete. The novel Roth would eventually
publish, in 1997, as *American Pastoral* begins life in the vast dreamwork of the early
1970s, its seeds in his attempts to write the incestuous relationship between

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223 Roth papers, ‘Distracted and Unblessed’, 1958-1959, MS, Box 85.
224 Roth papers, ‘A Coffin in Egypt’, 1959, MS, Box 149.
227 Ibid, p.4.
Zuckerman and his stepdaughter, ‘Moonie’. Moonie is the prototype of *American Pastoral’s* Merry: like Merry, she is innocently flirtatious, her explorations of her sexual identity often centring around casual household nudity; like Merry, she models herself on movie-star femininity, keeping, like Merry, a ‘10x12 scrapbook’ into which she pastes anything she finds with ‘Audrey Hepburn’s name or face’; like Merry, she is deeply affected by the political events of the 1960s.\(^{228}\) Just as in *American Pastoral* the father-daughter narrative is entangled with the history of the war in Vietnam, so here it is entangled with the assassination of President Kennedy: ‘Remember to fuse personal destiny to the sweep of human history,’ Roth writes of Zuckerman’s and Moonie’s relationship in one experimental draft that takes the form of a synopsis for a future-tense novel.\(^{229}\) Whether anything sexual actually occurs between them is a decision Roth delays perpetually: much of the drafts’ self-cannibalising metacommentary is, in fact, presented as a way of delaying this one narrative decision. By the time of *American Pastoral*, Roth will have found his way to a form that allows that decision to be held in suspension.

In 1972, Roth extracted this strand from his work on *My Life as a Man* and began to turn it into a separate novel, called at this stage *How the Other Half Lives*.\(^{230}\) Given its long gestation, it is surprising how much of the material that makes up the published text can be found here. Like the published novel, it is about a young girl with a stutter who, after an ambiguously incestuous moment, turns against what she regards as her parents’ privileged, bourgeois lifestyle and joins a radical underground protest group. In protest against the war in Vietnam she sets off a bomb that kills an innocent person. She goes into hiding in an animal hospital, where she converts to Jainism. Her father – a successful and assimilated Jewish, American businessman who owns a glove factory – struggles to come to terms with her fate. Less the addition of the narrative frame, this is the entire plot of the published novel. Yet Roth appears for a long time to regard it as insufficient, attempting a number of different narrative developments. In one version, a Czech dissident meets with Merry’s father – here, Milton Levov (though the name fluctuates) – wrongly imagining him, because of his daughter’s reputation, to be sympathetic to subversive

\(^{228}\) Ibid, Box 143, Folder 7, p.27.  
\(^{229}\) Ibid, Folder 8, p.84.  
causes. The dissident has with him a briefcase full, he conspiratorially tells Levov, of clothes he wants to send to his own daughter in Prague. He asks Levov to get them to her and Levov, who is about to go to Prague on a business trip, ingenuously agrees. In Prague, he encounters a concentration camp survivor who attempts to seduce him by showing him her camp number. The narration shifts to her point of view and takes, now, the form of a diary entry. Like Anne Frank's diary entries, it begins 'Dear Kitty', and is signed off, 'Anne'. She is Anne Frank; she has survived the war and is living under an alias in Prague, where she dreams of American men.

Frank has a presence in the novel even before she appears in person: early title suggestions include ‘THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK’S CONTEMPORARY’ and ‘ANNE FRANK IN AMERICA’.231 (Peter Tarnopol, too, has written a story with the former title.) As titles like these suggest, and as is borne out in the drafts, Roth appears to want to establish a parallel between his Anne Frank and Merry Levov. It as though they are cut from the same cloth. When, for example, Roth’s Frank writes in a diary entry about her embrace of socialism, her admiration for Stalin, and her rejection of the bourgeois materialism that, for her, her family (specifically her father) represent, she sounds much like Merry railing against her own father's conformism. This Frank writes, for example,

I began to think that it was no accident – I began to like to think, like a good little Marxist, “It is no accident that” – that what had destroyed my family was its bourgeois origins: our passion for our possessions, our narrow domestic interests; our crazy desire to keep to the civilized habits and rituals of our class. Including the habit of habit.232

It is significant, then, that in revising this early draft, Roth should write over the different names he has given Merry’s father with his own. The first sentence of what seems to be the very first draft – ‘Lebow was not given to daydreaming about the things he didn’t have’ – becomes the peculiarly demonstrative locution, ‘This Roth was not given to daydreaming about what he didn’t have.’233 On the following page, a sentence about his wife is revised from, “Take away Lebow and where would Milly

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231 Ibid.
232 Ibid, Folder 2.
233 Ibid, Folder 1, p.1.
be?’ to, ‘Take away Philip and where would Donna be?’ Later on the page: ‘To the criticism that his daughter used to make of his “self-satisfaction”, Lebow would try to be yielding and gentle’ becomes, ‘To the criticism that his daughter used to make of his “self-satisfaction”, R. would try to be yielding and gentle’. The character becomes, as Roth writes in a note at the start of the draft, ‘This [illegible] Roth who I am not but might have been.’

The hypothetical self-portraiture appears to be an extension of that of My Life as a Man but is unflattering in a different way. Where Zuckerman, in some of those drafts, had been malicious – misogynistic, selfish, abusive, a figure of unbounded capitalist greed (throwing huge amounts of money, for instance, at a teenage sex worker) – he is, here, a benign avatar of capitalism: “pathologically humane” as he reports it in one draft. The incestuous act is now considerably milder (a slightly too passionate kiss) and committed in a moment of sun-drunk confusion. Yet these early drafts are structured around – and appear to draw their energy from – accusations levelled at this Rothian counterlife, accusations regarding not malice or deliberate abuse of power but moral luck, blinkered social privilege and complicity, against which he is apparently defenceless. Indeed, the material’s arrangement appears actively to uphold them. For instance, Merry’s enigmatic maybe-accomplice Rita Cohen (who survives into the published novel all but intact) accuses Levov/Roth of complicity with what she calls in the published novel ‘paternal capitalism’.

After she claims to know where Merry is hiding, they meet, and have an exchange which makes clear the feminist tenor of the accusation:

"When can we see her?" “She doesn’t want to see you.” “Why? What did we do?” “You drove her crazy, Mr. Levov.” “That’s not true. You don’t know anything about Merry and her mother and myself.” “I know that people like you have driven us all nuts.” “What did we do? What is it you think we did?” “Come off it, Mr Levov, you know what you did.” “What? Exactly what?” “Just what you want to do to me.” “I assure

235 Ibid.
237 Quoted in ibid.
238 Quoted in ibid, p.124.
239 Philip Roth, American Pastoral (London: Vintage, 2005), p.135. All further references will be to this edition.
you I don’t want to do anything to you.” “You want to fuck me, Mr. Levov. And you
wanted to fuck Merry. Well, you fucked her, all right. You fucked her mind away.”

However deliberately provocative Cohen is being, however sweepingly personal,
that this dialogue immediately follows the incest scene means that the accusations
emerge with credibility, even if Rita herself does not.

To turn the screw of self-criticism further, the Roth character seems to be
privileged to the point of banality (of which more later), blithely accepting of and
untroubled by the accusations. Here, for example, is the tail end of an exchange
between father and daughter:

“Well, maybe I am lacking something, and maybe that’s why I’m content. Maybe
there is something seriously wrong with me that I don’t have a fight to pick with the
world. On the other hand, maybe I’m extremely lucky always to have wanted what
I’ve had.” “But what about what you don’t have?” “Well I seem to manage to get along
without it driving me nuts.” “But you don’t even know what ‘it’ is! And what if you
didn’t have what you d-d-do have? All you’re saying it that you’re p-p-privileged!” “I
am. I admit that. But then, not everybody who is privileged feels privileged. Enjoys
being privileged.”

Or, in another scene, Merry suggests that his investment in family structure is less a
matter of love than an enactment, in the private realm, of what for her is a capitalist
model of possessive patriarchy. He replies, blankly: “Your mother is my wife, and I
love her. I care about your grandparents. I care quite a bit about you.” To which
Merry responds, “But don’t you see, only because we’re yours.” And he says, “[...] caring about the people I love doesn’t sound like a crime to me.” To which, Merry:

“But it is! It’s no different from Lyndon Johnson ‘protecting American lives’! What
about everybody else in the world, who happens not to be an American, or a Lebow?
What’s so wonderful about being a fucking Lebow? How can you be so smug – and
narrow! And self-satisfied.”

242 Ibid, p.3.
And then, in pen, Roth has amended this passage so that it reads: ‘What about everybody else in the world who happens not to be an American, and better a Roth? What’s so wonderful about being a fucking Roth?’

In aligning Merry with Anne Frank and her father with himself, Roth extends, develops and reframes the self-criticism of *My Life as Man*, sketching now a typically inexact dialectic of Jewish authorship: on the one hand, the ‘Jewish saint’, as he will later call Frank, and, on the other, the blandly assimilated, privileged Jew – or worse, as he had been accused, the self-hating Jew, the Nazi informer. Measuring himself against Frank, he can only find himself, because of the fact of his moral luck, lacking: *What's so wonderful about being a fucking Roth.* Frank presents a model of morally serious Jewish authorship he cannot hope to equal. He is simply unable to speak from the position from which Frank speaks – a position of having suffered and died, a posthumous position. In 1979, two decades after he first tried to write about her, Roth would finally publish a novel, *The Ghost Writer*, in which Frank features. It is a novel about a young Jewish writer, Nathan Zuckerman, who, dogged by early accusations of anti-Semitism, attempts to create a fictional, living version of Anne Frank. Having learnt from *My Life as a Man*, in other words, Roth would finally make Anne Frank a workable subject of fiction by making the struggle to write about her – and the authorial anxieties that catalysed that struggle – the subject of the fiction.

In the following section I will look in detail at the drafts of *The Ghost Writer* in order to suggest that Roth came to this solution through a self-reflexive attentiveness to his own revisions as he rewrote Frank over and over. In doing so, I hope to show, he found a more workable response to the question of *Portnoy's Complaint*, producing a novel that attempts to do justice to both the confidence and the doubt inherent in any utterance. First, though, in order to understand the dimensions of his difficulty, I want to think a bit more about Frank’s unique status in American cultural discourse.

v. ‘Who owns Anne Frank?’

When Roth began writing, Frank had only just become a household name in America. Her diary – published in English in 1952 as *The Diary of a Young Girl* – had been popularised by a 1955 Broadway adaptation, *The Diary of Anne Frank,* and
became universally known with a film adaptation of the play released on 18th March 1959, less than two months before *Goodbye, Columbus* was published (2nd May). The film’s release coincided with what Michael Rothberg has described as ‘the transition of the Holocaust from a seldom openly discussed topic into a public matter’. The reasons for the transition have been debated. For some, such as Rothberg, it represents the delayed coming to light of a collective traumatic memory. For others, such as Peter Novick, the Holocaust emerged as a term in public discourse to serve an instrumental purpose: owing to ‘increasing communal anxiety about “Jewish continuity” in the face of declining religiosity, together with increasing assimilation and a sharp rise in intermarriage’, ‘American Jewish identity in the late twentieth century’ was in need of a new ‘consensual symbol’. Whatever the reason, when Roth began his publishing career, Frank had very recently become an acceptable symbol, perhaps the first, for the Holocaust and was thus uniquely freighted with both the weight of public emotion and the stuff of Jewish identity. She had, as Roth writes in a note about Merry Levov’s post-bomb existence in the drafts of *How the Other Half Lives*, been ‘rewritten nationally’.

In her famous article ‘Who Owns Anne Frank?’ (1997), Cynthia Ozick documents the various ways in which, ever since Otto Frank removed from his daughter’s diary any material he felt too delicate (sexual intimacies, religious pieties, filial anger), Anne Frank’s diary has been shaped, framed, translated, edited, even rephrased by others. She pays particular attention to the Broadway play – adapted by the screenwriting duo Albert and Frances Hackett, whose other credits include *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954) – which rewrites Frank’s words extensively, often making them more palatable, optimistic, universal, less singular. A passage about Jewish suffering ‘through the ages’, for instance, which imagines a future in which ‘the Jewish people will be held up as an example’ and will ‘teach the world and all the people in it about goodness’ is replaced with charged even-handedness. ‘We’re not the only people that’ve had to suffer,’ Frank now says. ‘There’ve always been people that’ve had to – sometimes

243 Rothberg, ‘Roth and the Holocaust’, pp.53-54.
one race – sometimes another – and yet [...] Or there is the play’s closing line. ‘I still believe,’ the onstage Frank concludes, ‘in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.’ Curtain down. These words do originate from the diary but they do not come at the end (nothing comes at the end) and are followed by a remarkable, equivocal passage whose optimism is far more confused:

I see the world being transformed into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too. I feel the suffering of millions ... In the meantime, I must hold onto my ideals. Perhaps the day will come when I’ll be able to realize them![248]

It may be that the Hacketts wanted to communicate dramatically the pathos of Frank’s defeated optimism by leaving the line hanging, leaving the audience to complete the story. However, as Ozick documents, many of the gushing opening night reviews responded positively to the arc of redemption provided by this ending, an aesthetic shape at odds with the reality of the text’s production. ‘It is not grim’, concluded Variety’s review, articulating the consensus.249

For Ozick, the Hacketts are not alone: Frank is always already rewritten. Even the diary in its original form leaves an erroneous impression: ‘it cannot count,’ she writes, ‘as Anne Frank’s story. A story may not be said to be a story if the end is missing.’ And because the end is missing, she suggests, in reading the diary we inevitably engage in an act of revisionary transference. Like Roth, we conclude Frank’s story for ourselves; we take it on, appropriate it, identify with it. ‘To “identify with”’, she writes,

is to become what one is not, to become what one is not is to usurp, to usurp is to own – and who, after all, in the half-century since Miep Gies retrieved the scattered pages of the diary, really owns Anne Frank? Who can speak for her?251

247 Quoted in ibid, p.395.
248 Quoted in ibid, pp.395-396.
249 For more details, see ibid, p.404.
251 Ibid, p.405.
Finally, Ozick figures any attempt at *speaking for* as an evisceration by revision:

Evisceration, an elegy for the murdered. Evisceration by blurb and stage, by shrewdness and naiveté, by cowardice and spirituality, by forgiveness and indifference, by success and money, by vanity and rage, by principle and passion, by surrogacy and affinity. Evisceration by fame, by shame, by blame. By uplift and transcendence. By usurpation.\(^{252}\)

The diary, she surprises herself by concluding, should have been destroyed:

Anne Frank’s diary burned, vanished, lost – saved from a world that made of it all things, some of them true, while floating lightly over the heavier truth of named and inhabited evil.\(^{253}\)

Ozick, an admirer of Roth’s, has very likely read *The Ghost Writer*. Certainly, her article – particularly in the *reductio ad absurdam* of its conclusion – compellingly articulates the ethical crux at the novel’s heart. To write about Frank, as Ozick herself does, might be to appropriate her story – to join the host of those who usurp, own, eviscerate. Not do to so, however, is to allow her to be ‘vanished, lost’. In drafting the novel, Roth works through a number of questions about how to write Anne Frank. How to speak of without claiming to speak for her? How to embody her in one’s own language without sentiment, cliché or appropriation? How to sympathise without overpowering? How to deliver and simultaneously retract her portrayal? He finds his answers, I propose, in the processes of revision.\(^{254}\)

In another of the narrative situations Roth had developed in his drafting of *My Life as a Man*, Zuckerman, in his late 30s, visits a writer-mentor and his wife in their Massachusetts mountain home, where he tells them, at length, the story of his marriage. While there, he lusts after a young student, Amy (who interviews him for *The Paris Review*), whom the older novelist has employed to prepare his papers for archiving in the Library of Congress. He engages Amy in further discussion of his

\(^{252}\) Ibid, p.407.

\(^{253}\) Ibid.

\(^{254}\) In this, Roth’s writing Anne Frank differs crucially to his writing of his marriage: the former has an ethical basis, as well as an ethical resistance, whereas the latter, a result of compulsion, has only ethical resistance.
bad marriage. (There is extensive metacommentary about the reasons for her creation, much of which self-consciously casts her as a redemptive fantasy.) As before, these characters function most of all to provide a narrative frame. Once again, Roth extracts that frame and turns it into its own fiction. Though the particulars will shift from draft to draft, this is the essential setup of *The Ghost Writer* – with two key differences. First, in most of the drafts Zuckerman is not Roth’s age at the time of writing but a young writer just starting out. And second, Amy (here, Amy Bellette), a young European Jewish woman who has moved to America, is notable most of all for her resemblance to Anne Frank.\(^{255}\)

In the earliest standalone drafts, begun sometime in or before 1977, Amy is Anne Frank, alive and living under an alias. But Roth found himself unable to sustain the illusion: his tone, as he came to see it, was artificially respectful, high-minded, reverential. ‘It was taking a high elegiac tone,’ he told Hermione Lee,

> [...] the tone appropriate to hagiography. Instead of Frank gaining new meaning within the context of my story, I was trying to draw from the ready store of stock emotions [...] clinging to cliché while anxiously waiting for something authentic to take hold [...] I was in fact succumbing to [...] the officially authorized and most consoling legend.\(^{256}\)

To break free of that legend, he rewrote the account of her survival in the first person – not because he wanted it to *be* in the first person, but as a ‘sieve’ to sift out ‘[t]he impassioned cadences, the straining emotions, the sombre, overdramatized archaic diction’ – as though attempting, through mimicry, to recover some originary energy – before rewriting the whole account again, in the third person. But in his attempts to recuperate for Frank some kind of authenticity or singularity, Roth has by this point rewritten her, significantly, three times. And with each revision, though he is perhaps approaching a style that more convincingly ventriloquises her, she seems to slip further away. What follows in the archive feels less like an attempt through revision to correct and improve his presentation of her and more like a sustained, laboured wrestling with her absence, her rewrittenness, which becomes

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\(^{255}\) Roth papers, *The Ghost Writer*, 1977-1979, MS, Boxes 91-99. Once again, these characters’ names regularly change. Herewith, unless with explicit reason not to, I will refer to them by the names in the published text.

\(^{256}\) Roth, *Interview with The Paris Review*, p.143.
an attempt to answer the question of who is responsible for the rewriting, who owns
Anne Frank. Her provenance thus becomes unstable. One draft focuses on the older
writer, E.I. Lonoff’s belief that she is delusional and encourages the reader to concur.
In another, however, Zuckerman reads truth in her body and rejects Lonoff’s
scepticism: ‘One glance at the table,’ he says, ‘and I knew she was Anne Frank. It was
no act of impersonation or deception, or “mythopoeic madness” (Lonoff’s phrase).
She was telling him the truth.’\textsuperscript{257} In another, she tells her story herself and even,
though perhaps with some irony, grants Zuckerman permission of ownership:
“’You’re a writer -- write it! [...] You can have the whole story, from beginning to end,
and publish it in the magazine section of the Sunday Times.’”\textsuperscript{258} In another, her
imagined post-war fate is presented as a new story by E.I. Lonoff, inspired by
Bellette but fictional; Lonoff is now the reviser. In yet another, Zuckerman finds a
sketched account of Frank’s survival in Lonoff’s notebook and cannot tell if it is a
diary entry or the draft of a story. The more Roth rewrites Anne Frank, the less able
he is to locate her; ever further from her point of origin, with each new version she
is divided and dispersed through infinitely competing revisions; in this instance,
accumulation becomes prohibitive. Oddly, though, it will only occur to Roth after a
number of other developments that it might be Zuckerman who invents her story,
Zuckerman, the fantasist, who rewrites Anne Frank.

There is a danger, in archival research, of retrospectively imposing a teleology, an
aura of inevitability, on a contingent and thinly evidenced process, as though the
endpoint were always latent in the material, the outcome inevitable. Nevertheless, I
think there are three apparently concurrent developments in the novel’s
composition that might, in combination, have catalysed this late breakthrough.
Gestured at only very slightly in the earliest drafts, all three strands begin to pose
sticky ethical questions about the writing, dissolve into the processes of that writing,
and resolidify as structure. The first such development is the gradual process by
which Roth comes to frame the novel within a biographically-anchored discussion
of the responsibilities of serious American, Jewish authorship in the mid 20th
century. In one early draft, Lonoff’s wife, Hope, has tasked his old friend Nathan

\textsuperscript{257} Roth papers, ‘The Ghost Writer’, 1977-1979, MS c.1979, Box 97, Folder 5.
\textsuperscript{258} Ibid, MS c.1977, Box 97, Folder 10.
Zuckerman with editing a new collection of her late husband’s stories. The draft, as many subsequent drafts will, takes the form of Zuckerman’s introduction to that collection, in which he recounts their first meeting in the mountains. Fittingly, even performatively, Zuckerman begins with a passage about the difficulty of beginning—material which, again fittingly, once Roth has begun, will disappear from subsequent drafts. ‘To write my critical appreciation of Manny Lonoff,’ Zuckerman writes,

I have had to go down into the cellar and take out of the antiquated freezer that came with the house, the first set of composition books I ever used to record what seemed to me then the more unusual (and fictitiously promising) of my experiences. All the abandoned manuscripts and old note books that are stored in the freezer I generally forget about completely when I’m finally at work on a new novel but between books, when the aimless, hopeless months slip by, marked by nothing but the elation and dejection of a hundred false starts, I invariably wind up spending a day […] leafing through [them] in search of something that will make me catch fire, a line of dialogue, a [illegible] to rescue me from the haunting fear that I will never write a readable sentence again.259

One imagines Zuckerman leafing through the drafts of My Life as a Man, but what he picks up is a notebook entitled ‘The Jewish Problem’, which draws substantially from Roth’s experience: it records ‘the early history of the quarrel between myself and the angry Jewish critics who labelled my first fiction “anti-Semitic”’, and contains,

[m]agazine articles attacking me “for feeding the fantasies of the Jew-baiters and the Jew-haters; letters to the editor written about me (or, in my defense, by me); correspondence with rabbis and outraged readers […] pages where I have set down the details of […] my lecture engagements before disgruntled audiences,

and so on.260 Reading through it, Zuckerman regrets having ‘hurt people’s feelings’ and acknowledges his younger self’s pomposity:

259 Ibid, Box 91, Folder 9 (rev. inc.).
260 Ibid.
I refused then even to consider the possibility that I was not on the side of the angels, and with the skill, the thoroughness, and the unworldliness of the ace high school debater, defended my high ethical and spiritual motives from my sceptical readers.\textsuperscript{261}

Channelling ironically his younger self’s high-minded seriousness, Zuckerman appears to pronounce the case against himself closed: he is guilty. The only other, brief reference to ‘The Jewish Problem’ in this draft occurs when Zuckerman recalls his father’s response to an acclaimed story of his, based on a family incident:

"You make everyone seem awfully greedy," he said, handing the pages back to me. "But everybody was," I said, with irritation. "Well that’s not the whole story, son, not by any means," he responded.\textsuperscript{262}

Once again, it is hard to argue with the charge: turning life into fiction entails a selective and limiting revision. The published novel will be structured around an ongoing argument between father and son about the author’s responsibilities to his community – in fact, it will be this argument that sends Zuckerman on his father-seeking trip to the mountains. For now, though, this is its extent. But in the margin, Roth has drawn a line beside these sentences and written, in thick black pen, the word: ‘Jews.’ This, he acknowledges, is not the whole story.

As the drafts develop, a subplot emerges about Zuckerman’s anxieties of Jewish authorship, documented in an undated folder entitled ‘Z and the Jews’ which contains numerous attempts to figure the whole story. In the first, Zuckerman expands on the material from his notebook, explaining how he ‘became the enemy of the Jews’:

Indignant letters denouncing me as “self-hating” and “anti-semitic” began to be received by the editors of the magazine [...] Dozens and dozens of shocked and angry readers -- among them rabbis, judges and officials in the world of organised Jewish affairs -- wrote demanding an explanation why the magazine should have published

\textsuperscript{261} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{262} Ibid.
a story based upon the most obnoxious stereotypes, and which could only do irreparable harm to a people who had already suffered the cruellest and most [illegible] persecution.\textsuperscript{263}

There is a hint of equivocation here, visible in that passive, ‘began to be received by’: Zuckerman is trying to write the people whose feelings he hurt out of his grammar. Further, his sarcastic channelling of these Jewish officials channels, also, some of the self-righteousness of the young man. But, perhaps too expository to be dramatic, he gives up on this straightforward narration and subsequently tries to dramatise the material.

In the version that falls next in the archive (though the sequence may be wrong) Zuckerman (here, Reingold) participates in the symposium Roth had himself attended in 1962. In the question and answer session that follows his interview, he is attacked, as Roth had been, by an angry audience who will not let him leave and who ask many of the same questions that had been asked of Roth. But, although there is some sour hyperbole in their line of questioning (‘If Mr. Reingold had been living in Nazi Germany in the thirties, would he have written the kinds of stories he wrote here?’), Roth takes Reingold’s public critics more seriously in this iteration than he will in the published novel.\textsuperscript{264} One critic has particular gravitas:

The head of white hair. A distinguished elderly gentleman. A vest. An impressive voice. No dope. He took a beat. Then another. Reingold was in trouble now.\textsuperscript{265}

The distinguished gentleman produces five pages of eloquent and measured, if impassioned, censure, taking each of Reingold’s stories in turn – stories that sound identical to those in Goodbye, Columbus. There is, for example, a story about ‘a Jewish soldier named Weisgut’ who

[brings] pressure to bear upon his first sergeant [...] a Jew named Shaw [...] to get special favours done him during wartime by calling upon Shaw’s Jewish fellowfeeling, such as it is.\textsuperscript{266}

\textsuperscript{263} Ibid, MS c.1979, Box 97, Folder 5.
\textsuperscript{264} Ibid, p.9.
\textsuperscript{265} Ibid, p.14.
\textsuperscript{266} Ibid, p.17.
Weisgut, the distinguished gentleman argues, is an anti-Semitic stereotype: greedy, conniving, self-serving. A familiar criticism, but, unlike Roth’s real-life critics, this critic convincingly anticipates Reingold’s response, which sounds very similar to one of Roth’s early responses to the charge: Yes, Weisgut may be depicted unfavourably, but Shaw, his superior, is not; is Reingold not simply showing that Jewish communities are as varied as any other?267 To which the distinguished gentleman says, of Shaw:

What kind of “Jew” is he, anyway? None, really. He is just a regular guy who happens to be Jewish, and because of this -- unfortunate accident of birth, Mr. Reingold? -- because of this he is victimized by a conniving and self-consciously Jewish Jew to whom he is vastly superior.268

The stories, the gentleman concludes, are ‘rich with […] your sense of superiority. Your smugness. Your arrogance.’269 ‘[Y]ou, with your gifts of vision and insight,’ he mocks, ‘have transcended being Jewish.’270 One could argue that his criticisms are based on a misreading of the story. But he is undoubtedly presented as a decorous, eloquent, concerned voice of Jewish citizenry. Not only that: Reingold has no convincing response.

In the version that follows in the archive, the symposium has become an ‘informal discussion’ organised by a Jewish lawyer and led by a judge whose ironic, condescending manner makes him less credible a critic. ‘I am willing to consider you as you consider yourself,’ he tells (now) Zuckerman,

as an artist, as a very special and unique individual […] Great artists, as history shows us, have been persecuted and humiliated by the stupid and uneducated and the frightened, and this from time immemorial […] It might very well be, and I say this in all sincerity, that we gathered here tonight are no better than the fools who persecuted these great men […]271

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267 See Philip Roth, ‘Writing About Jews’ in Reading Myself and Others, pp.193-211.
269 Ibid.
270 Ibid.
271 Ibid, p.179.
Zuckerman’s responses as he listens, however, are now sneering and arrogant. ‘Spare me the wisdom about to hit the fan’, he thinks. And he takes particular issue with the word ‘ethics’:

Ethics? These businessmen and housewives had the nerve to ask him if he had values and ethics? If he knew what self-discipline was? This pious collection of yentas and gonifs, asking him if he had values? These fancy physicians getting twenty-five dollars an office visit, these real estate developers raking in hundreds of thousands of dollars, these blue-haired women with their winter vacations in Puerto Rico [...] He would work an hour on a sentence, a day on a page -- had they ever reflected for more than two seconds on a single word they spoke?

The critic is no longer so credible – a representative of municipal authority, a public figure who has taken it upon himself to speak for the community and direct the behaviour of its members. But Zuckerman matches his pompous rhetoric. Each is now deserving of the other’s (and Roth’s) irony. What began as apparently clear-cut self-criticism – even a mea culpa – is becoming more equivocal.

In the published novel, Roth will have achieved a perfect balance of equivocation: the criticism will be both credible and not, as will the defence: each will have its counterpressure choreographed into the articulation. The criticism will take the form of a letter sent to Zuckerman by a judge called Judge Wapter at the request of his anxious father and will thus emanate from both the public and the private realms. The letter – which repeats much of the rhetorical appeal to the ‘very special and unique’ status of the artist – includes a ‘questionnaire’, an officious mode of presentation that, along with its hyperbole, comically conveys the intransigence of self-elected authority. The first question is the familiar, ‘If you had been living in Nazi Germany in the thirties, would you have written such a story?’ (102) and it reaches a climax with, ‘Can you honestly say that there is anything in your short story that would not warm the heart of a Julius Streicher or Joseph Goebbels?’ (104).

It ends with a telling postscript:

272 Ibid.
273 Ibid, p.177.
P.S. If you have not yet seen the Broadway production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, I strongly advise that you do so. Mrs. Wapter and I were in the audience on opening night; we wish that Nathan Zuckerman could have been with us to benefit from that unforgettable experience. (102)

The criticism is now voiced by a self-interested official whom Roth aligns, in the reference to the play (and the elitist boast about having seen it ‘on opening night’), with what he referred to in his interview with Hermione Lee as the ‘officially authorized’ version of Anne Frank. It is associated, therefore, with those who make palatable the horrors of the Holocaust and claim ownership of its representative victim; those who, like Grossbart in ‘Defender of the Faith’, turn the Holocaust into cultural capital. But crucially, the criticism does not begin there; it begins at home, with Zuckerman’s father, whose anxiety Roth presents sensitively. After a long, testy, conversation between father and son on the subject, Zuckerman, looking out from the back of a bus, has a moment of sympathy with his ‘bewildered father, alone on the darkening street-corner’. (96) The emotional origin of the criticism is presented as authentic, understandable. The criticism is, thus, voiced twice: once with sympathetic credibility, and once with irony. And Roth still gives us plenty to dislike in young Zuckerman’s arrogance. When his mother asks him, for example, ‘where’s your humility, where’s your modesty?’ the adolescent antagonism of his response – ‘What about the judge’s humility? Where’s his modesty?’ – makes it hard to take his side. (106) The balance of equivocation Roth achieves – which allows that people do not hold only one position at any one time – may be visible in what happens to that first comment of Zuckerman’s father: *that’s not the whole story*. In the published novel he still voices the frustration: ‘The fact remains, son, there is more to the family, much much more, than is in this story.’ (87) But he voices it now alongside an opposing frustration: ‘Well, Nathan [...] you certainly didn’t leave anything out, did you?’ (85) The two statements are irreconcilable; they revise one another indefinitely.

In foregrounding and making ambivalent the moral pressures of Jewish authorship, Roth finally produces the solution (or, a solution) to the question of who owns Anne Frank. In a letter to his editor, Aaron Asher, of 22nd November 1978, he describes his late breakthrough:
I’ve seen the light, here in dark London. What an ass I’ve been [...] 

Anne Frank is *all* Zuckerman’s invention -- he needs to invent her, to save himself from (the world of) his father and judges, etc. His fear of them is what accounts for his invention -- which also encompasses his Jewish feeling. Now the story is from beginning to end about looking for a moral sponsor [...] 

I never liked trying to make her *real*. She is real in his imagination. Zuckerman inventing it all -- oh how lovely.274

It is precisely the revision towards ambivalence -- the combination of Zuckerman’s ‘Jewish feeling’ and his desire to escape from his Jewish ties -- that prompts both Zuckerman’s fantasy and Roth’s breakthrough, allowing the early struggles of the novel’s composition to become its moral framework.

The second significant development in Roth’s drafting is the increasing emphasis he places on the subject of revision itself. The first overt mention of revision I can place in the archive is a small detail from one of the earliest drafts in which Hope Lonoff, long after her husband’s death, describes his writing process in exasperation: ‘The care he took with every page! The draft on yellow paper, the draft on orange paper, the draft on white!’275 At this stage, revision appears to function mainly to characterise Lonoff’s fastidiousness (and, in his wife’s exasperation, something of their relationship). He would not have appreciated the indiscretion: his is an aesthetic that seeks to hide its processes. ‘I should have chucked all those drafts out long ago,’ Zuckerman remembers him saying in one draft. ‘All that need to exist are the books.’276 A little later: ‘Nathan […] when you finish a story, remember, throw all the work sheets away.’277 But as Roth continues to struggle with the novel’s composition, so Zuckerman ignores this advice and allows revision to enter his world in different ways. About halfway through the drafting of the novel, for example, at the end of a bundle of pages on which he rewrites the same single paragraph (about the life of a door-to-door encyclopaedia salesman) again and again

275 Ibid, MS c.1977, Box 91, Folder 9, p.8. 
277 Ibid, p.64.
and again with only minor variations and apparently no satisfaction, Roth gives up and writes instead the following description of a work of art Zuckerman notices on Lonoff’s wall:

The only picture on the one bookless wall was a reproduction of a greyish, geometric still life: some small undefined bottles on an empty table top. It was signed "Morandi". I did not know then that Morandi, shifting only infinitesimally its formal elements from one painting to the next, painted the same cryptic picture again and again and again [...].

Morandi will not make it into the published book but his inclusion here is suggestive of how the writing process enters the novel. It is as though Roth is building Zuckerman’s material world out of his writing processes: when he began the book, coming at the project cold (or: returning to material he had kept on ice), Zuckerman was opening a freezer and thinking of beginning. Here, Roth is deep into an unproductive revision, and Zuckerman is looking at a depiction of obsessive revision (though it is only the older writer who knows that that is what it is) on a ‘bookless’ wall, the adjective conveying perhaps some of Roth’s frustration: there is no book.

This development in Roth’s world-building – a world made from rewriting – extends to his writing of Anne Frank, whose rewrittenness begins to rise to the surface of the fiction. In a key moment in one draft, before he has become her author, Zuckerman first expresses an urge to revise Frank, to continue the end of her diary in much the way Ozick describes:

To her last words -- written on the Tuesday before the Friday the Franks were discovered and taken away -- I want to append a paraphrase of Kafka’s words, to stand as the epigraph to her victimhood and innocence, “Someone must have falsely traduced Anne F., because one morning without having done anything wrong she was placed under house arrest.”

These words in fact originate in a long, adulatory letter about Frank Roth writes to his friend Jack Miles, in which he describes her ‘tragedy’ as

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278 Ibid, Folder 11, p.81.
279 Ibid, Folder 8.
more of an absurdist tragedy (like The Trial) than a Jewish tragedy -- again, I am speaking from the point of view of the “innocent” reader. "Someone must have traduced Anne. F., for one morning the police etc...." Rather than, “Once upon a time, a young Jewess living in Holland was arrested [...] 

What began, then, as an expressive authorial impulse to rewrite Frank is now diegetically expressed, Roth’s own authorial desire represented in the text. In the published novel, Zuckerman, now Frank’s author, will say these words directly to Amy Bellette after he has spun his fiction about her, who will simply ignore him; the sentiment will fall on deaf ears. (170) Zuckerman’s attempt to rewrite Frank so that she fits into his personal literary canon will thus be insufficient, issueless, failed. Through framing her story as a story about revision, about being revised, and about his own desire to revise her, Roth allows her possibility of resistance. The gesture thus contains both the confidence of the original expression (Roth is, after all, still rewriting Anne Frank in his own image, still turning her into an object of desire) and a counterpressure that undermines, or uncreates that expression.

Unlike Tarnopol’s wife, Maureen, in My Life as a Man, in Amy Bellette/Anne Frank, Roth has created a character whose purpose and being is her rewrittenness; she exists less at the crux of an ethical dilemma, as Maureen does, than as a fictional being made from the stuff of that dilemma. Thus, Roth’s Frank, in the published novel, is surrounded by revisers – often in the guise of protectors, carers. Roth draws an association between their care and the overpowering mimicry, the revision of narrative empathy. Indeed, those who seem the most empathetic are, in Bellette/Frank’s eyes, the guiltiest. She recalls, for example, walking out of a performance of The Diary of Anne Frank because she was disturbed by the displays of empathy: ‘The women cried,’ she tells Lonoff. ‘Everyone around me was in tears. Then at the end, in the row behind me, a woman screamed, “Oh, no.” That’s why I came running here.’ (123) The empathy is intrusive, even literally so. ‘Now people came every day,’ Zuckerman says in the published novel,

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280 Ibid, correspondence, 2 December 1997, Box 91, Folder 8.
to visit their secret hideaway and to look at the photographs of the movie stars that she’d pinned to the wall beside her bed. They came to see the tub she had bathed in and the table where she’d studied. They looked out of the loft window where Peter and she had cuddled together watching the stars. They stared at the cupboard camouflaging the door the police had come through to take them away. They looked at the open pages of her secret diary [...] (149)

Her ‘open’ diary is ‘secret’: Roth acknowledges this, here, even as he takes us into her private realm. He is – we are – invading her privacy. We step intrusively behind that concealing cupboard, wanting to see what she saw, feel what she felt, even imaginatively to enter her consciousness. But what we see there is half our own invention. We usurp, as Ozick has it, with our imagination. For Roth’s Frank, it is an experience not unlike evisceration:

I felt flayed. I felt as though the skin had been peeled away from half my body. Half my face had been peeled away, and everybody would stare in horror for the rest of my life [...] I will always be this half-flayed thing. (152)

This is finally the reason for her decision to live under an alias: she wants to recuperate herself from these revisions, to revise herself on her own terms; to revise Anne Frank like everyone else. ‘Their Anne Frank is theirs,’ she says. ‘I’d like at last to be my own.’ (154) But, of course, that the second chance Roth has given her is an illusion is at the heart of the novel’s power. In reality, Anne Frank cannot escape her final revision: the number burned over her name and onto her skin, a revision Roth boldly imagines her trying to erase with an iron, leaving ‘a patch of purple scar tissue about half the size of an egg instead of her camp number’. (131) An egg; a new birth, a regeneration; but she has branded herself with erasure.

In the published novel, there is hardly an interaction unaccompanied by some gesture towards the work of revision, from Lonoff’s monotonous habit of ‘turn[ing] sentences around’ (17) to the many letters Zuckerman writes. Of his first letter to Lonoff, for example, he says:
Everything undeniably true struck me as transparently false as soon as I wrote it down [...] I finally sent him the tenth draft and then tried to stick my arm down the throat of the mailbox to extract it. (8)

Or, of his letters to his father: ‘I began letter after letter explaining myself to my father, but each time [...] I tore the thing up in rage.’ (109) Just as any conception of another person, however compassionate, is for Roth a revision – ‘we are all the invention of each other,’ writes Zuckerman in a later novel, The Counterlife (1986) – so any narrative expression of the self – that is, any utterance – is, too, a revision intended to cover over some essential lacuna. (149) Zuckerman learns this, as Stephen Milowitz has it, from Anne Frank; it is she who ‘teaches Zuckerman [...] that images are controlled and redefined by each storyteller, each reader and performer’. 281 Perhaps Roth learned it from her too.

Finally, revision becomes a structural principle. Frank’s survival is, in the published novel, presented to the reader, at first, as an authentic part of the novel’s diegesis: we believe Amy Bellette to be Anne Frank, in the terms of the fiction, until we discover, only in the following chapter, that what we have just read is a story written by Zuckerman. The novel revises its parameters. It doing so, it creates an experience of revision through which Anne Frank does, in real time, as Roth put it in his Paris Review interview, ‘gain new meaning’.

The last significant, connected development is Roth’s thematic admittance of doubt into the novel. In one of the earliest drafts, Zuckerman, as he will in most subsequent drafts, notices an unspecified quotation from Rousseau’s Confessions pinned to a noticeboard in Lonoff’s study. 282 In the published novel, however, the quotation is from Henry James’s story, ‘The Middle Years’. In the story, an ageing novelist, Dencombe, convalescing in Bournemouth from a serious illness, sits on a favourite bench looking out to sea, reading through an advanced copy of what he fears might be his last book, The Middle Years. A passing young doctor, Doctor Hugh – coincidentally a well-connected fan of Dencombe’s, who has also received an advanced copy of the novel, which he has already finished – recognises the book,

281 Milowitz, Philip Roth Considered, p.181.
though not its author, and strikes up conversation. ‘Inflamed with passion for The Middle Years,’ Zuckerman summarises,

Dr. Hugh opens the book to read aloud a particularly beautiful passage; but, having mistakenly seized Dencombe’s copy rather than his own, he discovers that the printed text has been altered in a dozen places by a pencil. (114)

It is a shock. Keston Sutherland has written of revision that it is

not a jump from one category or judgement into another – from wrong words into right words, say. What happens to the lines from the point of view of their author is that they reemerge back into originality [...] into the illumination of a new doubtfulness full of potential happiness.283

This is something like what Doctor Hugh observes: from a fixed object, the text has become fluid and unstable in front of his eyes, as though his is now ‘the point of view of the author’, revealing itself in the natural condition of doubt which the mechanics and materials of publication work to veil. The two men strike up a friendship and with Doctor Hugh’s encouragement Dencombe, “a passionate corrector” never able to arrive at a final form, (114) begins to evaluate his life’s work. He comes to think of his career as an apprenticeship: if only he had a second chance, if only he could revisit and revise his life’s utterance. The words Lonoff has pinned up above his desk (emboldened below) occur in one of Dencombe’s and Doctor Hugh’s exchanges on the subject of doubt, in which Dencombe begins to come to terms with the belatedness of the revisionary impulse. ‘A second chance,’ he says,

“– that’s the delusion. There never was to be but one. We work in the dark – we do what we can – we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.”

“If you’ve doubted, if you’ve despaired, you’ve always ‘done’ it,” his visitor subtly argued.

“We’ve done something or other,” Dencombe conceded. (116)

What Dencombe may be coming to ‘concede’ is that doubting in fact constitutes the writer’s doing. The utopian fiction-making impulse is an impulse to rethink, reframe, rework; it is an impulse of doubt. But, as a final form is unreachable, revision thus interminable, writing contains a perpetual future of revision, its ‘potential happiness’, precisely in its doubt.

When Roth changes the quotation on Lonoff’s noticeboard from one of confession to one of revisionary doubt, he seems to have worked out the novel’s identity. In an undated note, in excited capitals, he comes to the conclusion that what should lie at its heart is an ethical kind of doubt:

STORY ABOUT THE LONELINESS + ISOLATION OF WRITERS AND THE DOUBTS WRITERS HAVE ABOUT THE EFFICACY OF WHAT THEY’RE DOING.284

And as he redrafts the novel, such doubt floods in: sentences begin to appear that comment reflexively on Roth’s anxieties about the efficacy of what he’s doing: ‘Oh the dirty, prying business this is,’ Zuckerman declares in one draft; ‘[t]he uses to which we put people! Stealing their words, their troubles, stealing their very lives’.285 Indeed, this ethical self-consciousness is most manifest at those moments at which Roth tries to imagine some kind of authentic point of view for Anne Frank. In one early draft, Frank reads the literary pages of the New York Times and reflects scornfully on the reviews of

novels that were said to be moving and enlightening and unusual and of great consequence to the reading public, not one of which could possibly be of greater consequence than her diary “posthumously” published around the world.286

In the published text, her hostility towards contemporary fiction will have intensified; the books she reads about are now ‘insipid best-sellers from which real people learned about fake people who could not exist and would not matter if they did.’ (148) The conditional tense – could not rather than do not – is conclusive:

284 Ibid, MS c.1979, Box 97, Folder 6.
285 Ibid, MS c.1977, Box 91, Folder 10.
novels cannot approximate (or appropriate) real people, real suffering; her diary can. Roth’s efforts are therefore, by association, undermined. But the aesthetic of doubt Roth is fashioning means that the undermining emerges in and is even indivisible from a positive, considered, constructive and morally serious depiction of an other person who has suffered unthinkably.

Roth’s Frank is not blithely confident of the efficacy of her own book, either. She, too, is a Denombian reviser after the fact: we see her, too, pencil in hand, marking up her published book on a favourite bench. (133) And she, too, has ethical authorial anxieties. Here are two passages from different drafts, both responses to the question, ‘What then would happen once her book had been read?’

The first passage will appear, condensed, in the published novel; (147) the second will not:

Her responsibility was to the bones and the ashes, her loyalty was to the skulls – to restore to them the human status and the human credibility. What effect that might have upon the heart of people whom she once pronounced so good at heart was simply not her affair. There was a fundamental point to be made about these slaughtered Jews and she would make it: they had been people too. Yes, she Anne Frank she would resurrect the dead, for whatever it was worth to the dead, in print.

What if her book could make those who read it less impervious to human suffering? What if she succeeded, if only for the length of time that it took to read the book, in arousing their compassion? What if this impulse towards goodness, towards tenderness and kindness and charity, were shared, if only for an hour, by a million people, who afterwards went back to being themselves with their own moral inclinations unchanged and intact? Was that enough? Was that anything? [...] Yes, she thought bitterly. It would be something indeed to let them know, if only for one hour, what goodness was – so that they might understand what it was to live without it. As if they could understand that! Still, the point would have been made and by someone with the credentials to make it. And the desire. Let her book judge them and condemn them -- the better to hate them with all her heart! That was the least -- and the worst -- that could happen. And the most? The most was the most, of course: she could change human life for the better; she could awaken conscience,

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287 Ibid, p.44.
288 Ibid.
nurture compassion, kindle sympathy, strengthen human resolve; she could restore human status and credibility to the corpses and the ashes and the bones; and she could restore a purpose to her own life that justified [illegible] her strange survival. She would no longer be Amy Bellette for no defensible reason.289

Though this later text will not appear in the novel, its prose is telling of the direction of Roth’s revisions. He has begun to weave into Frank’s interiority something of his own doubt: ‘The point will have been made by someone with the credentials to make it,’ Bellette thinks, implying that Roth does not have the credentials. ‘She would no longer be Amy Bellette for no defensible reason,’ it concludes, implying that her fictionalisation is not defensible. She is looking for a ‘purpose [...] that justified [...] her strange survival’ because Roth’s strange text is not yet justifiable. Roth finally finds Frank’s voice, that is, as he begins to locate himself in his mimicry – to acknowledge that it is a performance, a revision, that it is he who is rewriting her. Sentences like these begin to function as both transgression and confession. But they have another function, too: they articulate, powerfully and unsentimentally, in a conditional future tense the value of Frank’s work. Though transgressive, they also have an ethical function. The prose, through revision, comes to push and pull, to box and erase, to deliver and retract in a way that transcends such binaries. If human interaction is based on revision – if identity is revision, if empathy is revision – and if revision is mimicry, usurpation, appropriation – then the novelist can only transgress. But if the writer can create a self-doubting aesthetic, The Ghost Writer suggests, can create a fictional mode that confesses as it transgresses, that confesses through transgression, and in doing so can limn the space for different, better versions of itself – multiple future revisions, future drafts, potential happiness – then, rather than creating an efficacious fiction that does good in the world, the good that fiction can do is scrupulously to consider all the good it is not yet doing.

289 Ibid, Folder 10, pp.132-133.
vi. ‘This obsessive reinvention of the real’

In *The Counterlife* (1986), Roth takes his thinking about revision to its extreme, allowing it to become the fiction’s guiding principle, beyond even the conventions of narrative. One can see this structurally, for instance, in the development from the first to the second chapter. The first recounts Zuckerman’s brother, Henry’s funeral after his death during heart surgery. But partway through the second chapter (which does not, to begin with, mention Henry), a reader encounters the following sentence: ‘Until his trip to Israel eight months after the bypass surgery, my brother, Henry, had never shown any interest at all in the country’s existence’. (61) Formerly a contented family man, a well-assimilated dentist, Henry has survived the surgery, changed his name to Hanoch and joined an Israeli settlement as a militant Zionist. The diegetic and extra-diegetic revisions are synchronous: just as the novel has revised its parameters, so Henry has engaged in a process of ‘Jewish renewal and ethical transformation’. (140) This is the logic of *The Counterlife*, a novel that proceeds by means of what Zuckerman refers to as ‘[t]his obsessive reinvention of the real’. (251) It is a dizzying entanglement of revisionary stories that never quite meet. Each story functions differently, hopes for a different efficacy, but rarely has the foreseen effect; stories that appears to have one function turn out to have another. The comic opening of the novel, for instance, in which Zuckerman recounts his brother’s extra-marital affairs, is revealed, in the following section, to be the text of a eulogy he intends to deliver at Henry’s funeral.

Eulogy is one of the novel’s key narrative forms. To revise, the implication is, is to eulogise, is to have the final word after a death. To eulogise, to have the power of ultimate expression, is the ultimate power. Thus, the novel repeatedly figures revision as an act of violence: it is the terrorist’s bomb, the fundamentalist’s bullets, the Zionist’s settlements. Henry is radicalised by a man named Mordecai Lippman who, as a friend of Zuckerman’s puts it, does not only embody ‘the power of the will to remake reality’ but also ‘the power of the pistol to remake reality.’ (151-152) In one chapter, Zuckerman himself dies on the operating table and Henry delivers a eulogy at *his* funeral. As he speaks, Henry finds himself pronouncing sentences he does not mean to say, as though his words are being rewritten as he speaks them: sentences ‘just [slip] out’; (220) ‘[h]e was [...] not entirely in control. Something else was.’ (224) It is as though Zuckerman is writing his own eulogy, his power total.
Indeed, a few pages later, Henry considers his brother in terms that recall Irving Howe: ‘his version, his interpretation, his picture refuting and impugning everyone else’s and swarming over everything!’ (235 – emphasis in original).

If, in The Counterlife, to write is to remake and to remake is to distort, mutilate, kill, then the writer is inevitably an abuser of power. But the novel hopes, too, to see in each death the possibility of a birth, one which escapes the writer’s grasp. It attempts continually to find a way to reach beyond the authoritarian finality of eulogy. After Zuckerman’s funeral, for instance, Henry breaks into his brother’s flat and discovers what appears to be the manuscript – a second draft, with notes for revision – of the book we are reading. (229) Henry reads through the material about his extra-marital affairs, his radicalisation in Israel, and recognizes nothing: ‘No mind on earth,’ he thinks, ‘could have been more alien to him than the mind revealed to him by this book’. (234) In anger, Henry himself revises: he rips out any pages he deems problematic. The reader is left asking: What version of those chapters have I read? Have I seen those pages Henry has ripped out? Have Zuckerman’s notes for revision been incorporated? We have no way of knowing, in other words, in the terms of the fiction, if we are in the future or the past, before or after revision. On Zuckerman’s desk, Henry also finds a draft of another eulogy, in Zuckerman’s hand, that has just been given, by Zuckerman’s editor, at Zuckerman’s funeral. Again, Zuckerman appears to have had the last word. Again, the text Henry finds is provisional, full of ‘marginal emendations and insertions, lines crossed out and rewritten.’ (235) As when Doctor Hugh picks up Dencombe’s copy of The Middle Years, when Henry sees the draft, the eulogy’s fixity is unravelled. Rather than the final word it becomes a text with a history of revision and the possibility of a future, even though its author can revise it no more. This is the textual condition to which The Counterlife aspires: a form that, although full of eulogies, although inevitably single-authored and finished, does not eulogise.

Part of what is at stake is the question that causes Portnoy such anxiety: whether identity is – or, should be – internally or externally fashioned. Portnoy strives for an idealistic American individualism and tries to run from his Jewishness but finds himself unable to escape its claim on him. In The Counterlife, in one chapter at least, Henry attempts, conversely, to subsume his individual will to a collective Jewish
identity. 'The hell with me,' he says to Zuckerman, 'forget me. [...] Me no longer exists out here'. (109) 'Not me,' Zuckerman extrapolates, 'we. That's where Henry's me had gone.' (110) Though it is aware of the political danger of this kind of collective identity, aware that forms of totalitarianism require that their subjects yield their individual right to self-fashioning to a higher authority, this novel suggests that it is a yielding for which everyone, one way or another, yearns. Even Zuckerman, who in the final chapter moves to Chiswick to live with an English woman, Maria, and become the family man he had always striven not to be, finds himself, alienated by London's casual anti-Semitism, yearning for this kind of tribal belonging, wanting 'to be the tiniest component of something immense', (262) and ends the novel with a defence of circumcision: a mark of revision, a violent revisionary act that puts its stamp on an individual's identity from the outside. No longer solely the means of putting the self into the world, as Portnoy had wanted it to be, the penis, here, is also where his externally-fashioned identity is made visible: 'The heavy hand of human values falls upon you right at the start, marking your genitals as its own.' (327)

Yet the novel's revisionary method ensures that the reader is aware throughout that this is only one possible conception of identity. It may be where the novel ends up, but ending, it also suggests, is inconclusive. Thus Roth moves his exploration of identity beyond the limits of the binary he had established in Portnoy's Complaint and uses a different (and, crucially, unisex) organ to frame his presentation of the subject. The Counterlife, that is, is concerned with mouths. Henry's affair with his dental assistant, Wendy, which is centred around oral sex, is predicated on a shared interest in the psychology of the mouth. '[H]ow you feel about your smile,' Wendy says, 'is a reflection of how you feel about yourself and what you present to other people [...] You're dealing in a dental office with the whole person'. (36) Your mouth is who you are,' as Zuckerman says in The Anatomy Lesson. (278) And while, in Portnoy's Complaint, there appeared to be some substance, some essence to identity, '[t]he mouth,' as Henry puts it, 'is a hollow, the mouth is nothing.' (37) The mouth is the point of mediation between the inside and the outside; it both empties and replenishes, delivers and retracts. It might be an empty space but it is, at the moment of speech, full; words fill it up but have no quiddity, no essence; they exist in the moment of externalisation, which is also the moment of internalisation, and then vanish irretraceably. The next time they come out, they are different – even
if the same. Voice becomes the substance of identity. Or, as Zuckerman says, ‘If there even is a natural being, an irreducible self’ then it is ‘the root of all impersonation – the natural being may be the skill itself, the innate capacity to impersonate’. (324) Thus identity can exist in infinite possible versions, is a process of non-teleological revision. ‘The burden,’ Zuckerman thinks, ‘isn’t either/or, consciously choosing from possibilities equally difficult and regrettable – it’s and/and/and/and/and as well. Life is and’. (310) Counterlives, thus, in The Counterlife, do not correct but proliferate; they multiply indefinitely. The psychological cause and effect of the novel form has yielded to a kind of knowing that proceeds as accumulative revisionary provisionality, embracing revision not as a process of trial and error building towards a perfected state, but as a multiplication, a perpetual dying and a perpetual birthing, fostering a mode of fiction that creates and uncreates itself simultaneously, constructs itself through self-undermining.

In the decade following The Counterlife, Roth all but moved away from fiction; the conception of the human subject he seemed to have arrived at – that the mask is the subject and that the mask is perpetually revised – may have proved too difficult a conception to house in a form associated with singularity, with fixed psychology and emotional cause and effect – what Henry, in Israel, refers to as the ‘Freudian lock’ that Zuckerman ‘put[s] on every single person's life’. (144) In 1988, he published a memoir, in dialogue with Zuckerman, The Facts; in 1990, he published a slim novella, Deception, taking the form of a writer, Philip's notebooks towards a novel that sounds very much like The Counterlife; in 1991, he published Patrimony, a (relatively) straightforward memoir about his late father; and, in 1993, he published perhaps his most experimental book, blending fictional and non-fictional elements, Operation Shylock, in which a man called Philip Roth, who has much of Roth's biography, becomes embroiled with an antagonist called Philip Roth, who does not. When, in 1995, Roth does return to a purely fictional mode, it is with a novel of intense scepticism, of pure negation, whose third-person narrator is entirely distrustful of the cause and effect of psychological explanation and seeks to dismantle its structures at every moment.

In Sabbath's Theater (1995), Mickey Sabbath – a malignant Dionysian vortex of a character – tends to send those who spend too much time around him, in
particular young women, to therapy. There, as Sabbath sees it, they are encouraged to invent necessarily limited, erroneous accounts of their emotional development; they must reduce the infinite possible versions of themselves to one officially authorized version: ‘I have to tell “My Story,”’ says Sabbath’s wife, Roseanna, where the capitalisation (unspeakable; thus Sabbath’s) and inverted commas bear the stamp of authorized singularity. (258) Sabbath is consistently dismissive of such storytelling; when Roseanna encourages him to look for the ‘pattern’ in his life, he responds, with ironic alliteration: ‘[a] pattern is what is printed on a piece of cloth. We are not cloth’. (91) ‘[A]s for the “pattern governing a life,” he again alliterates, ‘it’s commonly called chaos.’ (91) Sabbath’s Theater is a novel of self-erasure, a book about masculine overpowering that continually rubs itself out. Thus, for instance, a passage of defined interiority undermines itself by concluding: ‘this is more or less what he was thinking’. (145) Or pathetic fallacy is revealed as overdetermined: ‘The rain bestowed more meaning than was necessary. That was realism for you.’ (353) Sentences proceed by self-undermining: ‘Unlike this neighbours (if Sabbath could be said to consider anyone anywhere a neighbour) […]’ (190) Or, at one point the prose blooms into Joyceanism –

Lamppost sex sale naked girl silhouette phone number whats that say I speak Hindi Urdu and Bangla well that leave me out shiksa Mount Rushmore Ava Gardner Sinja Henir Ann-Margret Yvonne de Carlo strike Ann-Margret Grace Kelly she is the Abraham Lincoln of shiksas (190)

– before continuing: ‘So Sabbath passing the time, pretending to think without punctuation, the way J. Joyce pretended people thought’. (198) Sabbath’s mantra is, indeed, an almost-reversal of Joyce: ‘and no I said no I will No’. (335) But in not turning ‘will’ into ‘won’t’, the reversal even negates its negation. Even nihilism itself is erased in this novel: ‘If he no longer gave a shit, why did he give a shit?’ (205) ‘For every thought a counterthought’ the narrator understands; ‘for every urge a counterurge’. (158)

Yet Sabbath’s Theater does not present an alternative to the fixed psychology of the novel form. Its central irony is that, sceptical throughout of pattern, the novel patterns itself so consistently around erasure. Sabbath’s Theater does not function
as an anti-novel; it functions as a playful realist novel whose habitual self-negation creates the impression of a depressed, nihilistic consciousness rather than that of no consciousness at all. Indeed, the novel offers a sensitively plausible explanation for Sabbath’s hedonistic sadism in its accounts of his mother’s traumatic withdrawal after his brother’s death in WWII. It rejects its apparent rejection of explanatory psychology, that is, making the rejection, instead, fundamental to its explanatory psychology. The novel is caught, in other words, in the ‘Freudian lock’.

At one point, Sabbath mockingly claims that, for his wife’s therapist, ‘the answer to every question is either Prozac or incest’. (287) The joke looks forward to Roth’s next book; the answer American Pastoral puts forward to its central question is, as we have seen, incest, positing a direct link from the erotic encounter between Merry and her father to her setting off of the bomb. What is remarkable, as I will conclude by arguing, is that Roth eventually finds a way to make the novel work by continuing to offer incest as an answer without blunting Sabbath’s revisionary scepticism, but also allowing Merry to slip free of the Freudian lock. He does so by making it a book about its own, long revision history.

vii. ‘the reign of error’

From American Pastoral’s earliest drafts, Roth seems to have struggled with the question of how to write benign and normative privilege from the inside, how to make such a character interesting and sympathetic enough that the tragedy of his story – the introduction of chaos into an ordered, contented life – resonates, whilst also ensuring that, as Debra Shostak has it in her discussion of the drafts, he ‘retain[s] the impenetrable otherness of the ordinary’.290 In the earliest drafts, the Levov character, as we have seen, is a man of blinkered and even callous success. His energies are focussed on self-protection (one draft projects an ending consisting of a long description of a new home security system); his sympathies are ignorant of whatever network of responsibilities he might reside within. He is, in short, banal, unlikeable, uncompelling: an unpromising subject of fiction. As one of the drafts of My Life as a Man asks of an early Zuckerman,

290 Shostak, Countertexts, Counterlives, p.242.
[w]hatever Zuckerman set out to do, he did; whatever Zuckerman wanted, he got. Was this the stuff of which fiction is made? Where was the conflict + complexity? [...] Where was the depth? 291

These questions will recur, as we shall see, in the published text.

Many of its earliest drafts are written in the first person and thus the necessary elucidation of the character’s achievements and satisfactions comes across, on the one hand, as smug, self-satisfied, boastful, and on the other, ironic. Here is a passage, for example, from a folder marked ‘First Draft’, in which Levov remembers announcing to his parents his decision to take over the family business:

It was surely the most emotional moment of our lives. Both agreed that I was “the best son God had ever made.” I hugged them as though they were children and I the parent and said, “I’m only doing what I want to do.”

My mother, who always had a taste for hagiography where I’m concerned, began to recount all the other saintly acts I had performed from as far back as I could remember. “You didn’t even have to be asked,” she said, about my willingness to go to the synagogue on the high holidays and sit there with my grandfather. Nor did I have ever to be asked to take my elderly grandmother to the bus stop and wait with her for the Number 8 to come and take her home [...] 292

He proceeds to instantiate a lifetime of virtuous self-sacrifice. And while there may be a degree of modesty in his insistence that he is ‘only doing what I want to do’, or in the reference to his mother’s ‘taste for hagiography’, and while there may be a degree of self-irony in the list of ‘saintly acts’, it becomes so long that we begin to wonder why such acts need to be instantiated, if not to impress. In another early draft, Levov recalls watching his future wife in a play about

a blustering stockbroker who trampled on everyone’s feelings and eventually had his comeuppance when out of spite, his daughter allowed herself to be seduced and impregnated by a Yorkshire scoundrel, toward whom his literary son -- also out of spite -- had simultaneously developed a carnal passion. 293

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291 Roth papers, ’My Life as a Man’, 1968-1974, MS c.1968, Box 142, Folder 3, p.490 (rev. inc.).
293 Ibid, p.20.
It is clear that Roth intends to draw at least a partial parallel between his portrait of Levov and this other avatar of ‘paternal capitalism’ (witness how Levov’s tortuous passive, ‘allowed herself [...] to be impregnated by’, grammatically repeats those structures). But the problem recurs: how to do so from within Levov’s obliviousness; how to write about his privilege both sympathetically and with moral perspective from within that privilege. In the pages that follow, Roth tries a number of different formulations for Levov’s response to the play, each in its own way defensive. Immediately, he writes:

I detested them, as I do today, the clichés of the blind and destructive man of finance, and his savaged, wonderful sensitive children. It is an insidious myth.

But he leaves the last sentence unfinished and crosses it out. He begins two further sentences, also crossed out – ‘I did not know then just how sustaining’ and ‘I myself happen from experience to have had first hand’ – and then attempts a more even-handed tack:

I did not then, any more than I do today, argue that there are [sic] unfeeling parents whose heartlessness can only take its toll on may take a terrible toll on their children -- what I detested then, as I do now, was the assumption that the play in question raised the an assumption, from which the play proceeded that a man of wealth means had necessarily [?]inadvertently to be destructive to the human feeling in himself and others. I thought the play, like the insidious proletariat legend which from which it arose to be more the product of perverse and murderous envy, than of art. That the Yorkshire lout was from the lower classes, I took to be an attempt at disguising behind a generalised misanthropy, etc. [sic]

The sloppiness of the writing, and the final abandonment of the ‘etc.’, suggest that Roth is just not sure how to have Levov respond to the play. Any moral perspective he may want to communicate gets lost in the character’s labyrinthine and unlikeable defensiveness. Elsewhere, he experiments with the depiction of avoidance: Levov simply pushes out of his mind anything that might lead to inner struggle, discontent,

\[294\] Ibid.
disturbance – as when, reflecting on the troubled relationship between his wife and daughter, he wonders,

> What is her grievance against this remarkable woman? That she is too remarkable, not remarkable enough? Or is it sufficient unto itself that her mother is her mother, that her father is her father and that she is their offspring? I do not know that it is a question worth pursuing.\(^2^9^6\)

Skirting around the edges of revelation, Levov retreats. Roth has struggled to find a way to portray his ignorance (and all that it is ignorant of) from the inside without simply repeating it, making it seem willed rather than ingenuous, glossing it in an irony that obstructs our sympathies, or delivering it with a self-irony that implies too much perspective. Were the character to have remained as he is in these early drafts, a reader may well have felt that he is in need of some kind of shock to wake him up.

In the published novel, the gap between the idealised form of the character and his unlikeable reality will have become a crucial aspect of the fiction. While remaining Levov (now, Seymour), the character has also become ‘the Swede’, a childhood hero of Zuckerman’s (who now narrates – who seems, in fact, to be always a product of revision, less an autobiographical stand-in, an ‘alter-ego’ than a personification of Roth’s compositional processes), whose sporting prowess and all-American good looks allowed, as Zuckerman has it, his Jewish community to enter into ‘a fantasy about itself’, a dream of assimilation to distract from the contemporaneous Jewish persecution in Europe. (3) The Swede was, in his youth, a star baseball player, a sport Roth describes in *The Facts* as ‘a great secular nationalist church from which nobody had ever seemed to suggest that Jews would be excluded.’ (32) In situating Levov within this kind of secular belief system, making him mythic, Roth is able to give the character – at the start of the novel, at least – a second identity that exceeds the reach of realist interiority. The nickname bespeaks not individual but tribal identity: it was ‘a magic name in our Newark neighbourhood’; (3) it ‘made him mythic in a way that Seymour would never have done.’ (207) When Zuckerman remembers him, it is as a minor divinity performing

\(^2^9^6\) Ibid, p.19.
rites of ‘glorification’ and ‘sanctification’ through his sporting efforts, his triumphs met with the ‘rhythmic, foot-stomping tribute’ of the cheerleaders, a ‘frenzied adoration […] ecstatically discharged’. (4) In this guise he is all rigid surface, all collectivity: his face does not speak of an interior but is a ‘steep-jawed, insentient Viking mask’. (3) Thus, the narration makes no claim to insight and allows that the character has been rewritten, externally refashioned, by his community. To begin with, then, Roth circumnavigates the problem of depicting privilege from within by simply not doing so; as one of his notes puts it, his mode, at this stage, is ‘[t]ragedy without consciousness.’

This is only, however, how Zuckerman remembers Levov. Reality irrupts when, a few weeks after Memorial Day 1995 (29th May: roughly, or perhaps even exactly when Roth restarted work on the novel after so many years, the end of the first draft dated to 26th July 1995), Zuckerman receives a letter from the man himself, asking to meet: he wants, he writes, some advice on a writing project. Curious, Zuckerman agrees and, on encountering the Swede after so many years, is surprised to find not the hero he remembers but a bore. ‘[F]rom the appetizer through to dessert’, Levov bores Zuckerman with photographs of his children and lists of their achievements; he rants about the decline of Newark’s manufacturing base and the city’s subsequent racial tensions from a position of defensiveness verging on racism. (24-26) Throughout the scene, Zuckerman signals his lack of interest in the character with lacunae. Of Levov’s children, for example: ‘one was “into” the sciences, another was more “community-minded,” while the third …etc.’ (23 – ellipsis in original) Or, of his sexism about his wife: ‘The boys were lucky to have a mom who still put staying at home and raising kids ahead of…’ (23 – ellipsis in original) He cannot, he wants us to know, even be bothered to finish the sentence; the character has no place in prose fiction.

This Levov is, in other words, much like the Levov of How the Other Half Lives. Zuckerman’s frustration during the encounter resembles Roth’s own compositional frustration. In the following pages, Zuckerman’s observations about Levov’s banality read like a critique of Roth’s earlier attempts. ‘[A]ll that rose to the surface,’ Zuckerman writes, ‘was more surface. What he had instead of being, I thought, is

blandness – the guy’s radiant with it.’ (23) He is a ‘human platitude’ (23), a ‘big jeroboam of self-contentment’. (29) ‘Several times during the meal,’ Zuckerman writes, ‘I didn’t think I was going to make it, didn’t think I’d get to dessert’. (23) As it was for Roth twenty-five years earlier, Zuckerman’s problem is one of interiority: ‘what did he do for subjectivity?’ he wonders before elucidating the problem in the language of literary composition:

What was the Swede’s subjectivity? There had to be a substratum, but its composition was unimaginable [...] There had to have been consciousness and there had to have been blight. Yet I could not picture the form taken by either, could not desimplify him even now [...] (20)

‘I couldn’t imagine him at all,’ he laments; ‘[...] rooting around trying to figure this guy out is ridiculous’; (30) ‘I had no idea where his thoughts might be’. (34) Zuckerman even appears to query Roth’s persistence with the project: ‘Why clutch at him? What’s the matter with you? [...] You’re craving depths that don’t exist.’ (39) By looking back at his own struggles and failures in his attempts to write the character, Roth finds another way of circumnavigating the interior, a method that relies on the retrospective glance, on a previous attempt having been mounted so that the specific dimensions of its doubt can become the form. But it does not quite make the novel workable.

In the earliest drafts, Merry Levov is as difficult to sympathize with as her father. Her political anger is not presented with any credibility, trading on personal insult and aimed at often undeserving targets. Of a Czech student who risks his life to put a bunch of flowers in a tank’s muzzle during the Soviet invasion, for example, she says in one draft: ‘oh those d-d-daisies are really gonna do a lotta good! Jesus! How fucking dumbass can you be.’298 Or, on another who self-immolated in protest:

"Why didn’t this stupid b-b-boy burn a tank! Th-th-that’s politics! What he did is just c-crybaby neurosis! You think B-b-brechez gives a good hot sh-shi-shit that he’s a pile of ashes? Oh But, Mother here is touched by it! Mother think it's touching!”299

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299 Ibid.
In the published novel, it will in fact be Merry's devastated response to the self-immolating monks of Vietnam that first incites her political passions; what was callous, even misanthropic anger will instead be rooted in fellowfeeling, the moment painted with a tenderness and sympathetic generosity, towards both Merry and her father, lacking from the earliest drafts:

“These gentle p-p-people,” she said, while the Swede gathered her into his lap, a lanky eleven-year-old girl, held her to him, rocking and rocking her in his arms, “these gentle p-p-people...” [...] “Do you have to m-m-melt yourself down in fire to bring p-p-people to their s-senses? Does anybody care? Does anybody have a conscience? Doesn’t anybody in this w-world have a conscience left?” Every time “conscience” crossed her lips she began to cry. (154)

Flowing from feelings such as these, her political anger, in the published novel, begins to seem appropriate, even commendable. In the earliest drafts, however, it is presented as a direct result of the inappropriate kiss. Her rejection of American foreign policy is, reductively, a rejection of her father: she is caught in the Freudian lock. By the time of the published novel, she will have slipped out of the lock and become autonomous. Yet the explanatory power of the kiss remains.

The transgressive scene is one of the very first things Roth writes towards the novel, surviving into the published text with little change. Yet it is the scene he returns to most frequently, experimenting with different degrees of eroticism and culpability, unable, as he had been while drafting My Life as a Man, to make a decision about what happens between father and daughter. ‘Their love affair was at its height back in the summer that Merry turned eleven,’ the first version begins, where there is no ambiguity as to its tenor. The scene plays out thus:

“Daddy, kiss me the way you k-k-kiss uumumumuther.” [...] Lebov looked down to see that one of her swimsuit shoulder straps had dropped over her arm, revealing the hard, red bee bite of a growing girl’s nipple [...] and] kissed her face with a wild tenderness that, indeed, only her mother before her had known, and then only in their most intimate moments.300

300 Ibid, Folder 1.
But this first 1972 version has a huge red cross through it. Immediately, Roth rewrites it – now, in the first person. In the second version, the Levov character reads the scene rather more defensively: here, ‘[s]he had allowed one of her swimsuit straps to fall from her shoulder, or it had accidentally done so,’ where it is ambiguous whether the provocation is deliberate or not. Again, there is a red cross through it. In another version, Levov does not kiss her at all; again, the red cross. However he frames it, Roth rejects the scene, deleting it in one stroke (a rare gesture), and yet continually circles back; it compels writing but is unwritable.

In the published text, the scene plays out almost exactly as it had in its first iteration. Some of the prose has shifted: in the published version, Levov

had looked down to see that one of the shoulder straps of her swimsuit had dropped over her arm, and there was her nipple, the hard red bee bite that was her nipple (90)

where the revision from ‘revealing the hard, red bee bite of a growing girl’s nipple’ to the formulation ‘there was her nipple, the hard red bee bite that was her nipple’ fosters, with its deictic, a greater immediacy and an impression of inevitability, and removes the reminder of her youth, allowing the reader to share in some of Levov’s surprise, to read this more sympathetically (more inwardly), and, perhaps, less judgementally. Most significantly, rather than kiss her in immediate response to her request, Levov first impulsively mocks her stutter: “N-n-no,” he said – and stunned them both. (90) It is only when he sees her wounded surprise that he is moved to kiss her, making it more an act of conciliation, a gesture provoked more by genuine lovingness. He kisses her, too, not with a ‘wild tenderness’ but with ‘the passion that she had been asking him for all month long.’ (91) The source of the passion is relocated from the father to the daughter, yet Roth also re-emphasises the power dynamic: rather than kiss just ‘her face’, as in the first draft, Levov here kisses ‘her stammering mouth’ (91), where ‘stammering’ reminds the reader of Merry’s helplessness, her youth, the imbalance of power. The act itself is more disconcerting and condemnable. To be sure, it is a significant change. But the scene still, as it is, 301 Ibid.
holds Merry in the Freudian lock, reinforcing the answer that the very first draft wanted to give to the question of why she planted the bomb: incest.

Yet *American Pastoral* shares in *Sabbath’s Theater*’s sceptical preoccupation with easy psychology explanation, a scepticism most visible in Roth’s ironic portrayal of Levov’s brother, Jerry. Jerry embodies the rationalist impulse to explain away. He speaks in short, grammatically direct jabs, full of certainty, of uncomplicated portraiture, which provide a palpable contrast to Zuckerman’s sometimes page-long, woundingly doubting sentences. ‘He was very stoical,’ he says of his brother, for instance, when he and Zuckerman meet at a school reunion.

He was a very nice, simple, stoical guy. Not a humorous guy. Not a passionate guy [...] In one way he could be conceived as completely banal and conventional. An absence of negative values and nothing more [...] That ordinary decent life that they all want to live, and that’s it. The social norms, and that’s it. Benign, and that’s it. (65)

Jerry has made the same mistake Roth first made. But the repetitious crescendo of ‘and that’s it’ signals the irony: if that’s it, why keep adding to it? For Zuckerman, Jerry (highly masculinist: a philanderer and vicious table-tennis player) is ‘without uncertainty or remorse and unflaggingly devoted to his take on things’. (72) But time and again, Roth shows him getting things wrong. After a chapter in which Zuckerman expresses great nostalgia for his school days, for example, Jerry, says, of the reunion:

I was sure you’d find the sentimentality repellent [...] You’re somebody who has banished all superfluous sentiments from his life. No asinine longing to be home again [...] (61)

And later, he provides exactly the kind of reductive psychological explanation the novel is so anxious about: ‘She stuttered, you know. So to pay everybody back for her stuttering she set off the bomb.’ (73)

If Jerry is the personification of confidence in utterance, of certainty and definition, then Merry, his name twin, with her ‘stuttering child’s burden of self-doubt’, (92) is the personification of revision. Levov is caught between the two. In his early life, he is ‘the superman of certainties’ (144), ‘never [...] inconvenienced by
self-distrust’ (29), ‘exempted from all self-doubt by his heroic role’ (83). In a deleted passage from a late draft, Roth makes the connection to textual revision apparent, describing how Levov’s ‘every utterance’ suggests

a boy who did not have scrupulously to oversee his words, his moods, his gestures, hadn’t to be constantly standing over himself, watching, judging, correcting and erasing himself. 302

When Merry’s bomb famously ‘transport[s]’ him from ‘the American pastoral’ into ‘the counterpastoral – into the indigenous American berserk’ (86), what she introduces him to (or so Zuckerman has it) is a world of, made by, revision:

The Swede as he had always known himself – well-meaning, well-behaved, well-ordered Seymour Levov – evaporated, leaving only self-examination in his place. He had been admitted into a mystery more bewildering even than Merry’s stuttering; there was no fluency anywhere. It was all stuttering. (93)

And, against the project of his scientific rationalist brother, the possibility of knowledge evaporates: ‘the inexplicable had forever displaced whatever he once thought he knew [...] This was his daughter, and she was unknowable.’ (266) Error becomes the inevitable condition of life, as it is for Zuckerman. Of ‘this terribly significant business of other people’, he says: ‘you never fail to get them wrong’; ‘getting them wrong,’ in fact, ‘is living. That’s how we know we’re alive, we’re wrong’. (35 – emphasis in original)

It is after his encounter with Jerry that Zuckerman, shaken by Jerry’s certainties, decides to have another go at writing Levov, to return to and revise his earlier impression. ‘Dispelling the aura of dinner at Vincent’s,’ he writes,

when I’d rushed to conclude the most thoughtless conclusion – that simple was that simple – I lifted onto my stage the boy we were all going to follow into America [...] To the honeysweet strains of “Dream,” I pulled away from myself, pulled away from the reunion, and I dreamed... I dreamed a realist chronicle. (89 – 2nd ellipsis in original)

302 Ibid, Folder 4, p.11.
Zuckerman, in other words, writes over the Levov he had encountered at the start of the novel, but he writes over him with erasure: it is inevitable that he will get him wrong. And even without a paragraph break, we are immediately in 1963 and Merry is saying, “Daddy, kiss me the way you k-k-kiss umumumother”. (89) Roth presents the kiss scene (rewritten and rewritten and scored through again and again with a big red cross) within a nest of revisionary doubt, thus making the limitations of the cause and effect of easy psychological explanation palpable; those red crosses are incorporated, formally, within the text. As in the drafts of My Life as a Man Roth had worked to delay making a decision about the erotic encounter between Zuckerman and his stepdaughter, here he manages to keep the decision in suspension.

For Zuckerman and for Roth both, American Pastoral is born of retrospection, of looking back at the past, identifying past errors, and remaking it imperfectly for the present – of, in other words, revision. Through a process of revisionary engagement, Roth allows the revisedness of his text to become its organising principle and, in doing so, suggests that it is just one more iteration in a long process of revision and re-revision, just one possibility, provisional and couched in doubt. In The Counterlife he had found his way to a mode of multiplicity; in American Pastoral he appears to have made his way back to a mode of realist singularity. But it is a singularity that admits of multiplicity, a multiplicity that a thinker such as Jerry precludes, and that a certain kind of realist fiction papers over; through limiting itself, the novel implies freedom. American Pastoral is not, ultimately, a realist novel but, as Zuckerman himself has it, while describing ‘the honeysweet strains of “Dream”’, a song from which one of the novel’s two epigraphs are taken, it is a dream of a ‘realist chronicle’. And as Roth has said, dreaming is, for him, a process of trial and error, of correction and revision, a process of ‘trying just to get the dream right. You can go on trying all night long.’

Chapter Three
‘Second thoughts to the power of n’: J.M. Coetzee’s Revisions

i. ‘there is always one more revision to do’

In the final ‘lesson’ of J.M. Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello (2003), ‘At the Gate’, the novelist Elizabeth Costello finds herself standing in front of a gate, seeking access to a bright light on the other side. To pass through, a bureaucrat informs her, she must compose an acceptable statement of her beliefs. In answer, she produces a short paragraph of refusal: as a novelist, it declares, it is her job not to hold beliefs but to let the beliefs of others enter and possess her. ‘I maintain beliefs only provisionally,’ she writes. (195 – emphasis in original) The bureaucrat deems the statement unsatisfactory; she must rewrite it. Her second attempt, too, is inadequate: she must rewrite it again. Her attempts continue to fail until she is called to a tribunal, where she faces a panel of judges. ‘You have a statement to make to us?’ one of the judges asks. ‘I have a statement,’ she replies,

revised, heavily revised, revised many times. Revised to the limit of my powers, I venture to say. I don’t believe I have it in me to revise further. (199)

The judge responds: ‘Revised to the limit, you say. Some of us would say there is always one more revision to do.’ (199) At the end of the novel, Costello is still revising her confession, condemned, it appears, to an eternity of revision.

In May 2001, Coetzee read an early version of ‘At the Gate’, then called ‘The Statement’, at an event in Canada. He began the reading with a short statement of his own:

Three years ago I was invited to a get-together of writers in Rome, the eternal city. It was one of those casually put together conferences in which the Italians specialize. There was no formal programme, we were not asked to prepare anything, lecture or reading or presentation; until the last minute our hosts remained charmingly vague about what they expected of their guests.

What was expected of us, it turned out, was that we should one by one mount the platform and give a brief exposition, each of us, of what we believed in.
“What we believe in?"

“Yes, you know, what you believe in. But not too heavy, no, something light.”

Three years later that commission still weighs on me. I am into the sixth draft of a response. The response runs to some 90 minutes of reading time, more than even my kindly hosts tonight will allow me. So for the purposes of this occasion I have cut it by about half. I mention this to excuse the sudden jumps, also the absence of an ending.304

In the version he proceeded to read, Costello’s judge has a rather more banal response to her strenuous revisioning: ‘Yes,’ he says. ‘You will be surprised at the amount of revision one can do.’ It is Costello herself who supplies the suggestion of perpetuity: ‘She had expected the word endless. One can revise endlessly.’ Yet even here there is hope of ending: the possibility of perpetual revision (‘one can revise endlessly’) is quite different to its necessity (‘there is always one more revision to do’.) The first iteration sounds like an expression of authorial frustration; the second sounds like a philosophy.

When we next see Costello, in Slow Man (2005), she is back in the land of the living, attempting to write a novel about a man called Paul Rayment. Rayment, it turns out, is of insufficient interest to be a subject of fiction. Costello therefore inserts herself into his life in order to engineer intrigue and event. Throughout the novel, they engage in extensive dialogue about the requirements of fiction. Costello accuses Rayment of lacking impulsiveness and passion. But is fiction really a matter of passion and impulse? he counters. Is it not rather a question of reining them in?:

Surely you wait for second thoughts. Surely you revise. Isn’t the whole of writing a matter of second thoughts? Second thoughts and third thoughts and further thoughts?306

‘Indeed it is,’ Costello replies. It is one of the few things they agree on. ‘That is what writing is: second thoughts to the power of n.’ (228) Her experience at the gate has

304 J.M. Coetzee Papers, 1864-2012, ‘Elizabeth Costello’, 1964-2003, MS, Container 38.4. (rev. inc.) In my references to Coetzee’s manuscripts I follow his page numbering which, while highly systematic, is not always intuitive. Thus, as a more consistent mode of navigation, I include, too, the date of each entry. (In this case, the document – a sheet of hotel writing paper – is undated.)
306 J.M. Coetzee, Slow Man (London: Vintage, 2005), p.228. All further references will be to this edition.
hardened into philosophy. Writing is perpetual revision; an authoritative final revision is unattainable; there is always one more revision to do.

In this chapter I explore Coetzee's revisions, his philosophy of revision, how the former becomes the latter, and how the latter influences the former. I delve into his drafts to show how, as in the example of the Italian conference, he transforms the doubts and frustrations of composition, the catalysts and impasses of revision, through revision, into the form of a revisionary fiction, the circumstances of writing into its matter. Both his philosophy and his practice of revision, I will suggest, are founded on a rigorous thinking about the relationship between text and truth.

ii. 'Coetzee has asked me to revise my essay'
Revision has been a central preoccupation of Coetzee's writing from the first page of his first published work of fiction. Dusklands (1973) consists of two thematically interrelated novellas. The first, 'The Vietnam Project', is the first-person account of an American specialist in psychological warfare, Eugene Dawn, who, in 1973, is writing a report for a man named Coetzee about potential uses of propaganda in the Vietnam war. After a brief, one-line prologue, the first chapter begins: 'Coetzee has asked me to revise my essay.' (1) Coetzee has told Dawn the report is too emotive for its military readership – 'he wants it blander' (1) – and has asked him to 'set to work revising the tone of [his] argument'. (4) The novella traces the psychic effects on Dawn of the pressure of revision – of having to tread this same grim ground again and again – which culminates in an act of violence against his son.

In the second novella, 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' – the first-person account of a Boer frontiersman journeying into unexplored southern African territories in 1760 – revision becomes formally significant. Jacobus Coetzee's account has been reworked many times. The novella begins with a 'Translator's Preface' in which a fictional translator – one 'J.M. Coetzee' – reveals that, in the course of his translation (itself a revision), he restored 'two or three passages' that had been omitted. (55) It is later revealed, in an afterward by the fictional J.M. Coetzee's fictional father, S.J. Coetzee, that the account that has been translated is itself a revision. 'The account hitherto received as definitive,' S.J. Coetzee writes,
is the work of another man, a Castle hack who heard out Coetzee's story with the 
impatience of a bureaucrat and jotted down a hasty précis for the Governor's desk. 
[...] 
The present work ventures to present a more complete and therefore more 
just view of Jacobus Coetzee. (108) 

It is dizzying to try to keep track of all the various revisions the account has 
undergone, and the story's source, its provenance, thus seems unlocatable. To make 
it even more complicated, Jacobus Coetsé was a real frontiersman who recorded an 
account of a real journey. 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' is also the real J.M. 
Coetzees's rewriting of a real historical text. 

307 There is one moment in the novel that draws the reader's attention to the 
implications of this textual instability. Somewhere down the line someone has been 
careless and, in the authorially-approved words of Jonathan Crewe, 'has been caught 
with the edges of his revision showing.'308 Towards the end of the account, Jacobus 
Coetze is crossing a river with his slave, Klawer, who slips and is swept away by 
the current: '[H]e disappeared from sight around a bend and went to his death 
bearing the blanket roll and all the food.' (93-93) The following paragraph begins as 
though nothing has happened: 

The crossing took all of an hour, for we had to probe the bottom before each step for 
fear of slipping into a hippopotamus hole and being swept off our feet. (94) 

Klawer, who 'went to his death' just a moment before, seems to have survived the 
crossing. Soon, however, he develops a fever and dies a second death. Two accounts 
of Klawer's death have been written. As they differ in their particulars, at least one 
must be false: the truth, it seems, is being covered up, written over. By exposing the 
mechanics of revision Coetzee highlights the unstable relationship between truth 
and text. The reader becomes aware that the facts of history have been rewritten 
but has no certainty as to which – if either – version constitutes the facts and which 
the rewriting. All the reader knows for sure is that reality has been revised. 

308 Quoted in ibid, pp.243-4.
This unsettling effect becomes part of the fabric of Coetzee’s first novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1976). This novel – a monologue of a woman, Magda, isolated on a Karoo farm – is another revision, a rewriting of Olive Schreiner’s *Story of an African Farm* (1883). It takes the form of 266 numbered paragraphs separated from one another by line breaks. The primary effect of the numbering is a disruption of flow. Each paragraph exists not as part of a continuous landscape but as an island; each paragraph seems to have its own sealed reality. Indeed, the paragraphs often contradict or rewrite one another. As in *Dusklands*, a character dies multiple times; another carries out the same rape in multiple ways. At one point, Magda describes how ‘[a] hot gust lifts and drops a flap of ochre dust. The landscape recomposes itself and settles.’

It is a good metaphor for what happens in between each paragraph: the particles of the novel’s reality disperse, resettle. Each time, the dust falls differently. Magda’s monologue is partly a process of willed self-fashioning and partly a process of being created and recreated by language, by ‘the babble of words within me that fabricate and refabricate me as something else, something else’. (53)

Her self exists, that is, not as a fixed core but as itself a process of textual revision; as she says, anticipating Elizabeth Costello, ‘I am having second thoughts about everything.’ (64)

The conception of text that emerges in Coetzee’s first two books is as an open-ended process that revises reality even as it calls it into being. The texts enact a coming-into-being, a becoming; they are not final forms. Of course, strictly speaking, they *are* final forms: they have been edited, printed, bound and sold, their text is finite. But, as Derek Attridge has suggestively argued, a novel for Coetzee exists not on the page but is an event in the mind of the reader and is thus, like Magda, ‘constituted […] not by an unchanging core’ but has ‘a capacity to be endlessly transformed’. Miming a state of provisionality, Coetzee’s novels are resistant to closure.

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309 J.M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* (London: Vintage, 2004), p.28. All further references will be to this edition.

310 This is not strictly true of *In the Heart of the Country*: in the first South African edition, the dialogue is in Afrikaans; in all other English language editions, the dialogue has been translated.

In his next two novels, Coetzee dramatises the continuity between the attempted creation of closed, final forms and the project of colonialism, which he figures as a writing over landscape, history and people. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) this ‘writing over’ becomes literal. Colonel Joll, a commander of ‘the Empire’ in which the novel is set, rounds up a number of ‘barbarians’ – the Empire’s name for members of nearby nomadic tribes – and parades them in front of a crowd of his people. According to the story the Empire tells about itself, the barbarians are the enemy with whom they are on the brink of war. Whether this story has any reality outside the walls of the Empire, however, is a question Coetzee leaves unanswered. But when, in front of the crowd, Joll writes the word ‘ENEMY’ in charcoal on each of his prisoners’ backs, he fixes their fate through the forceful imposition of text.\(^{312}\) These perhaps peaceful tribespeople are now, in the eyes of those watching the spectacle, terrorists. Unlike in ‘In the Penal Colony’, however, the text is neither repeated nor permanent: the prisoners are beaten with such violence that ‘their backs are washed clean’ of the word. (115) The text of Empire, the implication is, the text of power, is just as provisional as any other, its effect reliant on a particular way of reading. The marks of their beating, however, one imagines, remain.

The absence of an answer to the question of whether the barbarians are peaceful or not is one of many blanks in the novel. By not allowing the reader access to any definitive reality underneath the Empire’s text, but drawing attention to its forceful imposition, Coetzee allows the Empire’s version of reality the agency but not the status of truth. This epistemology finds its ultimate expression in the novel in the torture chamber – a room inside which agents of the state carry out brutal acts of interrogation but outside of which a different story is told. The events inside the chamber are never represented directly; they are usually denoted by a gap in the text. The only authoritative account is the Empire’s official line. Boasting to the novel’s narrator – ‘the Magistrate’ – about his ability to extract statements from the barbarians that accord with the story the Empire tells about them, Colonel Joll describes his interrogation process thus:

\(^{312}\) J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (London: Vintage, 2004), p.115. All further references will be to this edition.
First I get lies, you see – this is what happens – first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth. (5)

From this, the magistrate privately concludes: ‘Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt.’ (5) When the body is in pain, this novel suggests, the fictions of the human dissolve and the subject becomes a ‘clean page’. (26) In order to stop the pain the body will utter whatever ‘truth’ the Empire concocts. What happens in the torture chamber is a blank. What leaves it is history: a forceful revision, an overwriting of reality that, unstable as it is, acts as truth because we let it.

There is another kind of blankness at the heart of *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), a blankness overwritten by the text of the novel itself. Michael K, a homeless inhabitant of a war-torn Cape Town descended into anarchy, is of indeterminate race; he seems to have slipped through the net of South Africa’s system of racial classification. Indeed, he slips through all nets; he is, as far as the systems of power are concerned, unclassifiable. Michael K resists containment. In his resistance, he presents a challenge to the novel’s narrator – ostensibly the omniscient narrator of the European tradition – whose attempts to represent an unclassifiable African subject, to fix the subject in a new, definitive form by means of the imposition of text, can be seen as a kind of colonising. But a subtle disjunction between the narration and its object provides a constant metanarrative of resistance. The narrator over-narrates: ‘A dog,’ for example, ‘began barking and, having begun, went on.’ (41) Or he under-narrates: ‘Someone made a remark and there was a burst of laughter.’ (41) On some occasions he seems unsure of the sequence of events: ‘K had reached the door, had even stepped into the shop, when a little old woman in black scuttled forward’. (44) Even the official time of day becomes indeterminate: ‘Far away a clock tolled three or perhaps four.’ (29) At times there are signs of emotional experience that the narrator shows no insight into: when Michael K is asked to show his papers at a roadblock and the narrator says, ‘K whispered, cleared his throat, spoke a second time’, the whispering and throat-clearing speak of an inner life into which

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the narrator does not delve. Yet at other times, he appears to have unlimited access to Michael K’s interior:

Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (110)

But moments like this resonate more with authorial frustration than they do with sympathetic insight.

The frustrated narrator finds a counterpart in the novel’s second section, which is narrated by a medical officer tasked with looking after Michael K in a hospital camp. The medical officer obsessively tries to determine Michael K’s narrative significance and, in doing so, he continually retells Michael K’s story: ‘The story is,’ he repeats. The stories he tells, however, do not chime with the one we have just read. Indeed, the medical officer even, apparently unknowingly, rechristens Michael K ‘Michaels’. And even when he eventually comes to accept Michael K’s resistance to the novel form, he does so by turning him into a novelistic category:

Your stay in the camp was [...] an allegory – speaking at the highest level – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. (166)

Even Michael K’s blankness is an imposition. In turning him into an allegory of textual resistance the medical officer is writing over what he perceives as the blankness at Michael K’s core with the word ‘blank’. The medical officer’s care is undoubtable, his straining for sympathy admirable, but he and Colonel Joll adhere to the same logic: closed to provisionality, eager for closure, they are both revisers who, for different reasons, write their own, concluding texts over their inconclusive subjects. As we shall see, the continuities between the torture chamber and the structures of novelistic sympathy will recur in Coetzee’s writing.

‘Concluding’ is Susan Barton’s word. She uses it a number of times in Coetzee’s next novel, Foe (1986). In her efforts to interpret the blank at this novel’s heart – the
untongued Friday – Barton is something like the medical officer. She is particularly intrigued by Friday’s ritual of scattering petals over the waves, of which she first says: ‘So I concluded he had been making an offering to the god of the waves to cause the fish to run plentifully’.314 She uses the same verb, later, offering an alternative explanation:

I will tell you what I have concluded: that you scattered the petals over the place where your ship went down, and scattered them in memory of some person who perished in the wreck [...] (87)

Barton knows she has the power to conclude Friday: ‘what he is to the world,’ she says, ‘is what I make of him.’ (124) This is because, as Foe himself has it, ‘he has the last word who disposes over the greatest force.’ (121-2) Yet the novel affords a different perspective. Not unlike Roth’s The Counterlife – published in the same year – Foe is a web of revisionings. Stories are told differently from multiple perspectives, narrative situations reset, certain paragraphs recur, differently, in different contexts. One is never quite sure who is ultimately telling this story (in terms of the fiction, at least), whether we are reading a first-hand account or a revision. Any ‘conclusion’ the novel comes to is thus a false conclusion, in both senses of the word. Coetzee has worked his way to a form that both enacts the overwriting of the colonial project and also, in its own gestures towards provisionality, ‘invites us’, in Dominic Head’s words, ‘to speculate [...] on the omissions and reconstructions evident in the finished novel’.315 In labelling Robinson Crusoe the ‘finished novel’, Head’s implication is that Coetzee’s novel is somehow unfinished, a revisionary text that unravels the closed form of authority and leaves it in a new and incomplete (unconcluded) state. In doing so, it allows the realities that get written out of the colonial narrative, those previously silenced voices, a certain kind of presence without presuming to speak for them.

This kind of rewriting-into-openness becomes the organising principle of Coetzee’s sixth novel, Age of Iron (1990). Many of its preoccupations arise from Coetzee’s interest in confession, which developed through the early 1980s and

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314 J.M. Coetzee, Foe (London: Penguin, 2010), p.31. All further references will be to this edition.
culminated in his essay, which he wrote alongside *Foe*, ‘Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoyevsky’ (1985). The goal of confession, as Coetzee here conceives of it, is ‘to tell the truth to and for oneself.’³¹⁶ It is part of a fourfold sequence of truth-seeking,

> a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution. Absolution means the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter [...] Absolution in this sense is therefore the indispensable goal of all confession, sacramental or secular.³¹⁷

Confession has a potentially infinite number of, usually self-interested, unconscious motivations; without absolution, the self-deceiving confessor cannot be sure of the truth of her confession. The problem for the secular confessor is that absolution requires an absolute authority; with no divinity there is no such authority. Thus secular confession can never ‘lead to that end of the chapter whose attainment is the goal of confession.’³¹⁸ With no end reachable, confession becomes interminable. The sincere secular confessor must engage in a process of infinite doubling back: the buried motivations for confession are uncovered, a second confession is made, the buried motivations for that confession are uncovered, a third confession made, and so on. It is this process, in which there is always one more revision to do, that Coetzee dramatises in the final ‘lesson’ of *Elizabeth Costello*. The committed confessor must embrace the open-endedness and accept the unattainability of that elusive final revision. This is the closest she can get to truth: ‘The condition of truthfulness,’ Coetzee writes, ‘is not perfect self-knowledge but truth-directedness.’³¹⁹ Or, as he has it elsewhere, ‘what we call truth is only a shifting self-reappraisal.’³²⁰ Any final form is self-deception. Thus, as in much of Roth’s work, the reader of *Foe* becomes aware of two different kinds of revision at work. One, which might be conceived as a *writing onto*, is an imperial overwriting that replaces grace with force and attempts to fix its subject in a final form, to conclude. The other, a

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³¹⁷ Ibid, pp.251-252.
writing into, is a continual, truth-directed process, a rewriting conceived as a kind of flow, a perpetual seeing-again, thinking-again, re-imagining, making new.

*Age of Iron* takes the form of a letter written by a retired classics lecturer, Mrs Curren, living in Cape Town in the late 1980s and suffering from terminal bone cancer, to her daughter who lives in America. In the letter – a variation on the death-bed confession – Mrs Curren engages, in Derek Attridge’s words, in a ‘revision of her selfhood and her values’.\(^{321}\) Her writing clearly corresponds to the process Coetzee describes in his essay, her prose often miming the processes of revision, offering variance and re-articulation:

day by day I render myself into words and pack the words into the page like sweets: like sweets for my daughter, for her birthday, for the day of her birth. Words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to unpack in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb. As they say on the bottle: old-fashioned drops, drops fashioned by the old [...]\(^{322}\)

The political dimensions of her confession, too, are revisionary. At the start of the novel, she positions herself emphatically against P.W. Botha’s Afrikaans government, expressing her revulsion at their propaganda; watching their news bulletins is ‘like kneeling and being urinated on. Under them: under their meaty bellies, their full bladders’. (10) As she continues to write, she comes to understand that her motivation for expressing her revulsion is to exonerate herself from blame. She doubles back and confesses to her complicity: ‘A crime was committed long ago,’ she says. ‘[...] I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it.’ (164) But she comes to understand that her motivation for this confession is her desire to be a ‘good person’ and feels that her quietist ‘goodness’ is of limited value in the South Africa of the 1980s. She confesses again:

I have been a good person, I freely confess to it [...] What I had not calculated on was that more might be called for than to be good [...] What the times call for is quite different from goodness. The times call for heroism. (165)

\(^{321}\) Attridge, *Ethics of Reading*, p.95.
In her confession, Mrs Curren unties the final form of her self and sets about a process of unravelling that is interminable until circumstantial closure – death – brings to it what Beckett called a ‘finality without end’.\textsuperscript{323} Her confession is true not because of the conclusions it draws, but it enters into ‘the condition of truthfulness’ precisely because it does not conclude. The condition of truthfulness, for Coetzee, is a state of infinite rewriting; it is second thoughts to the power of n.

It is surprising, then, that when he comes to write his own confession, he does not appear to follow this doctrine at all.

\section*{iii. ‘always the thinking reverses its direction and accuses him’}

Coetzee would publish his first autobiographical volume over a decade after publishing ‘Confession and Double Thoughts’. \textit{Boyhood} (1997) is written in the third person and present tense and, despite its largely factual basis, in a fictional mode. A second volume, \textit{Youth} (2002), focusses on Coetzee’s early adult life. \textit{Youth} is less respectful of the facts, lying, mainly, by omission. There is no mention, for example, of his dramatic courtship, relationship, and marriage to Philippa Jubber, all of which occurred during the book’s timespan.\textsuperscript{324} A third book, \textit{Summertime} (2009), disregards the facts altogether. The author J.M. Coetzee is dead; he is remembered as an antisocial, solitary bachelor living with his widowed father following the death of his mother. In fact, during this period, Coetzee was living with Jubber and their two children; his mother was alive and well.\textsuperscript{325} Not only, then, does Coetzee’s third-person, present-tense narration preclude the possibility of the revisionary, truth-directed confession he had advocated in 1985 by short-circuiting its motion, but he overwrites his own history with fiction. Not only his own history: his mother’s, his father’s, his ex-wife’s, his children’s, and so on. These books appear to engage, in other words, in precisely the kind of forceful overwriting that, in my understanding, his novels oppose and precisely \textit{not} the kind of open-ended, truth-directed revision they advocate. In order to consider how these riddling books may function.

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\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{323} Quoted in Boxall, \textit{Twenty-First-Century Fiction}, p.28.
\textsuperscript{324} Kannemeyer, \textit{J.M. Coetzee}, p.130.
\textsuperscript{325} Ibid, pp.208-259.
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according to Coetzee’s model of revisionary confession, I will look in detail at Boyhood’s genesis, seeking ‘confession’ in manuscript revision. Before I do so, I want to make a few general observations about Coetzee’s compositional process.

Coetzee usually begins a novel by hand, usually in a series of University of Cape Town exam answer booklets, writing the day’s date every morning and revising for style as he goes (dating, too, each revision). When he comes to the end of what feels like a first narrative gesture, he will usually type up the material on a word processor, often dividing it into chapters, revising again as he does so, always, again, dating the documents. Then he prints it and revises by hand – once again, dating each revision – and repeats the process, over and again. Meanwhile, he will continue writing new material in the exam booklets, so that the narrative will progress at the same time that he is intensively revising what he has thus far written. Concurrently, in what appear to be candid notebooks (but could well be something more playful), he documents weaknesses, lacks, prejudices or hypocrisies he perceives in the writing, often drastically reconceiving the material as a result. When he does so, rather than start a new draft or document, he turns to the last page he has reached in the latest exam booklet and continues in compositional rather than narrative sequence, perhaps reframing an earlier scene, perhaps beginning the whole novel from scratch. He will then type up the new material, before returning to the next phase of the narrative, which he will write, again, by hand, in the exam booklet. These exam booklets, in play from the first day to the last, are therefore disorientating documents – less first drafts than cross-sections of the drafting process. If they are linear, they are archivally linear; if they tell a story, it is the story of Coetzee’s composition rather than whatever story the novel will eventually tell. They are thus uniquely revealing. Revising and revising, returning again and again to the same originary document, means the composition process has a spiral motion, always doubling back on itself, moving forward through return, much like Coetzee’s model of confession. Rather than unfolding in sequence, in real time – as, for
instance, a Lee Child novel does – a Coetzee novel shapes itself around his revisions.326

It is through this motion that ethical, aesthetic and epistemological doubt is alchemised into form. Life & Times of Michael K is perhaps the first novel fully to bear this out.327 The initial idea for this novel was to rewrite, in a contemporary South African context, Kleist’s 1810 novella Michael Kohlhaas – a telling of a German folk tale in which an affluent 16th-century horse-dealer, having suffered an arbitrary administrative injustice, takes justice escalatingly into his own hands, becoming an outlaw and, finally, a revolutionary. Such a novel, however, would not emerge. Coetzee appears to have been concerned that the story he first envisaged would have no relevance in the political atmosphere into which it would be birthed: in an early draft, the central character – a ‘middle-class intellectual’ – is working on a verse translation of Kleist; in one scene, he finds that a ‘coloured’ intruder into his home has wiped his arse on the typescript.328 The idea soiled, Coetzee abandons it. He decides instead to make the central character himself a ‘coloured’ man, and to move away from Kleist. But he appears to feel locked out of imagining such a character by his own racial status, writing in his notebook on 16th June 1980:

I am outraged by tyranny but only because I am identified with the tyrants, not because I love (or ‘am with’) their victims [...] There is a fundamental flaw in all my novels: I am unable to move from the side of the oppressors to the side of the oppressed.329

In frustration, he writes: ‘I sit in front of this blank page an hour at a time.’330 The white man was irrelevant, the ‘coloured’ man inaccessible: next, the character becomes a nine-year-old boy whose innocence, the hope appears to be, might

326 This is of course a generalised account: Coetzee’s practices change with his technological apparatus and circumstances. He first uses a word processor as early as the mid 1980s, while drafting Foe; in the 2000s, from Slow Man onwards, he moves away from writing by hand, though he will continue to edit in pen.
327 My brief and selective description of this novel’s genesis is indebted to David Attwell’s excellent account in J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.129-147. All other observations about the archives are my own. Attwell’s emphasis is different to mine: he is more interested in tracing the ways in which Coetzee’s biography and its social and political contexts enter the fiction than he is in exploring the textual presence of the processes of writing, the doubt of writing (and the writing of doubt), and the generative nature of revision.
328 Attwell, J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing, p.132.
329 Quoted in ibid, p.134.
330 Quoted in ibid.
remove him from historical entanglement. This new character proves too limited, however, and on 16th December 1980, Coetzee decides to turn him into an ‘older and simpler’ man, something like the Michael K of the published novel. The character’s new ‘simplicity’ allows his elusiveness to be formally expressed: Coetzee creates an alternative narrator, who will become the medical officer, who retells K’s story, failing consistently to understand him. ‘You can’t make a book out of my life,’ Michael K says to him in one late draft. The Michael K of the novel – ‘a gap, a hole [...] into which it was useless to pour words [...] a wrong story, always wrong’ (11) – is, thus, a document of his own unwritability, the ‘blank page’ in front of which his author sat ‘an hour at a time’, his narrator a diffuse and veiled personification of Coetzee’s doubts about his own cultural status.

Turning the novel into a document of its unwritability, formalising the anxieties and obstructions, is a solution that regularly suggests itself to Coetzee. ‘Turn the whole thing,’ he writes in a note of March 1984, at a particularly low point in the drafting of Foe, ‘into the history of the writing of the story. The story of Susan who will not be written.’ But it appears to be while drafting Age of Iron, in the wake of the confession essay, that he begins to think about bringing the processes of revision, as authorial doubt’s manifestation in the world, into the text. Thus, in a notebook entry of 20th October 1987, he writes:

The pattern of my composition is to do a version of an incident, proceed, then a long while later come back to the same kind of incident and do a more developed version. When I revise, the earlier version gets scrapped, in the interest of _____? [sic] Sometimes it remains, eg. ITH. Question. Why not leave them as knots of obsession, to which I keep recurring?

It is a crucial moment, not unlike Roth’s construction of a drama, in My Life as a Man, from his own ‘knots of obsession’: Coetzee is for the first time considering a work that does not erase the traces of his manuscript revision but allows them to become central to the novel’s meaning. His writing process and his theory of confession are

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331 Quoted in ibid, p.141.
dovetailing. It is perhaps, then, even more surprising that his own confession will not fit the model.

In his 1983 inaugural lecture at the University of Cape Town, ‘Truth in Autobiography’ – which, extensively reworked, would become ‘Confession and Double Thoughts’ – Coetzee stresses the importance, in autobiography, of the moment of telling. ‘Telling the story of your life,’ he says,

[…] is not only a matter of representing the past but also a matter of representing the present in which you wrestle to explain to yourself what it was that really happened that day beneath the surface (so to speak), and write down an explanation which may be full of gaps and evasions but at least gives a representation of the motion of your mind as you try to understand yourself. Indeed the lies and evasions may be more interesting than the visit itself.334

Coetzee’s first attempt to tell his own story – a short text he begins on 20th March 1987, not long after his mother’s death, to whom it is addressed, and whose tenor is as elegiac as it is confessional – bears out this thought. The moment of telling continually rises to the surface of the writing.335 ‘We are going to the school’s tennis court,’ he remembers at one point,


to play – what can it be? tennis? Tennis with paddles? – there. On (on? with?) my bared, tender, white feet I pick my way along the stony path to the tennis court.336

Not only does memory here falter (‘what can it be?’) but the voice questions present word choice as much as it does past event: ‘On (on?[...])’. The impression is of a mind in the motion of textual composition, of text on the cusp of revision. What we read, it is therefore implied, is only one stage in a longer compositional project: there is a truer iteration to come, a corrective, a countertext. The effect, at the confessional pressure points, the loci of transgression, is an awareness that what we read is not the whole story. In one episode, Coetzee’s mother sends the young John Coetzee and

335 For a full account of this material, and how much of it finds it way into Age of Iron, see Attwell, J.M. Coetzee & the Life of Writing, pp.161-176.
his brother into a circus unaccompanied because she finds she cannot afford the ticket prices and waits outside throughout the performance. It is a moment of intense shame for the child, yet his response may seem perfectly decent:

Perhaps I even say we should all go home together and leave the circus behind, or else go home and come back another day (but will the circus still be here?).

But the doubt (‘perhaps’) opens up the possibility of another, more honest version of the text: the adult, one implication is, might be wanting to remember himself as more magnanimous than he was, while the parenthesis suggests the child’s true priorities. A re-confession is latent in the confession. Thus, without having to mime (or enact) the impossible process of interminable reconfession, the text can to some degree fit, or gesture towards Coetzee’s model.

One problem, however, with this initial response to the confessional dilemma, is that it can let the confessor off the hook. Towards the end of this short piece of writing, the text drops into a Rousseau-like past tense to describe the young Coetzee’s development into a solipsist and a tyrant, his majesty the child:

I saw myself, even in those days, as the tyrant of the household, a little Napoleon, ridiculous because too small. Seeing myself as shameful and ridiculous did not help me: it only made me more angry, with myself, with you, with the world. More tantrums, more tyranny.

The immediate revision (from ‘Being this’ to ‘Seeing myself as’) suggests an appropriate check on the impulse to define and set in stone, but the new version also provides an avenue of redemption: this might simply be a description of a negative self-image. The implication of the text’s provisionality, that its truth exists in an unattainable future tense, while consistent with Coetzee’s model of confession, leads to a plurality of truths, both validating and invalidating all versions latent in the text: the boy both is and is not a tyrant. The text may imply truth-directedness but it is not, itself, truth-directed. Coetzee abandons the project.

When in 1993 Coetzee attempts, for a second time, to write his own story, the remembering consciousness – and hence the hesitation, the doubt, the suggestion of another, truer text to come – is absent. The initial notes after the five-year gap are written in a confessional first-person, past tense, but when he starts to write he employs from the start the estranging third-person present tense of the published book. In its suggestive immediacy, this fictional mode liberates the writing from the labours of exactness, thoroughness, responsibility; it allows Coetzee to unloosen the knots of remembering, to smoothe narration and refine affect. The material need no longer be accurate, in other words, only coherently affective. Thus the complexities of the boy’s initial response to his mother’s suggestion that she wait outside the circus tent, dealt with in the first 1987 text over two and a half pages of vacillation and inquiry, is boiled down, in the published text, to a single reserved sentence: ‘He is unwilling, but she insists.’ The text need not probe further. There is no obvious representation of the motion of a mind as it tries to understand itself and thus the question of how the incident is being remembered, of where the gaps and evasions might lie, does not arise (at least, not in the text itself). The scene’s truth status is not at issue: the doubt of remembering has become the paradoxical certainty that fiction, in its conditionality, allows. But the doubt of the remembering consciousness has not disappeared entirely.

Fiction and invention are not synonymous, but as Coetzee writes into the novel, the fiction begins to make its own demands and solicit invention. ‘As a memoir the thing may be OK,’ he writes in a note of 13th June 1995, approaching the end of the first full draft,

but as fiction it is too myopic, self-absorbed, closed. [...] There must be a moment – refused, if necessary – when he sees that he is blind to the reality of his father and mother, that they have lives of their own, and that the childishness of childhood consists in this wilful, self-indulgent ignoring of him. [sic]\(^{340}\)

Such a moment will indeed occur at the book’s culmination, its specifics first outlined in a note later the same week:


He thinks of his father as clever and his mother as stupid; but he knows there is something false in this judgement. He fears his father’s insight into him, but he has learned how to avoid hearing it. He has grown a shell like a tortoise’s. But there is something he fears more: the day when his mother will deliver her judgement on him. For there are moments when he catches her looking at him ruminatively, perhaps as she pauses with her hands in the kitchen sink, and knows she is summing him up.\textsuperscript{341}

The only concrete detail in this passage, thus the only detail by which the idea can be tethered to the fiction, is introduced oddly: ‘there are moments [...] perhaps as she pauses with her hands in the kitchen sink’. The ‘perhaps’ appears to introduce a singular moment yet refers back grammatically to a plurality of ‘moments’. One might imagine it to be a slip, the result of rapid note-making. Yet when the scene does appear in the published book, it retains some of the peculiarity of that disjunction in a moment of narrative instability:

His mother stands at the sink, in the dimmest corner of the kitchen. She stands with her back to him, her arms flecked with soapsuds, scouring a pot, in no great hurry. As for him, he is roaming around, talking about something, he does not know what, talking with his usual vehemence, complaining. (161)

\textit{He does not know what:} who is this he; and why the strange, conversational locution: \textit{As for him?} Surely ‘he’ is not the child in the moment of talking; he would know what he is saying. And not the author: the author is free to invent the detail. There is no implied reason, either, for the narrator not to know. The child in the act of remembering, perhaps? This seems most likely, but there is no narrative indication of it. The preceding paragraphs describe rare moments of self-awareness, self-othering, when ‘the sky, that usually sits tight and closed over his head [...] opens a slit, and for an interval he can see the world as it really is.’ (160) During such moments, he sees ‘his father and his mother [...] from above, without anger’. (161) ‘The sky opens,’ the paragraph concludes, ‘he sees the world as it is, then the sky

\textsuperscript{341} Ibid, pp.13-14. 18th June 1995.
closes and he is himself again, living the only story he will admit, the story of himself.’ (161) And then the following paragraph begins: ‘His mother stands at the sink […]’. There is no diegetic suggestion that anyone is remembering the scene. I will suggest what, or whose, this new perspective might be in my analysis, below, of Coetzee’s stylistic revisions. For now, I want to note that the development of the scene follows the movement of the note it stems from: it begins with a plural certainty (‘There are moments’) that leads into a specific and concrete moment (‘as she pauses with her hands in the kitchen sink’) which is shrouded in a sourceless narrative doubt (‘perhaps’). The text may not read, any longer, in its fictional form, as one iteration in a series of interminable revisions, but the authorial doubt of composition – a doubt that allows for the possibility of future, truer iterations – is part of its fabric.

With the move to the novel form, revision becomes fiction- rather than truth-directed, less a matter of scrutinising autobiographical efficacy and more a process of seeking inadequacies and possibilities latent in the prose’s functioning as fiction. The endpoint is less the truth of the self than the truth of this self-other. Nevertheless, in order to think further about how the book functions as confession, it is worth considering how Coetzee revises the young John Coetzee’s transgressions, whether each round of revision might constitute a re-confession or not: does Coetzee double back on himself like Mrs Curren, rethinking his assumptions, re-evaluating his motivations?

The first word of the first note Coetzee makes when he returns to the project in 1993 suggests a deferral of responsibility:

Deformation. My life as deformed, year after year, by South Africa. Emblem: the deformed trees on the golf links in Swanstown.342

No doubt this is fair. As confession, at least in an Augustinian sense, however, it is lacking. The cause of transgression is not found in the environment. Corruption comes from within. Throughout this first full draft, Coetzee follows this note, depicting a younger self trapped in a corrupting political environment that deforms

his relations with other people. John recalls, for instance, his relations with Freddie, a ‘coloured’ boy of roughly his age who had been a live-in servant for the Coetzee family before they left Cape Town. John and Freddy are natural allies yet they are unable to form a functional relationship; as John’s racial other, Freddie is a constant reminder of every privilege afforded him – a reminder, in other words, of his guilt.

One day, Freddie runs away. Coetzee’s father finds him in a bush, drags him home and allows their English lodger to beat him with ceremony and violence. John watches the beating silently, before being sent out. It is a scene of witness, in which John is shown the social role he is expected to inherit and exposed to the violence of his social positioning. But if, in his silence and passivity, he is complicit, his awareness of the dynamics of the situation takes him some way to redemption. His emotional response is not documented but the first sentence of the following section makes his discomfort clear: ‘The one place he knows where the treatment of Coloured people does not trouble him is the farm.’

By the time the scene is published, as we will shortly see, the moral emphasis will be quite different.

There is a similar dynamic in the first scene Coetzee chooses to write in full in 1993, featuring another ‘coloured’ boy of John’s age, another double. John notices the boy while he is walking with his mother and is surprised to see that the boy is unaccompanied. The boy is naked and seems, to John, as though he ‘come[s] with the land [...] pure, uncorrupted.’ ‘His body exists in the world perfectly, unspoiled, as it came out of the hands of nature.’ Once again, John is uncomfortable thinking about his status in relation to the boy. He knows that, ‘if his mother were to call out ‘Boy!’ [...] the boy will come and do whatever she sets him,’ and that ‘when he remonstrates afterwards his mother will say, ‘But he’s used to it!” In his confused understanding, however, he envies the boy what he regards as his freedom and cannot understand why children like him ‘do not turn their days into orgies of pleasure, erotic, masturbatory’. That they do not, that the boy’s penis is currently flaccid, is proof only of his own perversion. Thus the boy becomes his accuser. ‘That,’ he thinks,
is how the logic works: always it turns around and brings its pointing finger to point bear on himself. Always he starts the train of thinking; always the thinking reverses its direction and accuses him.\textsuperscript{348}

It is an articulation of a process common in all my authors’ work: an impulse towards fellowfeeling collapses into compulsive, solipsistic self-accusation. Indeed, John recognises it as a defining moment, recognises it ‘even as it occurs as one in which a meaning is defined for him, and a plight.’\textsuperscript{349} But the plight is as much his own as it is the boy’s: it is the plight of the unwillingly sovereign. The boy – naturally, as he sees it, his superior – ‘is subjected to him in a way that embarrasses him so much that he squirms and wiggles his shoulders and does not want to look at him or think about him.’\textsuperscript{350} The scene leaves a complex impression: in its latent racism, its self-centredness, it certainly makes a confession. But it also communicates an instinctive resistance to the unjust power relations and a willingness to speak truth to power (‘when he remonstrates afterwards’). Once again, this John Coetzee is trapped in a political situation he rejects; responsibility is once again deferred.

In the Michael K notebooks, Coetzee had confessed his inability ‘to move from the side of the oppressors to the side of the oppressed.’ In this first draft of \textit{Boyhood}, I would suggest, John Coetzee is insufficiently on the side of the oppressors. Many of Coetzee’s revisions over the following years work to redress the balance – to remove acts of resistance, to close off avenues of redemption, to dampen John’s sense of responsibility, his political awareness. Put simply, Coetzee works to make himself look worse, regardless of the truth claim of that worseness. In revising the fourth draft, for instance, in May 1995, he alters a small act of resistance so that it registers less heroically. Before revision, during a school assembly in which the children are made to sing Nationalist anthems, John ‘mouths “Kom ons gaan blomme pluk” as if he is singing, while really producing a low monotonous hum from the bottom of his throat.’ After revision, however, while John would still ‘like to scream and shout and make farting noises’ he pays lip service and

\textsuperscript{348} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{349} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{350} Ibid, p.1/5. 10 August 1993.
sings along with the other boys.\textsuperscript{351} In another scene in the same draft of the same chapter, John knowingly leads a group of friends onto a plot of land belonging to an Afrikaans farmer. Alerted to their presence, the farmer threatens them with a beating. John nobly steps forward to take responsibility for the transgression: ‘If they are going to be beaten, he must be the first.’\textsuperscript{352} After revision, he does no such thing; the sentence is simply deleted. Similarly, when, in the first 1993 draft Coetzee reworks the circus material from the 1987 text, John’s reaction to his mother’s self-sacrifice is considerably less gracious than it first was:

\begin{quote}
He wishes she did not love him so much. He will never be able to pay her back. It is the thought of a lifetime before him in which, no matter how he tries, he will never be able to repay her, that infuriates him.\textsuperscript{353}
\end{quote}

Returning to the scene in revision, John becomes even less pleasant: now he refuses to let his mother touch him after the show and, ‘[w]hen she turns away in silent hurt, he deliberately hardens his heart against her, refusing to give in.’\textsuperscript{354} In this second, 1994 draft, he is ‘miserable’ inside the tent; by the following draft, still miserable, he is also, ‘inside being entertained like a king’: he is sovereign.\textsuperscript{355}

The patterning of a language and a drama of sovereignty is one of the characteristic habits of Coetzee’s revisions of this text. In that first autobiographical gesture, John’s status as a little tyrant may have been a matter of self-conception, but in Coetzee’s revisionary intensification of his tyranny, it begins to have real-world effects. Thus, for example, in the third draft, to the following –

\begin{quote}
He plays with the vacuum cleaner, tearing up paper and watching the strips fly up the pipe like leaves in the wind.
\end{quote}

– he adds:

\begin{footnotes}
\item[351] Ibid, Container 27.5, Section 15, pp.4-5, 18, 20 March 1995. Revised: 24 May 1995. The Afrikaans translates as ‘Let’s pick flowers’: a significant sentiment in a book, and a career, so concerned with the wrongful inheritance of land.
\item[352] Ibid, p.5.
\item[353] Ibid, Container 27.2, p.6/11. 11 September 1993.
\item[354] Ibid, Container 27.4, Section 19, p.1, 27th December 1994.
\item[355] Ibid, Container 27.5, Section 5, p.8, 23-25, 27 March 1995.
\end{footnotes}
He moves down a trail of ants, sucking them up. The ants scatter in panic.356

And then in the following draft, he adds:

There are ants in Worcester, flies, plagues of fleas. He has a ring of fleabites above his socks, and scabs where he has scratched. There are nights when he cannot sleep for the itching.357

As John becomes more sovereign, and his sovereignty becomes a matter of real rather than conceptual violence, so his environment becomes less hospitable to that sovereignty, it bites back, his sovereignty more of a revisionary imposition: he should not be here, this final revision says. The trend is visible in another small revision of the sixth draft. The book opens with a description of the Coetzee’s garden, at the bottom of which is what is initially described only as a ‘small block’. In the sixth draft, Coetzee extends the description of the block: it consists ‘of a servant’s room and lavatory. Since they have no servant, they store rubbish in the servant’s room’. If this is the first impression a reader is to have of the Coetzees, then in this version it is of a family inhabiting a social environment set up to host a sovereignty they do not bring to it. In revision, Coetzee reverses that teleology so that the description becomes:

In each back yard stands a small block consisting of a room and a lavatory. Though they have no servant they call these “the servant’s room,” “the servant’s lavatory.”358

Now it is the Coetzees who impose the idea of servitude onto an environment that does not accommodate it. Their first impression is no longer one of blamelessness; now they are firmly part of a class of people imposing a system of power and governance over an unaccommodating landscape. Revision, in cases such as these, does indeed appear to function as re-confession.

In the published text, the scene in which Freddie (now: Eddie) is beaten is no longer followed, as in its first draft, by an admission of uneasiness about racial

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357 Ibid, Container 27.6, Draft 5, Section 1, fragment. 6 May 1995. Revised 12 June 1995. (rev. inc.)
injustice in South Africa, but by a long section that explores Eddie’s and John’s dysfunctional relationship, developed through cumulative revision. The paragraph that follows the beating now begins: ‘There is a debt he still owes Eddie, which he has told no one.’ (75) It was Eddie, we learn, who taught John to ride the bicycle he received for his eighth birthday. John appears to be aware that his relative freedom is predicated on Eddie’s subjection, but his refusal to acknowledge this publicly is further to subject him. And, lest we see in John’s private acknowledgement of indebtedness the kind of nascent political awareness he displayed in the first draft, we learn in the following paragraphs of his othering fascination with Eddie’s strange body. We witness him and his brother peeping into the bathroom as Eddie washes. (76) We see him repeat without comment his father’s phrenological evaluation that ‘coloured’ boys are good boxers and bad rugby players for the same reason: ‘They have harder heads than white people […] In rugby you have to think fast, you can’t be a bonehead.’ (75) His mother is no less racist: ‘People like that,’ she says, ‘always end up in a reformatory, and then in jail.’ (76) But if John is troubled by her attitude, it is not because of the racism:

He does not really care what she believes about Eddie as long as she does not change her mind from day to day. When she lashes out like this he feels that the floor is crumbling beneath his feet and he is falling. (76-77)

No longer a passive, troubled witness, resistant to the corrupting influence and enforced sovereignty of white South African-ness, John is, by the time of publication, a more solipsistic, more selfish and less unwillingly sovereign character and, if not himself racist, certainly, here, indifferent to racism – which, in such an environment, may amount to the same thing. The chapter reads like a spiral of reconfession, each new paragraph added in order to close off any routes to redemption available in the previous paragraphs, cumulatively serving to create an unflattering self-portrait whose factuality is not necessarily relevant.

Telling (or, retelling) one’s story with a willingness to look bad can be a way of making oneself look good. Self-criticism might be virtuous but broadcasting it can be self-serving. If Coetzee is to take seriously his imperative of self-critical
revisionary confession then simply reworking the material so that it is less flattering cannot be enough: a different kind of exposure is still necessary, the exposure of the confessing voice. Yet the process of revising this book is in part a process of hiding. As he goes back over the prose, Coetzee carefully erases any trace of adult perspective. For example, John does not understand how procreation works: babies, he believes, ‘come out of the mother’s backside’. (57) In the first draft, his theory is introduced with an acknowledgement of ignorance: ‘He still has no idea how babies are born,’ where ‘still’ implies a later gaining of knowledge and can only emerge from a more mature subjectivity.\textsuperscript{359} Immediately, Coetzee revises the sentence so that it reads: ‘He thinks he knows how babies are born.’\textsuperscript{360} Ignorance is still implied but the perspective is harder to locate: it could be the adult looking back and articulating the boy’s mistakenness, but it could equally be the boy putting forward an ingenuous suggestion. By the time of publication, his knowledge will be certain: ‘Yet he is not ignorant. He knows how babies are born.’ (57) The adult perspective is present, of course, in the irony, but it is absent from the prose. It is the reader who must supply the mature perspective. Coetzee has hidden himself.

In many respects, this process constitutes a kind of Flaubertian refinement: in each successive draft the author is felt more pervasively but seen less. For Coetzee, Flaubert’s narrative style is the paradigm of a certain kind of realism (‘the new school of Realism’, as he puts it).\textsuperscript{361} But \textit{Boyhood} is not quite a realist novel; whatever we make of its fictional status, no clean division between narrator and character is possible. The work thus poses a unique dilemma – one which Coetzee articulates in a notebook entry:

Even novels that believe they are past ‘realism’ adhere to an elementary realism of narration, in the sense that the narrative position at any given moment must be either inside or outside. Thus the narrative position can be conceived realistically as the position of the narrator, inside or outside the action. What I have to do is invent a position between the two that does not belong to realism, that is in

\textsuperscript{359} Ibid, Container 27.2, p.2/1. 13 August 1993.
\textsuperscript{360} Ibid.
effect a fictional construct. Neither a ten-year-old boy incapable of reflecting on himself nor the same boy grown up, looking back, seeing implications.\(^{362}\)

Accordingly, while revising adult perspective out of the prose, Coetzee simultaneously works, in revision, to house the child’s thoughts in a language whose sophistication exceeds his reach. Thus in the fourth draft, ‘Nevertheless he knows that it is not the pain that would matter’ becomes, ‘Nevertheless, he knows the pain is not the first consideration.’\(^{363}\) In the seventh draft, ‘Every barber in Worcester seems to believe that boys should have short hair,’ becomes, “The barbers of Worcester seem to have decided in concert that boys should have short hair.”\(^{364}\) Rather than using free indirect discourse to allow a character’s private language to bubble up into an impersonal narrative voice, or to fit the third person prose to the rhythms of the character’s thinking, here, an adult linguist’s efforts towards precision appear to structure how the child thinks. The adult is felt in the syntax. At one point, Coetzee even directly signals that the language is beyond the child’s reach. When John walks past the unaccompanied ‘coloured’ boy and begins to consider his own guilty desire, the narrator of the published novel says:

> he has come within sight of the word *perversion*, with its dark, complex thrill, beginning with the enigmatic *p* that can mean anything, then swiftly tumbling via the ruthless *r* to the vengeful *v*. (60-61)

The analysis of the word resembles how children are taught to read by anthropomorphising letters (*kicking k*, *vengeful v*). Yet it appears to be a word not yet known to the child: he has only ‘come in sight’ of it. The effect is an uncanny intersubjectivity; the thought belongs neither to the ‘ten-year-old boy incapable of reflecting on himself’ nor ‘the same boy grown up, looking back, seeing implications’.

Revision is particularly productive of this kind of linguistic intersubjectivity because it is the place at which two or more distinct moments of subjectivity meet to construct a single language. An honest revisionary prose is perhaps, for Coetzee,


\(^{364}\) Ibid, Container 27.7, Section 5, p.10. 5 July 1995. Revised 1 August 1995.
less one of retraction and renegotiation, of epanorthosis – which can be a contrivance, a virtuous posturing – than a prose whose centre seems diffuse, one in which the immediacy of the narrated moment, the self-consciousness of the confessing moment, and the self-critical looking-back of revision coexist in a perpetual and perpetually doubting present tense (a tense which only becomes Coetzee’s habitual fictional mode around the time he is writing Boyhood). Hence those moments of uncanny narrative doubt (‘talking about something, he does not know what’): they record, or mime, the intersubjectivity entailed by going back over the ground of the past and hold it within a single language. In other words, while Coetzee is looking back and intensifying his depiction of his younger self’s tyranny and sovereignty, he is working, simultaneously, to fashion an honest revisionary language that disperses the authority of the ‘I’. Revision becomes a process of simultaneously confessing to and unlearning sovereignty.

In one late-conceived scene, John witnesses the castration of the sheep in his father’s family farm. A farmhand, Ros, gets down on his hands and knees and pulls out their testicles with his teeth, before cutting off their tails. John, troubled by the spectacle, cannot find the language with which to articulate his feelings. In the first draft, he asks his mother, ‘Why do they have to cut off their tails?’ She answers: ‘Otherwise the blowflies breed under their tails.’ But Coetzee signals that this is not what John ‘really’ wants to ask: ‘but of course he is not talking about the tails, he is talking about Ros taking the testicle in his mouth and pulling till it comes out.’

In revision, he removes this piece of information: ‘They are both pretending,’ he now writes. ‘Both of them really know what [the question] is about.’ (Eventually, the phrase becomes ‘what the question is really about’. (99)) But the crucial piece of information – what the question is about – is now withheld from the reader, excluding her from the text’s reality. The unasked question, once specific, could now encompass much more: cruelty to animals, violence in general; perhaps John is thinking about his colonial status, or his masculinity; perhaps he is thinking about his death. The specific has become, through revision, nonspecific; there is a blank at the heart of the character’s response which has not entered the text as a blank but issues from an erasure. By erasing specificity thus, Coetzee alters not only the text

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but the reader's relationship with the text, thus altering, too, its confessional status. In an early note, written before the move to the third person, he writes:

Times one could have died (e.g [sic] I could have drowned in 1949 [sic]): assuming that each of these times one is saved, then one gets a new life each time. In the course of a lifetime one gets several new lives.

But then (a Borgesian point) each time one crosses the street one could die, and so is saved. Thus life becomes an infinity of new lives.\(^{367}\)

The idea that the text might constitute ‘an infinity of new lives’ is appealing: seen through Attridge’s reader-response lens, *Boyhood* becomes a new text, a new life, in each reading. And by erasing the specificity of a detail such as John’s question, and allowing the reader, thus, to conceive of it as she likes, Coetzee ensures that each reading constitutes a new confession, a re-confession. Further, the erasure prompts revisionary reading. In *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978), Michael Riffaterre describes what he regards as the two parallel processes of reading. The first, *heuristic* reading, is a reading for mimesis, decoding reference and imagining the referent. The second process, which he calls *retroactive* or *hermeneutic* reading, is a process of picking up on ‘gaps and compressions in the text – such as incomplete description, or illusions, or quotations’ which, in Sarah Dillon’s words, ‘trouble its mimesis.’\(^{368}\) The result of this second mode of reading is that the reader engages in a process of ‘reviewing, revising, comparing backwards’.\(^{369}\) By erasing crucial hermeneutic details, Coetzee prompts, or intensifies, this ‘retroactive’ reading: the reader now more consciously engages in a revisionary process of her own. And because the truth exists in a past rather than a future tense, the reader’s backward-looking revision is as resistant to conclusion as Coetzee’s future-directed revisionary labour. Neither Coetzee nor his reader, in other words, are in a position of authority. The text’s narrative centre can never be still.

Establishing the core of the text as a revisionary process for both writer and reader is one solution to the question of truth in autobiography. But following the castration of the sheep Coetzee extends the scene in such a way as to reaffirm the

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\(^{368}\) Dillon, *The Palimpsest*, pp.72-73.
\(^{369}\) Ibid.
inevitability of authorial sovereignty. The young John becomes angry with the sheep for ‘accepting their fate so meekly’. ‘[W]hen he looks into their alien yellow eyes,’ Coetzee writes,

he thinks he catches a glimpse there of a knowledge that disturbs him: a knowledge of everything that is fated to happen [...] everything down to the finest detail. They know it all and yet submit, he thinks: they have calculated the price, and they are prepared to pay it: the price of being alive, which is to be slaughtered at the end of it.\(^{371}\)

His sympathetic openness to their suffering has led to this imagining. In revision, Coetzee hardens hypothesis into knowledge, into narrative imposition, erasing any suggestion of doubt. Thus the sheep’s ‘alien yellow eyes’ become eventually just ‘their yellow eyes’. (102) Where he ‘thinks he catches a glimpse’ of knowledge, in revision, only: ‘he catches a glimpse of [...] a resignation, a foreknowledge’. (102) John, like the novelist, is imposing a text on the unspeaking other, stamping his image onto the formless real. Whatever the compositional process, whatever the reading experience, Coetzee seems unable to escape the cost of authorial power.

Simultaneous to drafting *Boyhood*, Coetzee is working on a number of other texts in which he thinks through the relation between text and the real, placing animals at the centre of his thought. In the following sections, I turn my attention to that rethinking, and suggest that he finds a new kind of realism in his revisionary process – in, that is, the archive.

**iv. ’Skip the ‘realism’”**

The latter half of the 1990s was a fecund time for Coetzee. While writing *Boyhood* and *Youth* he was simultaneously drafting *Disgrace* and much of *Elizabeth Costello*. Inevitably, much cross-pollination is evident in the archive. Here, for example, are two passages – the first from the published text of ‘Realism’, the opening ‘lesson’ of


\(^{371}\) Ibid, p.13/1.
Elizabeth Costello, first drafted on 2nd January 1996; the other from the published text of Disgrace, first drafted six weeks later, on 14th February 1996. In both, a focal male character recalls a sexual encounter:

When he thinks back over those hours, one moment returns with sudden force, the moment when her knee slips under his arm and folds into his armpit. Curious that the memory of an entire scene should be dominated by one moment, not obviously significant, yet so vivid that he can still almost feel the ghostly thigh against his skin. Does the mind by nature prefer sensations to ideas, the tangible to the abstract? Or is the folding of the woman’s knee just a mnemonic, from which will unfold the rest of the night? (24)

One moment stands out in recollection, when she hooks a leg behind his buttocks to draw him in closer: as the tendon of her inner thigh tightens against him, he feels a surge of joy and desire.372

The first extract poses a question about realism (broadly, a question about reference: is the tangible known in itself, or in its reference to the intangible?) that both keep in suspension. In context, both extracts mark an unusual proleptic-analeptic break from the fiction’s perpetual present tense: in each case, we are still, when we learn of the remembered detail, within the time of the event being recalled, but looking back on it as though from an imagined future. It is the only physical detail we learn about the sex, and we learn of it as a memory in the moment of its making. Thus we are locked out of the tangible knowing of present-tense experience and placed within the past-tense realm of epistemological uncertainty while still in the thick of the moment. Within the realism, in other words, the referent does not exist as a material ‘reality’, it is skipped over; the work of reference is suspended.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will trace some of the mutual influence of the theory and practice of realism in this five-year period, as those processes are visible in the archives of these two texts, focussing in particular on the marks of revision – marks that, I hope to show, become a crucial apparatus in what will

372 J.M. Coetzee, Disgrace (London: Vintage, 2000), p.29. All further references will be to this edition.
emerge as an idiosyncratic response to the question of how to house reality in fiction.

In his indispensably sensitive *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (2015), David Attwell establishes Coetzee’s literary beginnings, in *Dusklands*, as a ‘revolt against what he saw as realism’s unadventurous epistemology’ and documents Coetzee’s long subsequent struggle to ‘make peace’ with the genre. As a gloss for realism Attwell supplies, succinctly, ‘the need to produce verisimilitude’, and appears to associate the term with a particular literary convention: the accumulation of local detail, both social and material, without commentary, in order to create a recognisably textured world through which the characters can move and against which their conceptual resonance can be sounded. Thus, he identifies a passage in an early draft of *In the Heart of the Country* which, he writes, clears the way for that novel’s rejection of ‘realist padding’:

> I am simply going to lose my thread if I try too much particularism of the servants, just as I will lose it if I forget myself in particular enthusiasms about the land (the particular beauty of sheep-bells in the violet dust of the evening, the particular heat of river-sand against my thighs, to name two examples) [...]  

Or Attwell sees in the following note about *Waiting for the Barbarians* evidence that ‘writing realism in the third person’ proves creatively obstructive: “Creating” an illusionistic reality in which he moves depresses me. Hence the exhausted quality of the writing.” Or, he senses a desire to ‘move away from realism altogether’ in the following note about the vexed processes of writing *Life & Times of Michael K*: ‘What I need is a liberation from verisimilitude!’

Attwell is surely right to see in these comments an impatience with the conventions of realist fiction. Yet Coetzee does not, himself, in these examples, use the word ‘realism’, preferring terms like ‘illusionistic’ and ‘verisimilitude’. Attwell will of course know this: it is in an interview with him that Coetzee says, ‘Illusionism

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375 Ibid, pp.73-74.
376 Ibid, p.112.
377 Ibid, p.140.
is [...] a word I use for what is commonly called realism." And, to be sure, a personal critical vocabulary is fluid; one should be wary of identifying too deliberate a glossary in an author’s notebooks. Yet it is worthy of note that when the term does occur in Coetzee’s notebooks, it is usually with a particular resonance. ‘They ("they") want me to be a realist,’ he writes while drafting *Foe*.

They want my books to be-about. Specifically, to be-about South Africa, about social relations in that country. They check my text against what they have picked up from the popular media about SA, and when there is a correspondence they say it is “True”. The rest they cannot, will not read.

Or, he describes *Age of Iron*, an uncharacteristically immediate engagement with apartheid South Africa, as ‘my farewell to realism and to a duty to the South African scene.” While drafting *Disgrace*, nearly a decade later, that farewell is still pending:

Something about the South African material that drives one toward dull realism? A respect for this material that is essentially fearful?

For Coetzee, it seems, realism means South Africa.

Coetzee’s uneasy relationship with realism and South Africa is best understood in relation to his self-suppressed 1987 lecture, ‘The Novel Today’ – composed in part as a response to *Foe’s* hostile South African reception and the accusation that, in their circumvention of realist reference, his books shirk responsible engagement with their historical circumstances. In it, Coetzee distinguishes between novels that ‘supplement’ and those that ‘rival’ history, advocating the latter and envisioning, like Flaubert, a novel that

operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions

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378 Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, ed. Attwell, p.27.
that are checkable by history (as a child's homework is checkable by a schoolmistress).\textsuperscript{382}

A novel should be ‘another, an other mode of thinking’;

history is not reality; [...] history is a kind of discourse; [...] a novel is a kind of discourse too, but a different kind of discourse; [...] inevitably in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse [...]. The categories of history [...] do not reside in reality: they are a certain construction put upon reality.\textsuperscript{383}

Realism, for Coetzee, does not refer to ‘the real’: it refers to another system of reference, an imitation of an imitation, a consensual, mediated and perhaps enforced model of reality. Gareth Cornwell usefully glosses this version of realism as ‘historiographic mimesis’.\textsuperscript{384} Also usefully, he relates it to another essay of Coetzee’s, ‘Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa’ (1986). Written while drafting \textit{Foe}, this essay focuses on the problem of writing torture, as Coetzee had in \textit{Waiting for the Barbarians}. The novelist, Coetzee writes here, has a duty to bear witness to such atrocity but, locked out of the torture chamber, and having thus only the officially authorised version available, she must find a way of imagining what happens within it without simply ‘following’ the state, repeating its ‘vile mysteries’ in a ‘tawdry’ manner; it is a question of ‘how to establish one’s own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one’s own terms.’\textsuperscript{385}

Coetzee’s struggle against realism can also be conceived as a struggle towards realism: not, as such, to disavow the cluster of conventions that constitutes literary realism, but to find a way to employ them that is historically responsible yet not reliant on the approval of historical discourse, that is answerable only to its own authority; not to deny realism, in other words, but to wrest it from the grip of power. ‘Realism’ (the ‘lesson’ in \textit{Elizabeth Costello}) hardly mentions history, atrocity,

\textsuperscript{383} Quoted in ibid, p.351.
\textsuperscript{384} Quoted in ibid, p.352.
\textsuperscript{385} Quoted in ibid, p.352. Emphasis in original. As we have seen, Coetzee’s work in the decades following this essay is equally invested in the divestment of authority. But the divestment of such authority relies on its having been first established.
obscenity. It is, however, an attempt to think beyond the problems of ‘historiographic mimesis’, to find a responsible way to engage with the work of historical reference on one’s own terms. It is a thinking-through, I want to argue, that Coetzee simultaneously puts into practice in Disgrace, a firmly historically-situated realist novel.

‘Realism’ begins life as a public lecture called, ‘What is Realism?’ The content is much the same: in narrative prose focalised through her son, Coetzee describes a lecture given by an eminent, elderly novelist, Elizabeth Costello, entitled ‘What is Realism?’, to which question she supplies intractable answers. In the initial draft, she gives two separate speeches which will eventually become one. In the first, she recalls the publication of her first novel, remembering the thrill of ‘holding in one’s hands one’s first book’ – a thrill soon followed by a concern that it should find a place on a shelf in the British Museum, where it can stand ‘in perpetuity’ (though, even there, she acknowledges, it would not be saved from eventual disintegration). In the published text, this material will function as a few introductory remarks to the lecture proper and thus appear to be of secondary importance. At this stage, however, it is the entirety of Costello’s response to her title question. As though to clarify how it might answer the question, in revision Coetzee appends to her description of ‘holding in one’s hands one’s first book,’ the phrase, ‘knowing it is real.’ By the time of publication, the phrase will have become even more telling: ‘the real thing’. (16) The literary real, here, appears to encompass only the casing of its transmission.

Costello’s second speech in the first draft, conceived later, is also familiar from the book: a few comments on Kafka’s ‘A Report to the Academy’, which will comprise the majority of the eventual speech. But it emerges more slowly, less certainly, its resonance not clear even to its author until the final draft. Coetzee builds Costello’s thoughts about Kafka by accretion, through slow revisiting and reviewing. She begins assertively enough. As in the published text, she outlines

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Kafka’s story – a monologue ‘in which an ape, dressed up in evening clothes, has to make a speech to a learned society’.\textsuperscript{388} Because the story is a monologue,

there is no means, within the story form, for an objective look to be cast either at the speaker or at the audience. For all we know, the speaker may not ‘really’ be an ape, may be no more than a human being deluded into thinking himself an ape [...]\textsuperscript{389}

She elucidates a number of increasingly unlikely interpretations of what might ‘really’ be happening – the assumption being that there is a territory beyond itself that constitutes the story’s reality, but to which the reader has imperfect access – before concluding: ‘We do not know.’\textsuperscript{390} At which point, Coetzee stops writing for two weeks.

There can be any number of reasons for the pause. But one possibility – that he does not know where to take the Kafka material – is suggested by the number of discarded notebook entries he makes during the pause, in which he attempts to articulate the speech’s crux. In one, he has Costello say:

It is not that this is the key to Kafka’s story. It is not that this is a new reading of the story. We are no longer in times when anything is a key to anything else – in which anything is the answer, in other words. In particular I am not offering a key to how to read my own books. I am not a custodian of keys. I am not a custodian of anything at all. I am merely saying that things could be completely otherwise. The form within which the work writes itself [middle voice] makes it seem one way, but the work doesn’t live or die only within that form. The work has another kind of existence as well, independently, that we can imagine, though only dimly and intermittently, because we are used to working within forms. In this other existence – let me call it the idea of the work – things can be quite different. The man and woman who were in love, for instance, can be not in love at all, but self-deceived and mutually deceived...\textsuperscript{391}

\begin{itemize}
    \item\textsuperscript{388} Ibid, p.30. 18 November 1995.
    \item\textsuperscript{389} Ibid, p.32. 22 November 1995.
    \item\textsuperscript{390} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Costello sounds cautiously optimistic, imagining a realm that rivals rather than supplements the discourses that structure our understanding of a text (the creed, here, of romantic love) – a realm we can, however dimly, imagine. When Coetzee returns to the text proper, however, she is less so:

It used to be that we knew these things. It used to be that there was a man named Kafka who knew who was an ape and who a man; and as long as Kafka knew, that was good enough for us. Or we even believed in something simpler: that there was a lecture hall, and we had only to look to see who was lecturing whom.

But all that has ended now. Whatever you want to be going on in the lecture hall is, to all intents and purposes, going on […] There is nothing, not even the words themselves on the page themselves, that can stand up to the reader’s desire. For along with Kafka who seemed to know what was what, and then suddenly disappeared, the time when words stood strong each in their own meaning has also disappeared. Words are just The dictionary, that used to stand beside the Bible and the works of Shakespeare above the fireplace, occupying in the place that in pious Roman houses used to be occupied by the household gods, has been demoted: the dictionary is just one way of cracking the code in the text; there are plenty of other ways.392

‘There used to be a time,’ she concludes, ‘when we knew who we were. Then the bottom dropped out.’393 But she is not wholly nostalgic: ‘We could think of it as a tragic fate, were it not that it is hard to have respect for whatever the bottom was that dropped out’.394 Because of our postmodern scepticism, Costello seems to suggest, the bottom has dropped out of an agreed-upon, monolithic system for referencing the real (a system that we now know to have been a function of power) but we have no shared, communal system of reference with which to replace it; therefore we see only what we, solipsistically, want. The conception of literature that emerges from these two speeches, taken together, is of an empty case, a material container holding nothing more than the desire of whoever happens to look into it, and which will eventually, like the reader, disintegrate.

392 Ibid, MS, Container 30.3, pp.31-32. 5 December 1995.
393 Ibid, p.32.
394 Ibid.
What, then, is realism? Much of Coetzee’s writing over the following weeks worries at the question. Costello’s son, John, is dissatisfied with his mother’s riddling responses – a dissatisfaction shared, I would hazard, given the volume of discarded ideas he has for those responses, by John Coetzee. On Christmas Day 1995, for example, Coetzee has John Costello ask his mother, ‘What *is* realism?’ ‘You don’t know, after all this?’ she wryly responds, and then evades the question (‘Surely you can’t be interested in what your mother thinks?’) before supplying as her answer the single unyielding word: ‘Compromise’.\(^{395}\) Or, on 6\(^{th}\) January, Coetzee writes in his notebook: ‘Realism is a point of departure.’\(^{396}\) On 11\(^{th}\) January:

(Story) To his mother: But why realism? Such a grim subject. It makes me think of Norwegians in smelly underwear.

(Later) His mother: There is something important here, something to bring us down to earth, to deflate our fantasies of omnipotence. If I haven’t put my finger on it, that is my fault.\(^{397}\)

Her uncertainty is resonant; if there is something Coetzee wants to articulate, it seems he has not yet put his finger on it. He will find a degree of clarity when he comes to revise.

The day after he completes the first draft of the Kafka speech, 6\(^{th}\) December 1995, Coetzee begins a new entry in his writing pad. He writes: ‘[Opening]’.\(^{398}\) He has already written an opening to the story – in which Costello and her son arrive in her hotel room – whose first paragraph reads, in its entirety: ‘The hotel is much as he expected... The rooms are large, they have a view over the city...’\(^{399}\) The ellipses are in the original: whatever their status, they are suggestive of a provisional sketch to be returned to and filled in with ‘realist padding’. Now, returning to the opening, rather than fill the gaps, Coetzee’s narrator comments instead on the work of construction he appears to have left for himself:

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397 Ibid, p.29. 11 January 1996.
398 Ibid, MS, Container 30.3, p.32. 6 December 1995.
The problem with the opening is to get from where we are, where we are together, which is nowhere, to the promised subject, which is ‘What is Realism?’ It is a bridging problem: knocking together a bridge to take us from this bank of the river, which is empty, to that one, the promised land.

It is a technical problem, knocking together that bridge. [...]

Let us assume it is done. The bridge has been constructed, we have crossed the bridge, we can leave it behind now, forget it. We are in the subject, into the subject [...] 400

Read in relation to its previous version, the new opening has the feel of a critical-glancing-back: the problem with the opening. Indeed, it is this revisionary self-commentary that allows the text to tell us something, for the first time, about realist practice. This development inaugurates a revisionary method that allows Coetzee to combine such commentary with the more elusive material that constitutes Costello’s lecture(s). The narrative voice becomes, in revision, a discursive one, analysing and evaluating a previous iteration of itself, a discursiveness generated by authorial return. Thus, for instance, when Coetzee returns to his first description of Costello’s attire, her ‘lady novelist’s uniform’, he adds a paragraph in which the narrative voice identifies its description of her ‘costume and pearls’ as ‘signs of a moderate realism’, a literary convention he defines here thus: ‘Realism: supply the particulars, rely on the reader to infer their social meaning.’ 401 Indeed, all of the story’s insights into what the work of realism involves develop in this way. It is through evaluating its archive that the story begins to answer its title question. The implications of this process are most apparent when Coetzee deletes material: every significant deletion is marked by the narrator with a ‘skip’. Thus, for example, a scene in a restaurant, comprising mainly dialogue, in which we learn that the son is a physicist teaching at a university, is replaced, on 11th December 1995, with:

I skip the restaurant scene. Nothing of importance occurs. It emerges that the son is a physicist by profession, teaching at a university. 402

The restaurant scene is not a blank but an erasure: revision is recorded in the text. There are many such moments in the story.

Revisionary practice directly informs intellectual content: in one of those searching notebook entries, this one of 7th January 1996, Coetzee writes:

Mother: ‘It is not forbidden, within realism, to skip time. But the writer must be able to envisage what happens in the dead time, in the finest detail.’

The following day, working now on the third draft, Coetzee adds a dialogue between mother and son which elaborates on this idea. John asks his mother to clarify her definition of realism. ‘You don’t know, after all that talk?’ she responds, though does not answer. It is not her job, she says, to think: she writes. ‘Then,’ John asks, ‘how do you write?’ ‘By allowing things to pass through me,’ she says.

[…] By allowing another world to live inside me. Not live. Lodge. Coexist. So that one knows, so that it is known, what is going on in that world even when I am not explicitly looking at it. A world in its own right. Therefore not a world that needs to be composed on the page. I am just a picture restorer.

John does not think to question his mother’s confusing logic but wants to know what relevance Kafka has. Costello attempts an explanation:

There is one moment when Kafka reveals himself as a realist. When he tries to imagine what it would be like for his ape to mate. Where, he wonders, is it going to find a female at the same stage of evolution? His poor male is alone in the world, one of a kind. At that moment you realize he has thought the story through to the end, that he isn't just writing an ironic fable.

When he returns to this dialogue a month later, after continuing his revisionary evaluation of the text – in which he marks his erasures with a 'skip' – Coetzee adds
to Costello’s response: ‘[Kafka] is awake during the gaps while we sleep. That was why I brought him in. He watched, he saw, he knew.’ Those skips in the text – the ‘gaps’ – are becoming in some way crucial to Costello’s conception of realism. (‘Skip the ‘realism’,’ Coetzee writes in a concurrent note of 20th December 1995, in which he considers rewriting Disgrace ‘in more parabolic form.’) After yet another month, returning to this dialogue in the eighth, penultimate draft, Coetzee once again extends Costello’s thinking with a new paragraph. In a response, now, to her son’s suggestion that Kafka cannot be a realist because he did not write about ‘Norwegians in smelly underwear [and] people picking their noses,’ she says (I quote now from the published text):

But Kafka had time to wonder where and how his poor educated ape was going to find a mate. And what it was going to be like when he was left in the dark with the bewildered, half-tamed female that his keepers eventually produced for his use. Kafka’s ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself. His ape is embedded as we are embedded, you in me, I in you. That ape is followed through to the end, to the bitter, unsayable end, whether or not there are traces left on the page. Kafka stays awake during the gaps when we are sleeping.

Cornwell sees in the word ‘embeddedness’,

another name for the intersubjective space in which the dramas of recognition and surprise that constitute the act of reading can be staged. In this sense, “realism” is inseparable from intersubjectivity, a premise on which all successful artistic representation of human experience would seem to depend.

I do not disagree per se. Yet Cornwell does not suggest how these fictional characters are embedded in life rather than in the discourses of history; he does not say what has replaced the bottom that has fallen out.

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To my mind, the key word in this passage is ‘left’. For a trace not to be left on the page, it must once have had presence; it has to have been revised out: the phrase implies an erasure rather than a blank. Costello (or, better, Coetzee), it seems to me, is talking about the worklings-out of fiction-making, the reams of discarded imaginings that litter the compositional floor – about, in other words, the archive. The inaccessible territory that serves, for the fiction, as ‘the real’, becomes a material one. It is the avant-texte: the drafts, the notebooks, the dissecta membra. If, as I suggested above, revision is a site of intersubjectivity between at least two distinct moments of subjectivity – author past and author present – it might, then, function as a metonymy for the kind of intersubjectivity Cornwell sees as the condition of realism, one which circumvents the discourses of history. The field is not level: for the author, the archive exists as a defined material and psychological realm of strenuous labour, while for the majority of readers it exists only in dim imagination. But by drawing attention to his texts’ genetic histories, especially in reading the text aloud as per its original existence as a lecture – holding the paper, the text’s material existence, in his hands – every time he performs a skip he actualises the text’s archival dimension: the listener hears one version of the text and sees, in the paper, the material possibility of another, more thoroughly imagined one, gestured at but unavailable. The reality to which the text refers is its own genetic history. If the bottom has fallen out of the discourse of reference, the archive provides, for Coetzee, a new, paper-strewn floor. ‘Realism’ becomes a text that acknowledges, as Derrida said in an interview with Derek Attridge (an annotated photocopy of which is collected in Coetzee’s archive), ‘There is no literature without a suspended relation to meaning and reference’.409 It becomes a text, in other words, which does not give up on the possibility of reference, but which can refer with authority and certainty to its own recorded history, can ‘[operate] in terms of its own procedure and [issue] in its own conclusions’.410

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Before examining how these ideas influence the writing of *Disgrace*, I want briefly to consider one final aspect of Costello’s realism. In one of those many searching notebook entries, Coetzee writes:

(Mother) **The realism** Realism means knowing what underclothes they wear, what they do when they go to the bathroom, what happens when the light is off.

(He) So you watch that poor ape, you and Franz Kafka, watching him night and day, watching him pee, watching him with the poor half-tamed female, trying to...

John’s ellipsis confers a degree of respectful privacy on the apes. According to Costello’s shameless conception of realism, however, ellipses must mark erasures rather than blanks: realism does not respect privacy. In the published novel, John will go as far as to call his mother’s realist mode ‘zoo-keeping, not writing.’ (32) She will not disagree. ‘Don’t animals deserve a private life as much as we do?’ (33) John will ask. ‘Not if they are in a zoo,’ Costello will respond. ‘Once you are on show, you have no private life.’ (33) Realism becomes a voyeuristic, exploitative scrutinising of the body of the other rather than a display of sympathetic insight. But in the second Costello text Coetzee will write – his Tanner Lectures, given at Princeton University on 15th and 16th October 1997 and first published in 1999 as *The Lives of Animals* – Costello will boldly position herself inside, rather than outside, the animal’s body.

In his research for the project, Coetzee explores the ways in which animals are subjected to the traditions and discourses of rational humanism. The structures of language and narrative that constitute the writer’s tools become the bars of the cage. ‘Think of Descartes,’ he writes in a note of 10th May 1997,

sitting in his room, having thoughts, turning those thoughts into perfectly expressed propositions which, by elevating thought above (mere) passion, condemn those who have no words (no thoughts) to eternal servitude.412

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‘As with slave peoples,’ he writes in another, ‘animals have no histories. The only history they have is what we tell about them.’ But he begins, too, to consider how to apprehend that which exceeds capture. Language, inevitably, is insufficient. In a note about Ted Hughes’s jaguar – whose ‘stride’ within his cage ‘is wildernesses of freedom’ – he writes:

[Hughes] takes language to its (or a) limit and at that limit faces us with a contradiction: (a) the language fits the life of the other; (b) the language is not its but ours, the other is utterly impervious to it. It is like trying to bring someone to life (trying to arouse someone erotically) and failing utterly. The self is given without reserve, in the fullness of its powers, and it is not enough.

If writing the animal other is to ‘fail utterly’ then how is the writer to proceed? In the middle of a note of 29th April 1996 about David Lurie’s affair, in Disgrace, with his student Melanie Isaacs, Coetzee instructs himself: ‘Reread Levinas on the face in the context of animals. The animal’s face.’ Levinas, who founded his philosophy of ethics on the primacy of the face-to-face encounter, writes of the ‘epiphany of the face of the other’ – a singular moment of encounter which fosters a personal responsibility and creates a relation between self and other that, before anything else, is what makes us human: ‘I am responsible before I am an observer or explainer or interpreter,’ Michael L. Morgan glosses; ‘I am, in a sense, a moral agent before I am a cognitive one.’ Before language, that is, before politics, the human is ethical:

words, communication, and speech all arise out of and are embedded in a prelinguistic relationship of encounter between myself and a particular other person [...] it is a relationship with the other person's “face,” not with her appearance or features or whatever; it is with the fragility and dependence on me of her very being.

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418 Ibid.
The ethical relationship is a perpetually singular encounter predicated on an experience of an absence of knowledge that calls the self into question; it is a constant newness, constant erasure. By 30th September the same year, Coetzee appears to have digested Levinas:

It is a matter of seeing the animal’s face, but not seeing it as a reflection or likeness to one’s own (empathy). Every contact must be unique, as though preceded [sic] by no history. This means that every contact is unaided by culture.\footnote{Coetzee Papers, ‘The Lives of Animals’, 1997-2002, typed notes, Container 30.1, p.2. 30 September 1996.}

Apprehending the voiceless other in structures that exceed the limits of empathy, in other words, requires a perpetual and total revision – a process which would make writing impossible. The dilemma becomes Costello’s. ‘Her son has persuaded her to accept the invitation,’ reads a note from just over a month later, still over half a year before Coetzee starts writing the text:

She writes her paper, trying out one opening after another. Always unsatisfactory. Always back to the situation of leaving the animals behind when she begins to speak/write.\footnote{Ibid, p.3. 9 November 1996.}

The animal prompts such interminable revision that the writer is unable to begin.

In the published text, however, Costello does not falter. Instead, she gives a long, remarkable and optimistic lecture about what she calls ‘the faculty of sympathy’. Western philosophy has traditionally held, she argues, that it is impossible to sympathise with the animal. She disagrees. ‘To Aquinas and Descartes,’ she says in the first draft,

it was impossible to think oneself into the being of an animal because animals do not possess reason and thought is reason. This is nonsense. Thought is not reason. Reason is a minor function of thought.\footnote{Ibid, MS, Container 30.2, p.23. 7 July 1997. Revised 2 August 1997.}
By divesting herself of rational thought, the writer can find her way into another kind of thinking, which Costello, in the published text, describes as,

fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being – not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation – a heavily affective sensation – of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world. (78)

Thus she provides an answer to Thomas Nagel’s question, ‘What is it Like to be a Bat?’:

To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. [...] To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is joy. (77-78)

Conceiving of sympathy as ‘a question not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body’, (96) she proposes:

there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination. (80)

Neither Costello nor Coetzee use the animal as a metaphor for the fictional character; the question of the proper ethical relation with the animal is, for both, its own question. But the question of literary sympathy is, for Costello at least, of the same kind: ‘If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed,’ she says,

then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life. (80)

I am wary of reading Costello’s trajectory from zookeeper to mystic as Coetzee’s. Her lecture is, to be sure, punctuated by snorts of derision from John’s philosopher wife, Norma. But Norma’s relentless rationalism can seem comic when held next to Costello’s moral seriousness. And the text itself appears to emerge, rare for Coetzee,
in a single burst of writing, undergoing apparently just one round of (mostly stylistic) revision. Costello’s expression of faith in boundless sympathy does therefore being to look like a moment of authorial expressiveness. So it is sobering to recall that Coetzee is simultaneously engaged in the drafting of a novel whose apparent pessimism regarding ‘the faculty of sympathy’ is perhaps unsurpassed. But, as I hope to suggest, Costello’s influence is strongly felt.

v. ‘The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?’

On the 25th March 1995, midway through drafting Boyhood and just before beginning ‘What is Realism?’, Coetzee writes in his notebook:


> He teaches at a university. Distinguished. A girl is friendly, makes overtures. They sleep together several times. She begins to make demands. He realises she is serious: she expects a return for her expenditure. He digs in his feels. She denounces him.

> He falls into professional and social disgrace. His daughter’s intense disappointment."

Disgrace will pass through many difference versions of itself – it will take in suicide and murder, pass through farce and tragedy – but from beginning to end, these three women will form its backbone. Throughout the drafting process, as we have seen, Coetzee is elsewhere thinking about how to apprehend other people, other bodies, in realist fiction. In this section, I will trace the development of his writing about each of these three women, who at various moments in the novel exist at the extremes of female bodily experience, focussing on a moment of particular moral intensity in his writing of each, in order to suggest how the development of his conception of ‘archival realism’, as I have outlined it, and his thinking of sympathy

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enable something approaching an apprehension of their singularity. It is not, always, easy material to read.

1. ‘The woman he goes to once a month for sex.’

Coetzee begins writing Disgrace on 10th August 1995, midway through the first draft of ‘What is Realism?’, a few months before Kafka enters. These first pages begin as the novel does: a close, third-person realist narrator channels a late-middle-aged man’s precarious self-satisfaction as he considers his weekly visits to a sex worker called Soraya. In Lurie’s consciousness, and therefore in the novel, she has, to begin with, little presence beyond her function in his life. He has little interest in her singularity: he ‘has the decency not to ask’ how she entered ‘this line of business’, and thus ‘spares himself the irritation of having to listen to a story which he is sure will be concocted.’ Instead he superimposes over her reality his own version of her: ‘It is not possible,’ he falsely deduces, ‘for her to give him the pleasure she does without feeling it herself.’ Accordingly, there are few realist signifiers associated with her. On the one occasion Lurie does display some curiosity, there is nothing to see:

Once, when she was in the bathroom, he idly opened the chest of drawers. It was almost empty. The kitchen is the same: a kettle, a few plastic cups, instant coffee.

That ‘almost’ is suggestive. But if, as Coetzee will shortly have Costello’s narrator suggest, realism relies on the dispassionate depiction of material detail accumulated to create the impression of a singularly embodied life, if it relies on social and ethical resonance emerging uncoaxed from the dynamics of its object world, then, in this first narrative gesture of Disgrace, Soraya is denied access to its possibilities. In the published novel, there will, in these scenes, be two conspicuously signifying objects: ‘He likes giving her presents. At New Year he gave her an enamelled bracelet, at Eid a little malachite heron that caught his eye in a curio shop.’ (5) If they suggest

423 Though he has not yet settled on a name, I will refer to the man throughout as David Lurie.
425 Ibid.
anything about Soraya, however, it is only about Lurie’s construction of her: Lurie, at the start of the novel, will be in charge of her realism.

On the same day that he writes about the emptiness of the room in which they meet, Coetzee writes a single sentence in his notebook: ‘Sees Soraya in the street with her children.’ The note speaks of an intention to give Soraya a life outside of that room – the ‘cage’ of realism – and to stage an unprompted encounter with the reality of that life. The next day, he establishes the rudiments of the scene: Lurie notices Soraya out shopping with her two sons and, unseen, watches her enter a fish restaurant. Like Costello’s realist voyeur, he proceeds to make deductions by reading the signs: ‘she is carrying a parcel; they have evidently been shopping.’ But his speculations begin to demonstrate the instability of this kind of deductive knowledge: ‘A wife and a mother. With a home, probably in Athlone, and a husband, and bills to pay.’ Why must she be married? Why Athlone? Lurie is fitting her into a template and, in his positivist epistemology, the illusion of knowing through seeing fosters ‘a sort of power over her’, though he concedes it is ‘not a power he wants.’

With this chance encounter all there is by way of dramatic incident in the novel, Coetzee ceases to work on it for six months. In the meantime, he completes ‘What is Realism?’ and continues drafting Boyhood. He returns to the material on 2nd April 1996, revising the prose and writing a new section in which he describes the effect of the unprompted encounter on their subsequent sessions:

He says nothing to Soraya about having seen her. [...] In a curious way, the presence of the two little boys playing like shadows in the room in which they are making love, intensifies his feeling for her. While he is with Soraya, and particularly while he is inside her, he feels that they are is [sic] their foster-father or step-father or shadow-father, that they are his.

428 Ibid, MS, Container 35.4, p.7. 23 August 1993. [sic]
429 Ibid.
430 Ibid.
431 Before he does so, Coetzee will start to draft Lurie’s encounters with Melanie Isaacs and begin thinking about his daughter, Lucy. Though both developments have an effect on the development of this material, I will, for the sake of lucidity, try to untangle some of those knots below, in the hope of casting retrospective rather than immediate light on the development of the opening chapters.
His insight into the reality of her life has led here to an experience of sympathy ('feeling for') which has an analogue in the sexual act (being ‘inside her’). Soraya and her two children – ‘like shadows’ – are now the subjects of fiction rather than knowledge, and the illusory experience of sympathetic insight is one of total power: ‘they are his.’ Having begun with ‘no interest in her private life’, Lurie’s interest subsequently becomes obsessive; he even pays a detective agency to follow her. Whatever of her inner life may now register in the text is the result of both invention and invasion. Realism, at this stage, is an overpowering.

It is between this round of revision, begun on the 2nd April 1996, and the next, which he begins on 22nd May 1996, that Coetzee instructs himself to reread Levinas on the animal’s face (29th April 1996). Levinas’s influence on this material is clear. In the revised unprompted encounter, Lurie is no longer the unseen watcher. Now, Soraya notices him and meets his eye: ‘For an instant, through the glass, her eyes meet his; then she looks away again.’433 It is, now, a face-to-face encounter. In this iteration, Lurie’s experience of power remains. In revision Coetzee even strengthens the certainty of his deductions: ‘Her forefathers had probably been in Africa longer than his’ becomes ‘Her forefathers came to Africa a century before his.’434 But when he returns to the material a few months later all references to knowledge gained from observation, and to the subsequent experience of power, are simply deleted:

So: a married woman, with a husband and children and bills to pay.

His knowledge gives him power over her, a power he does not want.

Her forefathers came to Africa a hundred years before.435

In the published novel, Lurie will make some of these deductive assumptions, and other more invasive ones, before the unprompted encounter. But during the face-to-face moment itself there will be no record of Lurie’s inner life. It will read, simply:

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433 Ibid, Container 35.6, Chapter 1, p.3. 4 April 1996. Revised 22 May 1996.
434 Ibid, p.4.
He walks on, turns back, passes Captain Dorego’s a second time. The three are seated at a table in the window. For an instant, through the glass, Soraya’s eyes meet his.

(6)

All we learn of his subsequent thoughts is that ‘he regrets [it] at once’, no more. (6) The face-to-face encounter allows Lurie and Soraya to coexist, in the fiction, as mutually unknowable; Soraya’s singularity registers without the imposition of Lurie’s language.

One small, late revision might cast light on the new effect of their encounter. On 15th March 1997, Coetzee revises the following sentence.

The two little boys he has seen become presences at the Wednesday sessions, playing quiet as shadows in the corner of the room where he and their mother are making love.

In revision, ‘he and their mother’ becomes ‘the strange man and their mother’; ‘making love’ becomes ‘coupling’.436 In the published text, the moment will read:

The two little boys become presences between them, playing quiet as shadows in a corner of the room where their mother and the strange man couple. In Soraya’s arms he becomes, fleetingly, their father: foster-father, step-father, shadow-father. Leaving her bed afterwards, he feels their eyes flicker over him covertly, curiously.

(6)

‘[W]here their mother and the strange man couple’ is a typically rudderless late-Coetzean instance of free indirect style, moving from a foaclisation with Lurie (‘their mother’) imperceptibly through to his own sympathetic identification with the children whose language momentarily structures his thinking (‘the strange man’) and back to a language that exceeds the grasp of a child’s semantics (‘couple’). The experience for Lurie is no longer one of mastery (‘he feels […] that they are his’) but one of self-othering, self-alienation. Lurie himself becomes ‘strange’; he, himself becomes the ‘covertly’ watched, the imagined subject of an imagined, invasive

fictionalising consciousness (or consciousnesses) in a moment of bodily intimacy. If there is knowledge here, then it is not like the positivist knowledge he felt he had gained in the earlier drafts but something closer to Costello’s estranging ‘fullness’: a knowledge of the strangeness of the body, the otherness of the self, the selfness of the other. It is perhaps his reading of Levinas that allows Coetzee to approach an apprehension of otherness in a text that has no room for the other.

2. ‘A girl is friendly, makes overtures.’

On the face of it the least concerned of Coetzee’s novels with its fictional status, its coming-into-being, Disgrace is nevertheless largely characterised by its aporias: textual impasses whose relation to meaning and reference are suspended. It is my contention that these manifestations of textual doubt are not designed as moments of difficulty but rather record the knots and obstructions, the doubts and anxieties of their composition – and that they are crucial to the novel’s functioning (or, non-functioning) as a realist text. As I hope to show in the following account, they are a practical expression of what I have come to think of as Costello’s ‘archival realism’, which Coetzee is simultaneously working to articulate.

The terms of Lurie’s relations with his student, Melanie Isaacs, are the most consistently unsettled element of the novel’s composition. Coetzee revises the circumstances of their relationship from the moment of first conception to final copy, never not uncertain about the dynamics of their encounter and, in particular, the question of Isaacs’s consent. In the note in which she first appears, Isaacs is not only the instigator but is apparently in charge of the relationship: ‘A girl is friendly, makes overtures. They sleep together several times. She begins to make demands.’437 When she first appears in draft, almost a year later, on 13th February 1996 (towards the end of Coetzee’s work on ‘What is Realism?’), Isaacs no longer quite takes the lead but appears still to be a willing participant. ‘After class he catches her eye,’ the material begins, their affair in media res; ‘pretending to gather her papers,’ she lingers. Lurie drives her home, she ‘invites him in for coffee,’ and the following paragraph begins: ‘They make love in the bedroom […]’.438 An academic lawyer, this Lurie takes Isaacs away for a weekend in Johannesburg,
where he gives the keynote address at a conference on land rights and begins to understand (as, perhaps, does Coetzee) that her active participation might not be so uncomplicated: ‘there is another story to be told,’ he comes to realise, ‘[...] another set of memories being stored, memories he can with effort imagine, though he refuses to do so’.\textsuperscript{439}

Lurie’s failure of empathy appears also to be his author’s: the following day, after a few attempts to imagine Isaacs’s inner life, Coetzee abandons the material entirely and begins again. Now Lurie is an historian and Isaacs his postgraduate student, writing a thesis on the history of South African psychiatric services. She retains her agency; she even seems the more active party when, in this version, Lurie declines her invitation for ‘coffee’. Yet the deeper – and more formal – understanding of the dynamic intensifies:

\begin{quote}
He has the sense not to tell himself it is she who is seducing him. In a constellation such as this one – a teacher and a student, an older man and a younger woman – there is no division of blame. No matter what she says, no matter what she does, the blame is responsibility is his, every jot and tittle of it.\textsuperscript{440}
\end{quote}

This understanding informs the new dramatic arrangement of their sexual encounter: now, Lurie drives to her house, forces his way in and forces himself upon her. All we learn of her participation is that she ‘gives way to him’, and that, spuriously, ‘in the most intimate movements of her body he feels an answering passion’.\textsuperscript{441} The ‘other story’ is now left out of the text. Like Michael K’s medical officer, Lurie even rechristens her, thinking of her as ‘the girl Meláni, who is what he has chosen her to be’.\textsuperscript{442}

Coetzee tries again. Next, Lurie is an English lecturer, his specialism the influence of classical landscape writing on Pope’s pastoral. Isaacs is writing a thesis on ‘Landscape and Gender in South African Settler Writing.’\textsuperscript{443} They clash intellectually. Isaacs’s feminist reading of the poet Thomas Pringle sounds rather like one conception of the realist novel that emerges in \textit{Disgrace}: Pringle’s writing

\begin{footnotes}
\item[439] Ibid, p.16. 15 February 1996.
\item[440] Ibid, p.23. 21 February 1996.
\item[441] Ibid, p.24.
\item[442] Ibid, p.25. 22 February 1996.
\item[443] Ibid, p.32. 11 March 1996.
\end{footnotes}
'penetrates the feminized landscape and appropriates it [...] exposing its hidden parts to light'.\textsuperscript{444} Lurie dismisses her 'orthodox' approach as '[p]art of a huge paranoid fantasy'.\textsuperscript{445} (Though he himself conceives of South Africa earlier in the draft as a 'land of beautiful women [...] that seems to bring forth every year a more beautiful crop.'\textsuperscript{446}) But now the sexual content, which takes its cue from their intellectual interests, is minimal. Out running one day, Lurie is surprised when Isaacs, oblivious, overtakes him on the path; he returns to his car and watches, still unseen, as she, nymphlike, runs through the woods.\textsuperscript{447} At their next supervision, he suggests they go running together. Immediately, Isaacs files a charge of harassment, accusing him of putting 'pressure' on her. Her agency, in this version, supersedes his: 'If this is what she says happened,' Lurie says when confronted with the accusations, which we are not permitted to see, 'then it must have happened.'\textsuperscript{448} The 'other story' is still left out but now it dictates his own, present through its agency.

Yet, again, Coetzee rearranges the material. Now, Isaacs reluctantly agrees to run with Lurie but, afterwards, she stops turning up for supervisions. Here, Coetzee returns to the previous version of the sexual encounter, in which Lurie turns up unannounced at her door and forces himself upon her. This time, however, her non-consent is unmistakeable: 'As he tightens his grip on her he can feel her going slack. A sense of triumph runs through him. [...] She stumbles like a doll. She has no will left.'\textsuperscript{449} The act itself is not described; Isaacs's experience is absent.

These versions do not exist as discrete documents, one after the other, but are all a part of the same document, locatable (thanks to Coetzee's dating) within a network of revisions, crossings-out, cross-referencings, restructurings. The work of revision is visibly strenuous, dizzying to follow. At this point in the drafting, with no clear priority given to any one version of their sexual encounter, a kind of revisionary frustration enters the text, marked diegetically in a letter to Isaacs at which Lurie anxiously labours, and in which, like Coetzee, he tries to make sense of the dynamics of their relationship. Coetzee describes the letter like a genetic critic describing the revisionary markings on an archival document:

\textsuperscript{444} Ibid, p.40. 18 March 1996.
\textsuperscript{445} Ibid, p.35. 13 March 1996.
\textsuperscript{446} Ibid, p.33, 11 March 1996.
\textsuperscript{447} Ibid, pp.36-37. 15 March 1996
\textsuperscript{448} Ibid, p.42. 19 March 1996.
\textsuperscript{449} Ibid, p.61. 24 April 1996.
'When we began,' says the letter, 'there was a gulf fixed between us.' That sentence is crossed out. 'It is not possible,' the letter recommences, 'that a man of my age should feel for a woman of your age feelings no less intense, sincere, driving.' Driving is crossed out, then the whole sequence is crossed out. 'You should think carefully before,' begins the third sentence; there are fourth and fifth and sixth sentences, all crossed out. All that is not crossed out is the salutation – 'Dear Melanie' – and the ending: 'Sincerely yours, David Lurie.'

If this letter communicates anything, it is only its own revisionary struggle.

The day after writing this paragraph, Coetzee once again begins again, deliberately problematising the question of Isaacs's agency. She is an undergraduate again. Lurie runs into her on his way home, offers her a lift, and invites her now into his house for coffee, as he will in the published novel. She does not respond; to Lurie's mind, 'Saying nothing means yes.' In the house, she takes an active, even coquettish role in conversation. But, once again, her non-consent is unambiguous – or: ambiguous only to Lurie, who superimposes his own text over the real: 'Her resistance is real, but it is only formal. [...] She says NO, she says NO more than once, but that too is only formal.' Afterwards, Isaacs is clearly traumatised, becomes withdrawn on campus: in the final, poignant one-sentence section of this version, Coetzee writes: ‘At the end of the period she slides out of the room, holding her satchel to her breast as if to protect herself.’ She has come a very long way from her original conception.

A few days after writing this unpleasant scene, Coetzee writes in his notebook:

The kind of novel I am being pulled towards writing requires that, after he has been denounced, there is a period in which pressure on him builds up, until it's so great that he breaks and/or leaves. For this I have neither the patience nor the talent. So: how to give in summary without moving into a half-baked postmodernist mode?

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450 Ibid, p.71. 8 May 1996.
451 Ibid, p.75. 10 May 1996.
452 Ibid, pp.76-77. 11 May 1996.
Coetzee is not, here, thinking of the Isaacs material but the impulse to summarise, consistent with his impatience with the conventions of realism, has general application.\textsuperscript{455} When he returns to the scene, he begins to cut swathes through it, erasing the particulars of the sexual encounter: now, all the (lengthy) material in which the question of Isaacs’s non-consent is addressed, from which I only selectively quoted above, is deleted in full, and replaced with a single sentence: ‘He reaches across and with his fingertips brushes the back of her hand.’\textsuperscript{456} Her response is not recorded; nor is the event itself. The following paragraph begins: ‘It is not rape.’\textsuperscript{457} Coetzee has been circling the question of the legal status of the event. In the previous version, that status is easy to determine; now, with no representation of the event itself, this defensive negation places the reader in the position of juror, it commands judgement, but the means by which we might judge are withheld – or, rather, the particulars can no longer form the basis of our judgement. The representation of the sexual encounter has, through summary, through erasure, become a site of aporia. But, crucially, rather than allow it to stand thus, Coetzee now adds the previous arrangement of the sexual encounter onto the end of this scene. At the end of the chapter, Isaacs stops attending lectures as before, but the scene in which Lurie arrives, unannounced, at her door and forces himself upon her now follows. Rather than chose between the two versions, in other words, Coetzee has chosen to present the reader with both. Isaacs’s archival plurality is becoming a textual one.

He leaves the material for four months. During the gap, on 31\textsuperscript{st} August 1996, he makes the following note:

The form I am working towards is that of the synopsised novel. As though there were a fully-written realistic novel in the background which is being retold in synopsis. One gets an example in \textit{Don Quixote} when Q tells the story of a stereotypical romance. Impression of pace. Not being sure whether you are in the base novel or in the summary of it.\textsuperscript{458}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{455} Ibid, p.23.
\textsuperscript{456} Ibid, MS, Container 35.4, pp.76-77. 11 May 1996. Revised 24 May 1996.
\textsuperscript{457} Ibid, p.76.
\end{footnotesize}
David Attwell sees in this note an idea that never came to fruition: ‘Needless to say,’ he writes, ‘the synopsized novel was not the novel he ended up writing.’ I read it differently. I see here a description of something already in process, even an inevitability: *the form I am working towards*. Reading the note against Costello’s narrator’s skips, I would argue that *Disgrace* is, if not a synopsised novel, then a novel which is stylistically influenced by the synopsis, a novel whose affective experience is of ‘not being sure whether you are in the base novel or the summary of it’, the text or the performance of the text. Summary infuses its language. To point to just one example: when Lurie runs into Soraya in the street, the moment, which sets in motion the novel’s plot, is introduced thus: ‘Then one Saturday morning everything changes. He is in the city on business [...]’. (6) This is the language of the blurb, a sensationalist, selective revision of a text: *then one Saturday morning everything changes*. And: *he is in the city on business*: why the secrecy? Why should Lurie’s ‘business’ not be communicated to the reader? What can it be? Speculating thus can hardly be the point; were the detail to be revealed, we assume, we would recognise its unimportance. But at moments like these (and the novel is woven from such moments), if we pause to speculate about what the referent might, in reality, be, the ground beneath us falls away and we realise how limited, how imperfect is our access to the realm this text takes for the real.

I skip to March 1997, when Coetzee next significantly reconceives of the scenes with Melanie Isaacs. Now in the sixth draft of the seduction scene, they no longer have sex after dinner; Isaacs says, ‘I must go,’ and Lurie sees her out. In revision, Coetzee adds yet another scene between this one and the following, more forceful sex scene. It is written as though in detailed synopsis. Lurie phones Isaacs and invites her to lunch. Her response is not recorded (though it is gestured at) and the text moves on. Here is how it appears in the published text:

‘[...] I’ll pick you up at, shall we say, twelve.’

There is still time for her to tell a lie, wriggle out. But she is too confused, and the moment passes.

When he arrives, she is waiting on the sidewalk [...]’ (18)

The question of her agency, in other words – her volition and consent – is entirely removed, *skipped over*. Whatever her response, it exists in a realm beyond the reach of this myopic text, though not beyond the reach of its author’s imagining. The lunch itself is dealt with in only a few lines, at the end of which Lurie asks, ‘Shall we leave?’ Once again, Isaacs’s response is not given, her consent withheld. Here is the paragraph that immediately follows his question (I return to the sixth draft):

‘Shall we leave?’

He takes her back to his house. To the sound of rain pattering against the windows he makes love to her on the living-room floor. The act, once under way, is intensely pleasurable, so pleasurable that from its climax he tumbles into white oblivion, forgetting to breathe, the very tissue of his brain wiped clean.460

This key moment in the novel – the first sexual contact between Lurie and Isaacs – is now imperfectly represented, told in a disconcerting blend of the coldly synoptic (‘the act, once under way’) and the purple (‘he tumbles into white oblivion’). Isaacs’s presence, her agency, her volition, her consent, are again written out; the traces are not left on the page. We are not sure if we are in the base novel or in the summary of it.

Still, the question of Isaacs’s agency continues to occupy Coetzee. In the following months he begins, perhaps surprisingly, to fashion for her a positive sexuality: Lurie speculates on what might have gone through her mind during the night of their first encounter, putting Joycean consent into her mouth: ‘Yes. Yes, I will. I will [...] put my ear to his chest and hear the heartbeat of power.’461 To be sure, this is filtered through Lurie’s consciousness. But Coetzee now adds yet another version of their relationship into the mix, in which some of that positivity is borne out in Isaacs’s behaviour: *she* starts turning up at his home unannounced, asking for favours, staying the night. She becomes the active party once more. ‘She has him under the finger,’ Lurie thinks. ‘She is getting whatever she wants.’462

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There will be another year or so of revision and reconception, each scene will be considerably more nuanced and morally complex than is suggested in these outlines, and more unified. But, to rest my account here: all the different Melanies who exist in the archive are now present and accounted for, as they will be in the published novel. There is the first Melanie, the Melanie who took charge and started ‘to make demands’; there is the passive victim of Lurie’s force; there is the Melanie who resists his ‘pressure’. And, crucially, their very first sexual encounter is presented in such summarised form that we have no way of knowing what ‘really happened’. All the other Melanies follow from this originary aporia, this erasure. She is her accumulated drafts and yet her truth lies beyond the reach of the text: she is at once plural and blank. Her reality – the book’s realism, such as it is – is archival, as though the book is a summary of its archive. Coetzee has found a way to represent the historically-specific dynamics of the workings of power on his own terms.

There are plenty of examples in Disgrace of previous drafts finding presence in the text. In each case, the result is an aporia sometimes so mild that it hardly registers; accumulated, however, they contribute to the unplaceable unease readers experience while reading this book. I have space to consider only one such instance, which occurs when Lurie and his daughter, Lucy, are attacked on her farm. Their attackers gain entry to the house by asking to use the phone: ‘His sister,’ one of them explains in the first draft, ‘is having a baby’. As he writes, Coetzee crosses out the words ‘a baby’ and replaces them with ‘an accident’, creating a strange continuous present tense: His sister is having an accident.463 The revision has created a linguistic knot; can an accident be continuous or is it necessarily momentary? We might assume it to be the result of a language barrier. But the knot tightens. Coetzee revises the following dialogue accordingly but, when he returns for a second round of revision, he revises some of it back into its original form. Here is how it appears in the published text:

The young one speaks. ‘We must telephone.’

‘Why must you telephone?’

‘His sister’ – he gestures vaguely behind him – ‘is having an accident.’

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'An accident?'
'Yes, very bad.'
'What kind of accident?'
'A baby.'
'His sister is having a baby?'
'Yes.' (92)

I always found this moment odd; I never understood why Lucy and her father, who are nervous and alert, see nothing suspicious in the exchange: ‘He and Lucy exchange glances. [...] The story makes sense.’ (92-93) But ‘the story’ does not make sense, is clearly being invented and revised on the spot; they are being presented with two possible versions, both genetically authentic but mutually exclusive. Two drafts come into contact and do not quite fit together. At this moment of keen narrative suspense, the archival knot interrupts the flow of the realism, at precisely the point at which the fabrication of narrative is at issue. A story is being put together but its reality is inaccessible, its authenticity uncheckable: reference is suspended.

3. ‘His daughter’s intense disappointment.’
Coetzee makes the very first note towards Disgrace on 13th December 1994. It reads:

A man at the prime of his career, a respected writer, is invited onto a Truth Commission. He declines: he says no one is morally competent to sit in judgment; his private motive is the knowledge that he is not morally competent OR is guilty and may be found out.

He has seduced a student. She is about to denounce him.

Blackmail?

His daughter. Her clear eyes.464

Those two final, verbless sentences will resonate throughout the drafting of the novel. Clear eyes mean clear-sightedness, but they also entail transparency and legibility, speaking to realism’s desire for access. Lurie’s daughter, Lucy, however, is defined in the published text by misreading and obscurity. She is got wrong from the

very beginning; even her arrival in the holograph on 18th May 1996, eighteen months after this note, is marked by a misreading: ‘A woman comes out onto the stoep: it takes him a moment to recognize that it is Lucy.’ Suggestively, in the published novel this misreading will register differently: ‘From the shade of the stoep Lucy emerges into the sunlight. For a moment he does not recognise her.’ (59) The misreading no longer registers in the prose: the text knows it is Lucy even while Lurie does not. Subsequently, we see her emphatically through her father’s eyes – ‘Her lips and breasts are now (he searches for the best word) ample’ (59) – yet Lucy has, here, a momentary independence that precedes Lurie’s language. It is a significant but hard-won development. The impossible question of how to make Lucy present in the text independent of male authorship is one that haunts the writing process, becoming, eventually, the novel’s central preoccupation. In this section, I want to trace Lucy’s winning of independence through revisions of her ‘clear eyes’.

Coetzee does not initially intend for Lucy to be raped. In a note of 21st May 1996, while drafting the first farm scenes, he writes: ‘He is worried about her. It is a surprise when he is the one attacked.’ Before writing the attack, however, he stops and returns to the Melanie Isaacs chapters. When, on 22nd June 1996, he starts drafting these scenes again, he stops, once again, at the point at which the attackers approach. He writes nothing the following day and on the 24th June writes just one sentence in his notebook: ‘Lucy is raped; he is present.’ Given Coetzee’s return to the Cape Town material in between conceiving of Lurie as the victim and this reconception – and given that, as per this note, Lurie’s presence appears to be the point of the attack – it is hard to avoid the troubling conclusion that Lucy’s rape was conceived as a punishment for her father. Certainly, the first version of the attack, which Coetzee begins the following day, privileges Lurie’s experience. As in the book, three men approach the house and ask to use the phone. Lucy leads one of them in while the others wait outside. Worried, Lurie runs into the house and is knocked unconscious on the kitchen floor. When he regains consciousness he is set

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465 Ibid, MS, Container 35.4, p.80. 17 May 1996.
on fire. He hears Lucy screaming but can do nothing to help. Eventually she enters
the kitchen. Though he has not been present during the rape, as she tries to put out
the flames her body takes on a grotesque presentness:

She is upon him, falling on him, knocking him, embracing him. He can smell her, her
breasts are for a moment against his face, fleshy, full, a woman's breasts (no time
for delicacy now,!) but he knows this is the only time in his life he will feel them),
she is panting hard as he rubs at his hair.468

The scene appears to be arranged so that it resonates with Lurie’s experience, full
of overdetermined symbolism: his vision is obscured; Lucy ‘knees him in the groin’;
all his keys fall out of his pocket: ‘the keys of his life’.469 In the aftermath, Lurie hardly
considers his daughter’s trauma, concerned, primarily – though she is visibly
distraught, sobbing – that ‘she ought to be helping him’.470 Even afterwards, he can
only conceive of himself as the focal point of the attack and deliberately shuts the
door on his daughter’s experience:

It occurs to him that the Toyota Cressida standing in the driveway must have been
the bait, that if he had not come Lucy none of this would have happened. He does
not know what has happened to her, probably the very worst has happened to her
(he does not want to think about that now, he pushes the door shut on the thought);
but what has happened to him is not trivial […] yet his daughter has never been as
indifferent.471

After wondering why he was not moved to intervene, he concludes that ‘[h]e does
not care about Lucy’, before revising himself: ‘or does not care enough.’472

In revision, Lucy’s absence from her father’s imagining starts to become
volitional; she begins to close the door on her experience herself, asserting her right
to privacy. ‘Lucy visits him every afternoon’ becomes ‘Lucy does not visit.’473 Her
friend, Bev (later Dot) Shaw comes in her place; when Lurie asks after his daughter,

468 Ibid, MS, Container 35.4, p.110. 27 June 1996.
469 Ibid.
470 Ibid, p.111.
471 Ibid, p.113. 29 June 1996.
472 Ibid, p.115. 3 July 1996.
Shaw responds, pointedly: ‘She’s keeping to herself.’ Over the following two years, Coetzee works hard to strike the balance between writing Lucy and allowing her her privacy, between sympathetically and responsibly imagining her experience and respecting her wish to ‘keep to herself’. His writing of Lucy is characterised by a frustrated search for insight, particularly regarding this decision to keep to herself, not to go to the police. In this, Coetzee and Lurie are kin, Lurie’s interactions with his daughter beginning to look like an allegorical representation of Coetzee’s authorship. In this first revised version, Lurie begins to reach out to his daughter, to seek understanding. Coetzee writes a first testy exchange on the subject of her decision to ‘keep to herself’, in which she gives nothing away, and after which she asks, ‘Do you understand me?’ Lurie does not respond but the following sentence communicates his frustration. ‘He does not understand her.’ Immediately Coetzee crosses out the sentence and stops writing for the day. When he returns to his desk the following day, he replaces the sentence with a more hopeful, revisionary response: “I am trying to understand.” Lurie then, literally, reaches out to his daughter. He draws her head to his chest and tries to cradle her. But she does not yield: ‘To the last, her eyes are hard, glittering.’

Lurie and Coetzee will have the same problem: in their attempts to understand Lucy, they will demand that she explain herself, that she make herself translatable into a language they can read, into their language, and thus demand that she lose her singularity. A year earlier, Coetzee had copied into his notebook a quotation from Roland Barthes’s ‘Inaugural Lecture’: “Language is fascist... fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech.” He is thinking, here, of the pressure Lurie comes under to make a confession in Cape Town. But compel speech – as Colonel Joll does in the torture chamber of Waiting for the Barbarians – is precisely what both Lurie and the realist form continue to do to Lucy in their attempt to find the words with which to access what, from a male point of view, is unimaginable experience. It is a dilemma which will overwhelm and threaten to derail the novel;

474 Ibid.
475 Ibid.
476 Ibid, p.120. 6 August 1996.
477 Ibid. 7 August 1995.
478 Ibid.
Coetzee will only partially find a way forward. But now, on that stark description of her ‘hard, glittering’ eyes – far from the ‘clear eyes’ of first conception – Coetzee stops taking the novel forward and writes in his notebook:

All that I have written thus far is a prelude: (1) his trouble in Cape Town, (2), the assault on the farm. The real action begins only now, with father and daughter alone in the house with few illusions left to them. What happens? 480

Rather than answer the question, he begins instead to type up and rework existing scenes.

When he gets to the attack, Coetzee stops typing mid-chapter and returns to the holograph, on 17th August 1996, in order to write a new version. Now, Lurie is prevented from entering the house – is kept out of the space of Lucy’s traumatic experience, no longer ‘present’. He becomes something like the novelist outside the torture chamber: it is both imperative and unconscionable that he imagine what happens inside the room. Thus Lucy’s experience takes on a different kind of presentness, one predicated on its absence:

Lucy is alone, cut off, at the mercy of two grown men. It is not the past, it is not the future, it is now. Lucy is now in the house, it is now happening, whatever it is that is happening. In a minute or two or five or ten it will be over, it will be the past; but now he has a chance to intervene, not to think about intervening but simply to intervene, to act, so that what would have been in the past will not come about, will not be. 481

Like the Magistrate entering the torture chamber after the event, Lurie is left to piece together the unimaginable from its material debris, its scattered particulars. He looks for Lucy in the bedroom. She is not there, ‘but the bed is in a mess, so it, what he does not like to think about, must have happened.’ 482 In revision, Coetzee intensifies the impression that Lurie is reading the particulars of the scene: ‘but the bed is in a mess. Bad sign.’ 483

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480 Ibid, p.47. 9 August 1996.
481 Ibid, MS, Container 35.4, p.121. 17 August 1996.
In the first version of the aftermath, Lurie had worried that, were he to imagine Lucy’s experience, he would not be able to ‘look her in the eye’. Here, when he finds her, he does just that, fostering another face-to-face encounter (this is only a few months after Coetzee instructs himself to reread Levinas and revises the encounter with Soraya accordingly):

He looks into her eyes. The same eyes, the same face. ‘My dearest, dearest...’ he says, and begins to cry. He stands before her and sobs, and she does not comfort him.

In the first draft it was Lucy who had stood sobbing before her father and he who had been unmoved. Here, coming face to face with her, her singular reality prompts a moment of sympathetic sorrow and care. In the first draft, he had decided he did not care about her; after revision, now, the line becomes: ‘[h]e does not care about himself or what is to happen to him.’ Yet, again, sympathy cannot become rational understanding without also becoming an overpowering. Coetzee drafts a new scene in which Lurie interrogates his daughter about her decision to ‘keep to herself’. ‘Are you trying to teach me a lesson?’ he asks. ‘Are you trying to teach me what women have to undergo. At the hands of men?’ After asking her father if he means to imply that ‘a woman must allow herself to be molested as a form of expiation’ Lucy says:

This has nothing to do with guilt or expiation. It has nothing to do with words [...] there are things that don’t belong in words, that are always and forever outside words.

Yet, still, Coetzee, like Lurie, attempts to find the words in which to house Lucy; he attempts to find an explanation for her decisions, unsatisfied with the blank that she presents him. The day after he writes this dialogue, he writes in his notebook (with callous revision):

Ibid, Container 35.4, p.117. 2 August 1996.
Ibid, Container 35.6, Chapter 8, p.6. 3 August 1996. Revised 4 September 1996.
Ibid, Container 35.4, p.13.3 28 August 1996.
Ibid.
Ibid.
Pregnancy, or, better, HIV.

Part of what Lucy is withholding is what one of the men said to her: that she is infected.\(^{490}\)

And his frustration appears to be just as keen as Lurie’s. ‘This is not a novel,’ he writes in the same entry.

Not possible to keep the emphasis from shifting to Lucy’s inner world, thus splitting the work in two.

Speed up the narration, make the control of the narrator more formal, denaturalize it, emphasize symmetries.

[...]

30,000 words. One of a series of ‘exemplary tales’.\(^{491}\)

It is just two days later that he writes the note about the synopsized novel form. His inability to imagine, to understand and to write Lucy appears to be part of that impetus.

It has become something of a truism of contemporary writing practice that committed revision generates compassionate insight and sympathetic understanding. In a recent article, for example, George Saunders has written about how revision’s movement towards elaboration and precision produces sympathy. Developing an example in which a character’s bad-temperedness becomes, through accumulated revisitings, a symptom of his grief after his wife’s death, Saunders suggests that, under aesthetic rather than moral pressure – ‘the pressure of trying not to suck’ – the revisions have proved that ‘it is possible for one’s gaze to become more loving’.\(^{492}\) The writer becomes less disparaging of the character, Saunders writes, as the character becomes ‘closer to “me, on a different day”.’\(^{493}\) Saunders’s example is illustrative, to my mind, of the way in which the illusion of penetrative


\(^{491}\) Ibid, pp.48-49.


\(^{493}\) Ibid.
empathy can mask a flooding of otherness with sameness; the character becomes worthy of love as he begins to resemble the self of writing. But as we have seen, Coetzee wants to resist seeing in the face of the other a ‘likeness to one’s own’.\textsuperscript{494} Indeed, in revising Lucy, in a reversal of his revisions of Soraya, he begins to revise her face out of the picture. Accordingly, his revisions appear to work to resist compassionate insight and sympathetic understanding and seek instead a kind of care in unknowing.

In \textit{On Sympathy}, Sophie Ratcliffe writes of John William Waterhouse’s ‘haunting’ by the figure of Miranda in \textit{The Tempest} – a figure he painted and repainted throughout his life. Waterhouse, Ratcliffe writes, was noted by his contemporaries for the sympathy he brought to his painting of faces. In each version of Miranda, however, her face is turned progressively further away. In these images, Ratcliffe writes, quoting the art critic Peter Trippi, Waterhouse offers

\begin{quote}
not his characteristic ‘Waterhouse girl,’ with her ‘yearning flower-like face’, but her merest edge, a \textit{profil perdu} rarely seen in his work. The pose may not appear to give much away, but it captures something important – it directs us to the difficulty of finding an appropriate expression for compassion.\textsuperscript{495}
\end{quote}

\textit{A profil perdu} is a pose in which the subject’s face is turned so far away that the viewer cannot make out an expression. Ratcliffe proposes in her study that writers and artists are often attracted to \textit{The Tempest} as a result of ‘a crisis of confidence about ethics and writing’.\textsuperscript{496} Their reworkings of the play, she argues, are, as in Waterhouse’s paintings, preoccupied with, and a result of, ‘[t]he difficulty of recognising another’s point of view.’\textsuperscript{497} A result, she writes, can be an attraction to allegory:

\begin{quote}
We turn to analogical modes of thought and allegorical modes of storytelling because there are limits to our sympathetic comprehension; our recourse to such metaphorical means of understanding might be said to stem from the sense of our mental confinement. Beckett, Browning, and Auden are all too aware of their own
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{495} Ratcliffe, \textit{On Sympathy}, p.2.
\textsuperscript{496} Ibid, pp.66.
\textsuperscript{497} Ibid, p.3.
limits, and repeatedly consider the difficulties and pleasures of analogical thought.\textsuperscript{498}

Ratcliffe’s theory might appear too specific to be of general use. Yet its application to \textit{Disgrace} is uncanny. As many commentators have noted, the novel is a reworking of \textit{The Tempest}, with Lucy, of course, as the Miranda figure. And, as with Miranda’s slow turning away in Waterhouse’s revisitings, each time Coetzee attempts to paint Lucy again, her face is quite literally turned further away, her once ‘clear eyes’ less visible. The result, as we have seen, is a movement towards, in Ratcliffe’s words, an ‘analogical mode of thought’ – or, in Coetzee’s words, ‘the exemplary tale’, the ‘parabolic form’, the ‘synopsized novel’.

As he continues to revise, Coetzee begins to remove instances in which the narrator reads interiority in Lucy’s outward appearance, moving away from Costello’s zookeeper conception of realism. When Lurie suggests that she might be making a mistake in not reporting the crime, for example, this is how Coetzee reports her response before and after revision:

\begin{quote}
I’m not,’ she says. She wants to seem firm, but even in the bad light he can see that she is holding herself rigid.\textsuperscript{499}
\end{quote}

All that registers in the text after revision, in other words, is refusal. Continually, Coetzee imagines Lurie’s interpretations and then erases them – beginning, always, again. On the 18\textsuperscript{th} November 1996, for example, he writes:

\begin{quote}
He is not sure what is going on inside her. […] He blames her state on the strange attitude she takes to the men who raped her. […] He believes that in her heart of hearts she does not hate them. But, because she wishes to be enlightened, or because she believes that hatred and vengeance must be consigned to the past, she refuses to acknowledge what her heart tells her. So her anger festers inside her, or vents itself on inappropriate objects.\textsuperscript{500}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{498} Ibid, p.4.
\textsuperscript{499} Coetzee Papers, ‘Disgrace’, 1995-2012, MS, Container 35.6, Chapter 8, p.3. 30 August 1996. Revised 3 September 1996.
\textsuperscript{500} Ibid, Container 35.5, pp.159-160. 18 November 1996.
But this insight is once again boiled down to pure refusal so that, in revision, the paragraph reads in full:

He does not understand her attitude to the men who raped her. She says nothing about them, expresses no feelings. She seems indifferent. In fact, she becomes indifferent about everything.⁵⁰¹

‘His diagnosis’ Coetzee writes on the same page, ‘is that Lucy is in a rage, and has repressed her rage. As a diagnosis it strikes him as jejune, but he can come up with nothing better.’⁵⁰² He then strikes out the sentences. *He can come up with nothing better:* Lurie, like Coetzee, is working at the limit of his ability.

On 19th February 1997, Coetzee once again reconceives of the attack. Now Lurie again finds his way into the house but is beaten and locked into the lavatory. He is locked into his locked-outness, that is, confined to a space of self-limit, of bodily function, even of the comic; all he can do is, Clov-like, to ‘stand on the toilet seat and peer out of the small window’ while the attackers, his audience, congregated outside, laugh.⁵⁰³ In this draft, too, Lucy is turned further away from the viewer at the moment at which we might expect the keenest sympathy. After the attack, the men drag Lurie from the toilet and into another space of comic confinement: the dog kennel. They shoot the dogs and lock the gate. When Lucy emerges – the first time we see her after the attack; the first time she and her father see one another – she all but ignores him as she takes in the carnage. After a curt acknowledgement, before Lurie has a chance to see clearly her face, she has already turned away:

Her hand, as she unlocks the padlock, is trembling; she does not meet his eye.

He follows her into the house.⁵⁰⁴

Coetzee is now denying them the opportunity of a face-to-face encounter. Yet, in the material that follows and in its revisions, Lurie becomes more and more respectful of Lucy’s difference, her existence beyond his language. Thus, ‘He does not

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⁵⁰¹ Ibid. Revised 6 January 1996. [Sic]  
understand her attitude to the men who raped her,’ becomes, in revision: ‘He calls it an attack; he cannot imagine what word she uses for it.’

Lucy continues to slip away from textual apprehension and that slipping away continues to become the subject of the text. Here she is, for example, in the next revision of their moment of reunion after the attack, literally slipping away:

‘Lucy!’ he calls again, and now she turns to him. Her hand, as she unlocks the padlock, unbolts the gate is trembling

‘My dearest child,’ he says, and tries to embrace her. Gently, decisively, she wriggles free and turns away.

But still, Coetzee strenuously tries to understand her, to find her secret – working, like Kafka, to follow her to end; still he appears frustrated that he cannot. As new interpretations occur to him, he has Lurie present them to Lucy. Together they are like the Magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians, who, in his own words, ‘continue[s] to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her.’ (89) But unlike the girl in Waiting for the Barbarians, Lucy has the freedom to refuse each one. Still, her refusal is a source of authorial frustration. On 1st May 1997, Coetzee writes in his notebook: ‘The problem is Lucy. Whatever she is going through, I can’t feel it from the inside.’

In an apparently direct response to this difficulty, on the following day Coetzee writes a new section in which Lurie attempts to inhabit sympathetically Lucy’s experience not through her eyes but through the eyes of her attackers – whom he now respectfully calls her ‘visitors’. ‘Presumably it has pleasures of its own,’ he thinks.

He is not inclined to believe that rapists […] are the wretched creatures. […]

‘He thinks it was probably worth it. He thinks that […] Lucy’s visitors would have had every right to feel content with their afternoon’s work, and happy in their careers.”

This perspective prompts a self-conscious thinking about realism: ‘Rape,’ Lurie thinks, ‘is a collision with the real, and eros is never present in the real.’ He then proceeds to imagine the bodily reality of the event in a passage too unpleasant to repeat.\textsuperscript{509} Coetzee is looking ‘into the dark chamber’ – the torture chamber – and finds that he can only imagine its horrors through the eyes of the oppressors. It is, thus, at this point that his failure to imagine Lucy’s experience – to see through and into her clear eyes – becomes most pronounced:

He tries to see the eyes as Lucy must have seen them, the eyes that are seeing her without losing her; but here his imagination fails him, for the time being. He can see Lucy through the men’s eyes, but he cannot see the men through hers. He will have to try again, and try harder. He can do the men: now he will have to show himself he can do the woman.\textsuperscript{510}

Coetzee and Lurie are here at their closest point. \textit{He will have to try again:} these passages read like a confluence of fiction and notebook, Coetzee simultaneously attempting the impossible fiction and commenting on the attempt, making notes for revision: he will have to return to this passage and have another go. The attempt, as Lurie thinks in another deleted comment, is ‘a failure, a failure of everything: of the imagination, of human sympathy, of moral energy, of parental love.’\textsuperscript{511} Not long afterwards, on the 29\textsuperscript{th} May (about three weeks before he begins to write the animal lectures), Coetzee does indeed return to the material and try again:

Her heart raced, her limbs were cold, she could not breathe. She was in fear of her life. The men did not soothe her, try to induce her into a sexual mood, but on the contrary did their best to menace, hurt, confuse her.\textsuperscript{512}

But the new attempt collapses once again into: ‘He will have to try again. He can do the men; he has yet to show himself he can do the woman.’\textsuperscript{513} The change of tense is

\textsuperscript{509} Ibid, p.231. 4 May 1997.
\textsuperscript{510} Ibid, p.232.
\textsuperscript{513} Ibid.
a startling demonstration of how closely Coetzee is writing his revisionary process into the material: where once the revisionary labour was to come (‘he will have to show himself’) it is now ongoing (‘he is yet to show himself’). In the book, the same sentence will register as an unanswered, unanswerable question: ‘The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?’ (160)

Now on the sixth full draft, there is little revision of the scene left to do. But Coetzee makes one last significant change: Lurie is no longer led to the dog cage but left in the bathroom. It still falls to Lucy to let him out. Here is how the moment of their reunion is now described:

He has to wait a long while before she unlocks the door. When he opens it her back is already turned as she heads for the cages. She is wearing a bathrobe, her feet are bare, her hair wet.

He follows her out through the kitchen. Still she does not glance at him.514

*Her back is already turned:* she is now fully turned away at the moment of greatest emotional and ethical pressure. Eventually, with one final revision, in the published text the door will open as though of its own agency: ‘At last, blessedly, the key turns in the lock. By the time he has the door open, Lucy has turned her back on him.’ (97)

In her introductory moment, Lucy registers in the text before Lurie apprehends her presence. Here, her absence registers in the text before Lurie is faced with it: grammatically absent from the turning of the key (‘the key turns in the lock’), she is present in the grammar only once her back is turned.

On the 20th December 1997, now that the novel is beginning to feel whole, Coetzee writes in his notebook, with a characteristically ambiguous masculine pronoun:

He had thought it was a story about a man who goes to his daughter for succour. Now he sees it is a story about a woman living alone in South Africa. It is Lucy’s story, not his.515

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The thought finds its way into the published text and reads, at its climax, in Lucy's voice:

David, I can't run my life according to whether or not you like what I do. Not any more. You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions. (198)

If Lurie, like the author figure, like the realist genre, has compelled speech from his daughter, this is her moment of definitive resistance: she is the protagonist of a different novel, the real novel, to which we have no access – one which carries on in the gaps. We are locked into this single perspective, but Coetzee implies a truer perspective beyond the novel's bounds. Revision, for Coetzee, has been a process not of uncovering the real but of uncovering the resistance of the real. Lucy's resistance is the story of her genesis. It is by simultaneously turning her face away from confinement in language and genre, and *strengthening* the limits of language and genre, that Coetzee allows her, finally, her own, other presence.

In *On Sympathy*, Ratcliffe quotes Stanley Cavell in *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (1987): 'in failing to see what the true position of a character is... we are exactly put in his position.' My narrative has been predicated on the assumption that there is a person we can imagine, another human being, called Lucy Lurie, who *knows herself*. But there is not, in at least two ways. As Ratcliffe writes, after Cavell, of her three authors, '[i]n many ways [...] their failure to perceive the 'true position of a character' [...] derives from their sense of the peculiar ontology of fictional beings'. That is: there is *not* a person here, therefore neither sympathy nor face-to-face encounter are possible. But equally, for Coetzee, as we have seen, self-knowledge is an impossibility. Ratcliffe writes:

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516 Quoted in Ratcliffe, *On Sympathy*, p.65.
517 Ibid, p.66.
The way in which Caliban has been distorted, changed, and rewritten in readings and rewritings of the text is a concrete example of what it might be to suffer from a subjective identity.518

‘[W]hat we call truth,’ Coetzee has written, ‘is only a shifting self-reappraisal.’519 His endless deferral of sympathy may, then, be an act of great sympathetic insight, imagining the truth-directedness of Lucy’s own revisionary grasping for self-understanding, not assuming that she understands her own decisions, or that she has a language in which to articulate them, and fostering a perpetually revisionary knowledge that cannot be expressed in the terms of rational humanism, the terms of realist fiction, but is, as Costello says, limitless.

518 Ibid, p.66.
Chapter Four
‘Unfinished to perfection’: Geoffrey Hill’s Revisions

i. ‘a click like a closing box’

In *Youth* (2002), the young John Coetzee abandons his poetic aspirations and turns to prose because, as his narrator wryly puts it,

> [h]e has a horror of spilling mere emotion on to the page. Once it has begun to spill out he would not know how to stop it. It would be like severing an artery and watching one’s lifeblood gush out. Prose, fortunately, does not demand emotion: there is that to be said for it. Prose is like a flat, tranquil sheet of water on which one can tack about at one’s leisure, making patterns on the surface.520

John’s formulation of the difference between the two mediums is founded in revision. Poetry, the suggestion is, is an evacuation, a pouring forth of inner essence until none is left; it is direct and expressive, unrelaxed and urgent; it is unrevisable, finishable only through a kind of perishing. Prose, on the other hand, is detached surface; it can be played with, tinkered with, rearranged, repatterned, refashioned over time in a manner that is if not quite arbitrary then erratic, lacking in urgency, even capricious; it can be stepped away from at any moment.

It is of course not the case that poetry is unrevisable. But it may be that, for the poet, utterance and revision, spontaneity and reflex are considerably closer together than they are for the novelist, revision part of the gush of lifeblood. G. Thomas Tanselle makes a useful distinction between ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ revision. Vertical revision ‘aims at altering the purpose, direction, or character of a work, thus attempting to make a different sort of work out of it’.521 Horizontal revision, contrastingly, is a process of ‘intensifying, refining, or improving the work as then conceived […] thus altering the work in degree but not in kind’.522 Not always distinguishable in prose, the two kinds of revision are even closer in poetic composition. Poetic effect relies on balance; to change a word, to alter a rhyme,

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522 Ibid.
cadence or rhythm, is to change that balance and thus come considerably closer to altering design than a similar substitution would in a novel. Each detail, especially in lyric poetry, is a far greater percentage of the whole, and thus carries a far greater weight. The success or failure of a poem lies in such details; ‘the distance between grace and sentiment’, Geoffrey Hill has written, ‘may be the breadth of a syllable, dissolved in an instant’. If the poem finds its audience, the poet knows that each detail will accordingly be weighed and tested and scrutinised mercilessly. Each revision occurs, thus, under substantial pressure. Further, revising a sonnet, however slow and considered, is a much quicker process than revising a novel, however rapid; each individual poetic revision is therefore closer to both first gesture and final form, flowing from the former and acting in the service of the latter; it is, perhaps, more directed. A poetic revision is more likely, therefore, to be simultaneously expressive, critical and corrective than is a revision of prose, an act of more immediate historical self-actualisation, though it may also serve to make a poem more artificial, more calculated. I hope that I attend to these differences in this chapter.

In my discussion of Portnoy’s Complaint at the beginning of this thesis, I quoted Hill’s use in his late poem, The Triumph of Love, of a strikingly similar image to that of John Coetzee’s narrator, figuring poetry as an unstoppable externalisation: ‘the blown/aorta pelting out blood’. (239) In its context, Hill’s image resonates less as an expression of fatality than one of gushing endless delay:

   Ever more protracted foreplay,
   never ending – O Ewigkeit – no act
   the act of oblivion, the blown
   aorta pelting out blood. (239)

As we shall see, it is a fitting image for Hill’s late verse, whose distinctive style issues as a propulsive forward motion that works to subsume first thoughts, second thoughts, further thoughts, to include spontaneity and reflex, utterance and revision in the same motion, and does not hope to end. It is not, however, an image that could

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have appeared in his early verse, in which the work of revision is figured quite differently. In this chapter I will account for Hill’s developing thought about what it means to revise and to finish a poem, suggesting that his thinking on the subject shifts radically in the middle of his career, and trace the influence of that shift on his poetic ethics.

In his inaugural lecture, given at Leeds University in 1977 and published in 1984 as ‘Poetry as “Menace” and “Atonement”’, Hill emphasises the importance of revisionary labour and closure to his poetic practice. He begins his account with two quotations to which, he says, he gives ‘instinctive assent’. (4) The first is from Yeats, for whom ‘a poem comes right with a click like a closing box’. (4) The second is from T.S. Eliot:

> when the words are finally arranged in the right way – or in what he comes to accept as the best arrangement he can find – [the poet] may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable. (4)

As Christopher Ricks has pointed out, these two statements are not entirely reconcilable: the one figures the poem as a complete and independent object; the other demurs about the possibility of true completion, associating its shadow with something akin to the perishing John Coetzee fears. Yet both assume a revisionary labour that has a definite, achievable and identifiable end in view.

Approvingly, Hill quotes Pound: ‘The poet’s job is to define and yet again define till the detail of surface is in accord with the root in justice.’ (4 – emphasis in original) The poet’s standing, that is, is distinguished for Hill not by any expressive talent or receptivity to inspiration, by any gift of spontaneity, but by a diligence of self-criticism and self-correction. The work of poetry, he has elsewhere said, is ‘a slow, common craftsmanship, an ordinary occurrence’, that assiduously tightens the weft of language until it manifests a final correctness, instinctively known.525 ‘[T]he technical perfecting of a poem,’ Hill writes in the essay,

525 Haffenden, ‘Geoffrey Hill’ in Viewpoints, p.84.
is an act of atonement, in the radical etymological sense – an act of at-one-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony. (4)

This scrupulousness constitutes neither ivory-towered fastidiousness nor abstract play; as Hill has said,

[i]n the act of refining technique one is not only refining emotion, one is also constantly defining and redefining one’s ethical and moral sensibility. One is constantly confronting and assessing the various kinds of moral and immoral pressures of the world, but all these things happen simultaneously in the act of self-critical decision.526

The attentive, end-directed self-criticism of stylistic revision is, for Hill, the ethical engagement at the heart of a responsible poetry.

A poem cannot, however, be all revision; there must be a first gesture. Hill takes care to allow for something close to inspiration: ‘I write very much by intuition and work hard, by means of scholarship and self-criticism, to satisfy myself of the validity of that intuition.’527 Elsewhere, he has used the word itself, though not in his own voice:

However strong the first “urge” to create the poem, it is only by a long and arduous process of fashioning that I am able to justify the final poem in my own eyes, and myself in the eyes of anyone who cared to read it. To borrow someone’s phrase: “what began as inspiration ends as entity.”528

In Hill’s most successful early poems, one feels that the words are twisted as tightly as they will go, but their effect relies equally on the presence of ‘first “urge”‘. As Jeffrey Wainwright has written,

526 Ibid, p.87.
The box clicks shut [...] certainly as a result of the intuitive impulse that is part of poetic composition, but also by virtue of conscious thought and labour. It is the capacity of poetry to encompass both kinds of mental action within its forms that means that poetry is not an exchangeable form of discourse.\textsuperscript{529}

Hill’s early poetry allows the immediacy of intuitive impulse into the warp of its wrought finality. We can see what this looks like as early as ‘Genesis’ (1953), not quite his first published poem but the poem he chose to begin his first collection, and which thus formally inaugurates his oeuvre. The opening of the poem dramatises the over-reachingly world-making poet’s confidence in the act of creation, a confidence belied by the increasingly botched genesis it subsequently details:

\begin{verbatim}
Against the burly air I strode,
Where the tight ocean heaves its load
Crying the miracles of God.

And first I brought the sea to bear
Upon the dead weight of the land;
And the waves flourished at my prayer,
The rivers spawned their sand.\textsuperscript{530}
\end{verbatim}

In an account of the poem’s genesis, Piers Pennington has reported that Hill for a while had in mind only a single line, which had occurred to him unprompted. He wanted, Pennington has it, ‘to start the poem with the sea’, and attempted four times to begin with the words, ‘The sea moves first’.\textsuperscript{531} The poem’s breakthrough, Pennington suggests, came when Hill introduced his own poetic agency to the lines, beginning: ‘First, then I bring the sea to bear / Upon the dead weight of the land’.\textsuperscript{532} The lines now describe the fact of their being Hill’s first gesture: first urge narrated as first urge. In their published form, the past tense will record the poem’s

\textsuperscript{529} Jeffrey Wainwright, \textit{Acceptable Words: Essays on the poetry of Geoffrey Hill} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p.3.
\textsuperscript{531} Pennington, ‘The Manuscripts and Composition of “Genesis”’, p.29.
\textsuperscript{532} Ibid.
subsequent distance from that urge, but the poem ensures it is inaugurally present. The three lines that will eventually open the poem go back even further, describing a *prelinguistic* urge to create, a setting-out into the resistance of language. The poem proceeds, and succeeds, in other words, by allegorising, in heavily worked-at language, the creative energy that generated it.

Though careful to retain impulse and inspiration, Hill’s poetry is nevertheless characterised by a distrust of the poetic urge. Revision, which may come to constitute ethical engagement, in fact begins as a practical response to this self-distrust, an act of anxious self-justification: ‘I [...] work hard [...] *to satisfy myself of the validity of* that intuition’; ‘it is only by a long and arduous process of fashioning that I am able *to justify* the final poem’. A Hill poem, which encompasses intuitive impulse and wrought finality, also records the contours of the poet’s anxious labour to justify that intuition. Indeed, as I hope will be evident in an account of the genesis of his best-known expression of self-distrust, ‘September Song’, published in 1968’s *King Log*, the anxiety *becomes* the justification. Here is the published poem:

*born 19.6.32 – deported 24.9.42*

Undesirable you may have been, untouchable
you were not. Not forgotten
or passed over at the proper time.

As estimated, you died. Things marched,
sufficient, to that end.
Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented
terror, so many routine cries.

(I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true)

September fattens on vines. Roses
flake from the wall. The smoke
of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

This is plenty. This is more than enough. (44)
The first urge that would end as the entity 'September Song' came when Hill visited an exhibition of artworks by children murdered in Nazi concentration camps. One image in particular, depicting the arrival of a deportation train, impressed itself upon him when he noticed that the artist, Edita Polláková’s birth date happened to fall the day after his own. It was perhaps this uncanny jolt of proximity, collapsing momentarily the distance between artist and viewer, that moved Hill to write an elegy for Polláková. Certainly, his first effort, comprising five discrete gestures, follows a logic of proximity and distance, presence and absence, that speaks of such an experience. First, Hill records dispassionately all the biographical material available to him:

Edita Polláková
born June 19th 1932
deported Sept 24 1942
died auschwitz [sic], Oct. 4 1944

The published poem will record only the dates of Polláková’s birth and deportation: though she will be statistically present, her personhood will be absent. For now, the announcement of her identity is given primacy but Hill’s second gesture, an unfinished (unbegun) version of the published poem’s opening lines, characterises Polláková only by blankness and negativity:

____ you may have been. Untouchable
     you were not.

The construction of the opening conditional is, colloquially, not an expression of possibility but an expression that works to reveal the lesser importance of one particular fact in the light of another: you may have come last, but it is the taking part

533 Geoffrey Hill Archive, 'Notebook 6: King Log' (1965-1966), BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/4, p.36. Hill’s drafts are regularly covered in indecipherable markings. In general, I have kept my reproduction of those markings to a minimum, except in cases when they are easily decipherable, or when they have a clear bearing on my reading. As photography is not permitted in the Hill archive, my transcriptions are inevitably more provisional than in my other chapters. Where I am unsure about a particular word, I have prefixed it with a question mark in square brackets. Where a word of phrase has proved illegible I have noted it in square brackets. When a word appears directly above another word as a suggested alternative rather than a replacement, and it has not been possible for me to reproduce the effect typographically, I connect the two words with a ‘~’.

534 Ibid.
that counts. The words thus express factuality in the language of the fictional, absenting grammatically the concrete presence assumed in the sense. Similarly, to be touchable is to be palpably present; to describe a person as not untouchable is to say, literally, the same, but to whip away from the grammar’s unfolding any possibility of presence. That Hill has left Polláková’s first attribute blank suggests that the construction of a space of presence that remains unfilled is more than poetic effect, is a matter of authorial struggle. The accretion of these absences leads to a statement of authorial presence, a confession that is the only part of the poem to emerge, at this first stage, more or less complete:

I have made
An elegy for myself. That
Is true.535

The confession is no doubt sincere. Yet it records a false teleology, staging a revisionary glancing back over a finished text not yet written. It is a mark of how crucial the expectation of closure is to Hill at this stage in his career: the poem is being imagined as a closed box, a container which it is the poet’s task to fill and seal. Nevertheless, the lines form a link in a chain of unfolding logic: Hill’s fourth gesture appears to respond to the confession, articulating part of the ethical dilemma:

Let them keep
their dignity
of silence in death.536

But Hill appears, immediately, deliberately to ignore the injunction, bringing this first effort to a close by giving voice to the victim and reducing her, in the first two words, to sameness, albeit in such a way as to mark the distance:

Like me borne away
Terrified, indignant
outraged + shouting

535 Ibid.
536 Ibid.
The final line (which will become the final line of the sonnet sequence ‘Funeral Music’) is a moment of unity, an at-one-ment of expression and subject: its emotional power arises from the fact of its finality, drawing the reader’s attention to both a diegetic and an extra-diegetic ending while simultaneously protesting against both. There is more to say, more to be said. From the beginning, then, the poem is engaged with ideas of what it means to finish a poem, suggesting a consonance between the process of ‘technical perfecti[on]’ and the death it seeks to memorialise.

In his first round of revisions, Hill attempts to fill in the primary blank: ‘______ you may have been’. He lists a number of alternatives, none of which appear satisfactory, including: ‘Enfant’, ‘Despised’, ‘Hated’, ‘Defined’, ‘WRETCHED’, ‘brute’, ‘Naked’, ‘Polluted’. The ethical dilemma is that to define Polláková thus, in one stroke, would, for Hill, be a poetic act in some way consonant with the act of racial definition that designated her for elimination. The aesthetic dilemma is one of voice: that the suggestions continue to appear in speech marks (“animal” you may have been’) suggests a continuing uncertainty about whether to adopt the voice of the tyrant, the compassionate fellow citizen or the dispassionate poet. The dilemma of definition prompts a new, quasi-Biblical stanza, soon discarded, precisely about the act of definition – or better, of conclusion, or working in the service of a pre-determined ending:

They have (had?) a place
ready for you
Since the beginning of time

Just as the poem’s end is in its beginning (‘I have made’), so, here, is Polláková’s, who was concluded at birth. This thinking about ‘place’ in turn leads Hill to consider, in another new stanza, the place of the poem, of the poet –

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537 Ibid.
538 Ibid.
539 Ibid.
at their leisure
The artist fed by
[?] more than work\textsuperscript{540}

– and, immediately after considering his own positioning, to equate more decisively the agency of elegy, of memorial, with the agent of Pollková’s murder:

\textit{you were not forgotten\textsuperscript{neglected} not overlooked}\textsuperscript{541}

Not to forget, not to overlook, is both the elegist’s and the Nazi’s task. The ambiguous unity in these lines brings the detail of surface closer to its root in justice, a justice that implicates the poet. As Hill works to \textit{get it right}, as he moves towards the predestined end, so the poem becomes a narrative of the hesitations and dilemmas of composition, the ethical anxieties about its inevitable transgression; it becomes a narrative of Hill’s \textit{getting it wrong}.

Fittingly, as the poem nears completion, that final line – “I have not finished” – disappears: Hill has (nearly) finished. The majority of the subsequent poetic labour works to tighten the grip on the language. Hill is yet to decide, for instance, how to conclude the second stanza, which breaks off mid-sentence:

\textit{Just so much zyklon [sic] + rubber; enough Terror; so many routine}\textsuperscript{542}

Suggestions include: ‘lies’, ‘strokes’, ‘tries’, and, finally, ‘cries’. The lines self-consciously articulate an affinity between their composition and the process they describe: a process of quantification and statistics, of finding the right amount and fitting the proper material, the \textit{mot juste}, into its proper place. It is perhaps this affinity that prompts another stanza, soon discarded, about what \textit{escapes} the controlling grip of the authoritarian – reflective, perhaps, of the way in which the

\textsuperscript{540} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{541} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{542} Ibid, ‘Notebook 7: King Log’ (1966-1967), BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/7, p.28.
resonances of words exceed the poet’s grasp – a stanza that appears to describe the material deposits left on display at concentration camps:

Now only the residue is excessive. Too much hair,  
Too many?gold~?gray ?socks; too heavy ; the wires –  
rose trained to the wire.

What remains is excessive: the hair, the grey frames.543

But as the elements of the poem fall into place, these lines disappear and the emphasis falls fitly instead on a grotesque sufficiency: ‘Things marched,/sufficient, to that end.’544 One late substitution to a version of these lines makes clear that the process of finishing the poem and the ending of the child’s life are connected in the poet’s mind, and being yoked though revision: ‘Material was sufficient for your death that end’.545 ‘Material’ has literary resonance, of course, and the revision from ‘your death’ to ‘that end’ ensures that the lines mean more than death and encompass other kinds of ending, including the ending of the poem.546

It is as the poem begins to click shut that Hill adds the final line: ‘This is plenty. This is more than enough.’ The poem had ended in its first draft with the words, “I have not finished” ; its composition had proceeded as both a record of its movement towards a predestined, definite end and an exploration of its ethical anxieties about ending. Now, finally, it records, with self-disgust, the moment of its completion, or its nauseating more-than-completion, its excess.

In their final forms, these early poems look back on themselves: first I brought the sea to bear; I have made an elegy. Their glance is retrospective; the finishing of a poem means a solidification, the crystallisation of an end-stopped history of self-doubt, self-criticism and self-correction, the creation of anxious

543 Ibid, p.29
544 Ibid, p.28.
545 Ibid, p.29
546 There is, at this point, an odd and unpleasant intrusion on a facing page of the notebook, hard to construe but important to note:

His one idea in  
Sucked off by his  
Love was being  
Friend’s wives.

Whatever the reason for these lines, they record the poet’s obscene distance from his subject. [Ibid, p.30]
entity. An early Hill poem, in short, proceeds as an anticipation, and ends as a record, of its clicking-shut – a kind of finishing about which it is simultaneously suspicious.

ii. ‘I dislike the poem very much’

Hill's early belief that a poem can achieve ‘technical perfecti[on]’, as a piece of functional design can, is, in the first stage of his career, in tension with an idiosyncratic theory of language – really, a theology – according to whose logic words exist in a state of perpetual and irredeemable error.\(^{547}\) For Hill, utterance is distorted by the ‘gravity’ of language, a force accumulated through the accretion of meaning, association and resonance that characterises a word’s historical development and issuing in a necessary ambiguity. The moment of a word’s utterance is also the moment of its falling; the more a word can mean, the wider the variety of associations it calls to mind, and the more it resonates, the heavier it is. As they fall, words slip and slide into one another, they slip and slide around inside themselves in a fashion that devalues any poet’s claim of ultimate authority, however firm a grasp she may have of their casings. There is, thus, for Hill, as Rowan Williams has it,

> a tension between the life of language and its use; as we might say, what is meant by us as users and what is “meant” by the elusive resource of language itself, escaping our conscious strategies.\(^{548}\)

Utterances, Williams writes, ‘say more than they mean to, though not more than they mean.’\(^{549}\) But Hill does not quite believe that the relation between word and thing is arbitrary. His thinking is founded in a doctrine of original sin that he takes from the 20th-century theologian Karl Barth: the gravity of language, Hill writes, is ‘implicated with, compounded with, that “specific gravity” which Barth says sin is’.\(^{550}\) Language is fallen – or, more suggestively, is the fall – in a way that, as Robert Macfarlane has


\(^{549}\) Ibid, p.65.

\(^{550}\) Quoted in Sperling, *Visionary Philology*, p.64.
it, ‘exceeds metaphor’. Though Hill never outright affirmed his Christian faith, he often expressed ‘complete assent to the doctrine of original sin.’ If I am a Christian,’ he lately equivocated,

it is because the Church’s teaching on Original Sin strikes me as being the most coherent grammar of the plight of tragic humanity that I have ever encountered.

It is sin that rips utterance from intention, word from thing, that stains expression with ambiguity. And although Vincent Sherry is perhaps right to claim that, ‘[e]tymology, for Hill, reveals no true or original meaning, but a play of difference’, there is a real sense in which, for Hill, that true or original meaning must be imagined, or at least allowed for in an etymological imagination. ‘[T]here’s a real sense,’ Hill has said,

in which every fine and moving poem bears witness to this lost kingdom of innocence and original justice. In handling the English language the poet makes an act of recognition that etymology is history. The history of the creation and debasement of words is a paradigm of the loss of the kingdom of innocence and original justice.

If poetic language can only ever look backwards, in sin, towards an unrecoverable state of linguistic perfection, what might be the functional endpoint of revisionary labour? What might a perfected poetic utterance look like if it is impossible wholly to say what one means and mean what one says? What is the perfect flawed poem?

One answer is an utterance that apprehends as fully as possible the dimensions of its fallenness, the internal histories of its words and phrases, and allows those histories to resonate. If etymology is history, then such an utterance reveals more than philological curiosity. As Hill puts it in a late sequence, Scenes

\[^{551}\text{Macfarlane, ‘Gravity and Grace’, p.237.}\]
\[^{552}\text{Quoted in Sperling, Visionary Philology, p.134.}\]
\[^{553}\text{Quoted in ibid, p.134. Emphasis in original.}\]
\[^{555}\text{Haffenden, ‘Geoffrey Hill’ in Viewpoints, p.88.}\]
"From Comus" (2005): 'Weight of the word, weight of the world, is.' (431) 'The poet’s true commitment,' Hill has written,

must always be to the vertical richness of language. The poet’s gift is to make history and politics and religion *speak for themselves* through the strata of language.

To this end, revision is a practise of immense authorial control that seeks a loss of authority. The history of language can be made to speak for itself through controlled paronomasia – the reapprehension and recontextualization of cliché, for example. The poet works to apprehend and embed the slippage and multiple meanings of off-the-peg units of language in his verse so that the power structures inherent in language's diachronicity are revealed. The revision in 'September Song' from 'for your death' to the deictic 'to that end' functions in this way, demonstrating how language hardens into cliché, how cliché masks singularity, and how that masking can be put to insidious use: the revision allows us to hear how certain kinds of language can facilitate bureaucratic depersonalisation, how the corruption of language can make thinkable the extermination of a race.

But bearing witness to 'the lost kingdom of innocence and original justice' cannot mean simply recording the loss: the kingdom itself must be imagined. Hill’s poetry seeks to approximate, aspire to and even effect kinds of language that transcend semantic expression. For Robert Macfarlane, Hill attempts this transcendence most of all through prosodic refinement. Macfarlane argues that for Hill the poet’s task is to 'exert [...] an effortful resistance to [the] gravity [of words]' He quotes Hill: ‘a poet’s... rhythms are not his utterance so much as his resistance’. There are, Macfarlane writes, two forces that dominate Hill’s poetry: the first, as we have seen, is gravity, and the second, gravity’s counterforce, is grace. If rhythm, distinct but indivisible from utterance, is a resistance to the error and distortion of gravity, then,

prosodic technique acquires words of their weight, and allows them a lightness or levity. To overcome language’s gravity in this way is not to enter an unfallen realm.

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558 Quoted in *ibid*, p.239. Ellipsis in original.
of utterance, but it may achieve the possibility of ethically responsible – graceful – utterance.559

‘At such moments of “technical success”,’ Macfarlane writes, ‘poetic thought accomplishes a different and speculative order of comprehension’.560

A perfected poetic utterance might, then, be one that enacts its fallenness. As Matthew Sperling has written,

in Hill’s earlier poetry [...] a prelapsarian language in which word and thing are integrated [...] is reimagined in a number of ways, but always and only at the same time that its loss is lamented and poetically enacted.561

A poem’s pre-linguistic prosodic music allows for a unity of intention and reception, meaning and sounding – one cannot misconstrue a rhythm; rhyme cannot get lost in translation – which the weight of subsequent semantic apprehension uncouples. Hill makes use of this effect, for instance, in that opening stanza of ‘Genesis’:

Against the burly air I strode,  
Where the tight ocean heaves its load,  
Crying the miracles of God.562

The striding rhythms and the perfect rhyme of the first two lines communicate poetic confidence, purpose and success; against the iambics, the rushing anapaest of ‘Where the tight’ mimes the rushing in of the ocean. There is the prosodic illusion of a unity of purpose, content and expression which is derailed by the ambiguity of ‘crying’ (crying: celebrating, announcing or lamenting; creating or responding). Landing, finally, on the one word that should communicate ultimate transcendence and unity, the stanza comes to a halt on a half-rhyme. Through prosodic refinement

559 Ibid.
560 Ibid, p.248. Macfarlane’s interest is in Hill’s encoding of unknowing in syntactical indeterminacy, particularly in his later verse, an unknowing which Macfarlane traces to Simone Weil’s concept of metaxu (‘passing through the known to reach the unknown’ (241)). Weil’s mysticism of ‘de-creation’, which Macfarlane describes as ‘a kenosis of the self that makes room for the sudden access of God’s grace’ (241) will have a bearing on my discussion, below, of the development of Hill’s late style.
561 Sperling. Visionary Philology, p.164.
562 Hill, ‘Genesis’ in For the Unfallen, p.15.
the stanza imagines unity; through its control of the resonances of its words it apprehends its fallenness.

Such a poetic may gesture beyond imperfection towards perfection, may even brush against it. But there is another revisionary purpose in Hill’s work which takes a poem closer towards a kind of perfectedness in imperfection. It is suggested by a postscript to his second volume, *King Log* (1968). The volume ends with a section entitled ‘King Stork’ which consists of an explanatory essay about the collection’s sonnet sequence ‘Funeral Music’ and a revised version of a poem from Hill’s debut collection, *For the Unfallen* (1959), ‘In Memory of Jane Fraser’. The new poem, whose revisions I will look at below, is retitled ‘In Memory of Jane Fraser: An Attempted Reparation’ and is accompanied by a note which states, with a degree of sly wit: ‘I dislike the poem very much and the publication of this amended version may be regarded as a necessary penitential exercise.’ Poetry and penitence are close for Hill. Indeed, as Peter Robinson has written, Hill ‘conceives of the acts of composition as a resistance to, and a seeking to amend for, sins and shame’. The implication of ‘King Stork’ is that the formal self-criticism of revision constitutes a confession to the failures of utterance and that its being made public is therefore an act of penitence. Can there, for Hill, as there cannot for Coetzee, be such a thing as a perfect confession?

*For the Unfallen*’s ‘Solomon’s Mines’ is an early poem that might function as confession. The poem articulates one of the dilemmas at the heart of Hill’s verse:

Anything to get up and go
(Let the hewn gates clash to)
Without looking round
Out of that strong land. (12)

The ‘strong land’ of the poem is an underland of ‘buried thrones’, of ‘dead/Priests, soldiers and kings’: a land of obsolete forms of traditional authority. The speaker strains for elevation against their ‘dead weight’, (‘Genesis’ 3) but the poem, like the

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collection, is aware of the way in which, as Hazlitt had it, poetry ‘naturally falls in with the language of power […]’ Kings, priests, nobles are its train-bearers, tyrants and slaves its executioners.”565 The gravitational pull of tradition is strong, that is, and, in its adherence to the rudiments of poetic form, the poem cannot quite escape communion with those traditional modes of authority:

Spadework and symbol; each deed  
Resurrecting those best dead  
Priests, soldiers and kings […] (12)

The collection wants to memorialise the war dead, but this poem confesses to the complicity of its language with forms of power that sustain and feed on war. But in the ambiguity of ‘those best dead/Priests, soldiers and kings’, ‘Solomon’s Mines’ becomes a self-revising utterance. Read one way, the lines suggest that these forms or authority are ‘best dead’ – that is, best left fallen, unbothered, unresurrected. Seen another way, however, they suggest that these dead forms are the best. In the ambiguity the lines confess also to an attraction to precisely that which they articulate an ethical desire to transcend. In instances such as this, ambiguity becomes a means of continuing the processes of self-criticism that constitute, for Hill, revision, fixing a motion of affirmation and negation, act and erasure. It is a stuck, retrograde (rather than progressive) revision that continues, perpetually, in the finished object.

This motion of affirmation and negation, re-affirmation and re-negation, is central to Hill’s poetic. ‘Un’ words recur in For the Unfallen. Indeed, Hill’s poetic oeuvre begins, in this first title, with negation. In its negation of the function of memorial, the title confesses to the essential selfishness of its memorialising impulse. This volume of memorial poetry, it announces, is for the living: the unfallen, the undead, the unnegated. But it is also possible to read in the words a negation of this negation: the fallen, according to the Christian mythology with which Hill aligns himself, are also the living – our postlapsarian selves. Thus the unfallen are also the prelapsarian, the not-yet-able-to-die, the unnegatable. They are even, at a push, the re-animated, the living dead. At any rate, in the title’s play of negation, the question

565 Quoted in Hugh Haughton, “‘How fit a title...’: Title and Authority in the Work of Geoffrey Hill’, pp.39-40.
of who, exactly, the book is for becomes unresolvable. If it confesses, the confession is indeterminate, not an arrived-at endpoint. If poetry is atonement and atonement requires confession and confession requires utterance and to utter is to transgress, then a poem must, for Hill, constitute an act of atonement for itself; it must confess to the transgression of uttering to confess. A perfected poetic utterance might, then, be one that crystallises revision and perfectly and perpetually criticises and corrects itself, creating a revisionary aesthetic that is not quite, as it is for Coetzee, an interminable spiral, but which is total, which utters utter confession.

The most puzzling ‘un’ word in ‘For the Unfallen’ is housed in the original version of ‘In Memory of Jane Fraser’. The poem begins nostalgically; its first stanza has the rhythmic ingenuousness, the monosyllabic diction and simple rhyming of a song of innocence or a lyrical ballad:

When snow like sheep lay in the fold
And winds went begging at each door,
And the far hills were blue with cold
And a cold shroud lay on the moor‘

In its general effect, the poem seems to dramatise not a struggle against tradition but an easeful succumbing. It ends with a death that coincides with a revival of the landscape, seeming to introduce to it movement and agency:

She died before the world could stir.
In March the ice unloosed the brook
And water ruffled the sun’s hair
And a few sprinkled leaves unshook.

It is fitting, in a poem in which death brings life, that life should be enacted by means of those ‘un’ words: unloosed, unshook. But that last word, ‘unshook’, strikes an off note. Its only record in the OED is as a long obsolete alternative to ‘unshaken’; that is, it can only mean something if we understand it in a distant historic sense.

566 Geoffrey Hill, ‘In Memory of Jane Fraser’ in For the Unfallen, p.23.
567 Ibid.
poem ends with new life but culminates in a long-dead word, once again communicating the collection’s ambivalent relation to tradition. But, reading it in the sense the *OED* supplies, the word does not quite work: it follows neither grammatically nor thematically, where the grammar anticipates agency and the sense anticipates movement. The ‘solecism’, as Vincent Sherry has called the word, might tempt us to read it in a new sense, as a coinage: a few sprinkled leaves shook themselves out of the branches, that is, a few leaves emerged.\(^{569}\) Yet the movement being described, in that case, would be a shaking, a fluttering outwards, which is stilled by the negative prefix. The poem, which seeks to end with a consolatory new life and movement after stillness, ends in fact on an image difficult to construe, to imagine or apprehend with any confidence, and a word which stills itself; it ends with an annulment. Like ‘September Song’, the poem distrusts its ending.

Other than a light tinkering with the punctuation, the one notable change in the revised poem is that the final line now reads: ‘Dead cones upon the alder shook.’\(^{570}\) For Vincent Sherry, the new arrival of death at the end of the poem frustrates the poem’s formal anticipation of new life and,

\[\text{[a]s he drops the consolation of the pastoral, [Hill] also destroys the poem’s effect as a social ritual. He has checked the ambition to perfect the common tongue for the civil rituals of verse.}\] \(^{571}\)

It is, for Sherry, a movement away from perfection – or, at least, from a formal, generic perfection. But it seems to me that the revised poem works even less to differentiate itself from poetic tradition, even less to trouble ideas of perfection. It may be that ‘unshook’ was too unstable a word to be effective, and it may be that the literal introduction of death into the line does the work of self-undermining with more poise. But the most effective function of this revision is, to my mind, its making public of the act itself. By drawing his readers’ attention to the revised text in this way, rather than quietly replacing the poem, Hill does not only cast a backward glance at *For the Unfallen* but, more to the point, ends *King Log* – a volume wholly

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\(^{569}\) Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, p.48.

\(^{570}\) Geoffrey Hill, ‘In Memory of Jane Fraser: An Attempted Reparation’ in *King Log*, p.69.

\(^{571}\) Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, p.49.
anxious about the poet’s authority – by altering the poet’s status. As Stephen James has written of Lowell’s publication of his notebooks,

[t]he denial of any special ethical privilege for the author is strengthened by removing the safeguard of private revision and opening the process of recomposition to public view.572

Although the poem announces its new finishedness, its presentation makes publication seem like just one more stage in an ongoing process, thereby once again undermining the poet’s claim of having finished not only this poem, but any poem, in much the way the poem undermines its own revivifying ending with annulment.

The sly wit with which Hill announces this revision, describing it as a ‘necessary penitential exercise’, may open him to the charge of false modesty. One of the most common criticisms of Hill’s work is that its self-critical attitude is a rhetorical posture, an essentially inauthentic construct that functions as a get-out clause for proper moral engagement. James Wood, an admirer of Hill’s early verse, writes, in a particularly snarling review of Canaan (1996) and The Triumph of Love: ‘It is hard to avoid the feeling that his penitence [... has] become something of a false religion.’573 Wood objects to Hill’s attraction to ‘the most extreme of historical occurrences’. ‘The more extreme the subject,’ he writes,

the more outlandishly distant the poet’s grief from the subject, the more ‘penitent’ – or scrupulous, or careful, or distancing – the art will be. The greater the liberty, the greater the apology; which may mean neither a freer nor a more penitent art, but instead (and awkwardly) a freely penitent art, an art that takes excessive liberties while apparently apologising for the excess. The greater the penitence, moreover, the stranger the initial choice of subject comes to seem. For an excessive scrupulousness of apology only serves to make the choice of subject seem less scrupulous.574

574 Ibid.
Or, as Rachel Buxton has summarised,

Hill’s intense self-questioning can easily become little more than a mannerism, a reflex action, an instinctive and self-justifying response to certain subject matter.

[...] John Bayley identified a similarly questionable quality in *Tenebrae*, writing that Hill’s many distancing devices are ‘a way of giving to pure aesthetics an air of the moral’: the poetry’s concern is with creating lyric from the stuff of ethical problems, at the expense of the ostensible subject.\(^575\)

It is a charge which Hill himself recognises. As E.M. Knottenbelt has written, ‘that there might be something morally evasive about his self-consciousness’ is something which the poems themselves ‘mercilessly diagnose.’\(^576\) Even this self-diagnosis can become a subject of the poetry: ‘critic and poet,’ writes Gabriel Pearson of ‘September Song’, ‘get kudos from showing awareness in the poem of the danger of getting kudos from this “ultimate subject.”’\(^577\) Certainly, as we have seen, the confession at the heart of ‘September Song’ does not constitute a clear-sighted evaluation of a piece of work so much as an early anticipation of that evaluation, a fact that might give weight to these criticisms. In the rest of this chapter, I will look at Hill’s development of a ‘late style’ which, I will argue, can be characterised by a new way of thinking about what it means to finish a poem, what the work of revision should constitute, and offers another, less rhetorical way of removing ‘the safeguard of private revision,’ denying the poet ‘any special ethical privilege’ and of ‘opening the processes of recomposition to public view’, while still honouring, constantly, ‘King Stork’’s performance of repentance, its ‘I dislike the poem very much.’

### iii. ‘sparks breaking out of the circuit’

Few poets can have had more made of their ‘late style’ than Geoffrey Hill. Critical responses to his extensively revised collected edition – *Broken Hierarchies: Poems*

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1952–2012 – have tended to centralise the thirteen-year gap between the publication *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1984) and *Canaan* (1996) and take the verse that falls on either side as two distinct corpuses, the first characterised by its wroughtness and rarity, the second by its provisionality and torrent. In the *London Review of Books*, Colin Burrow, for whom the ‘asymmetrical volume of [Hill’s] output is one of the more obviously remarkable things’ about the book, celebrates ‘the remarkable unstoppling of Hill’s muse in the later 1990s’.578 Paul Batchelor’s review for *Poetry Foundation*, the best overview of Hill’s long career I have found, uses variations of the phrase ‘late style’ twenty-one times, eight while still discussing the early poetry.579 More than culmination, addendum or coda, Hill’s development of a ‘late style’ has become the lens through which he is read. There has been much speculation about the cause of the ‘remarkable unstoppling’. The ending of a first marriage in 1983; a second marriage to the poet and librettist Alice Goodman in 1987; Goodman’s love of Frank O’Hara; their move to Boston in 1988, where Hill took up a position as Professor of Literature and Religion at Boston University; his treatment there for depression and chronic anxiety; and a cardiac arrest have all been brought into the frame – not least by the poems themselves.580 But there has been little exploration of what happens poetically in the gap, either as it is recorded in Hill’s archive or as it is stage-managed in *Broken Hierarchies*. I do not wish to speculate about causes; for the remainder of this chapter I will look at both the archival record and the stage-managing of the change in order to show that at its core is a rethinking of revision.

The thirteen-year gap is not entirely empty. In 1983, while putting together his first collected edition, Hill began work on three new poems which, having fallen through the gap, have received little attention. Entitled ‘Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres’, the poems were positioned not at the end of the collection but immediately before *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*. They retain the longer poem’s verse form –

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quatrains of variously-stressed pentameter with two pairs of variously-arranged rhyming words – and function as a kind of retrospective prelude, commemorating and apparently retracing Péguy's 1912 pilgrimage to Chartres Cathedral, a 13th-century cathedral whose relics, artworks and elaborate stained glass windows have made it a focal site for the veneration of the Virgin Mary. Drawn from the language of Marian worship, the ‘Hymns’ hold the struggle of faith against the easy rote of religious practice. The pilgrim poet seeks communion – with history, with the suffering of the world, with the spiritual or transcendent – but finds, in the cathedral’s religious community, only a pedantic and canny devotion: ‘priests go nodding by, dainty and shrewd’.\footnote{581} In its devotional artworks he finds only blank materiality: the 16th century Black Madonna has a ‘wooden stare’.\footnote{582} Its stained glass windows are more promising, their material filtering of light having a non-material effect in which the poet sees an imbrication of the spiritual and the violent, yet the only realm in which he can apprehend that violence is one of aesthetics: the ‘festal light’ that ‘pour[s]’ through the windows – ‘full of the sun’s holocaust’ – produces ‘flowering lances’.\footnote{583} Art can only Prettify worldly suffering. Religious experience, for the poet of these hymns, requires victimhood, martyrdom. Thus, for him, ‘spared,/as well as other ecstasies, the hues/of burning’, there is nothing.\footnote{584} The poems pose familiar questions about the possibilities of devotional verse: how can a poet who has not suffered the torments of faith fashion a spiritual art without subscribing to the empty rote and habit of religious practice? How can a poetry apprehend the woundiness of religious experience without prettifying violence? How can Hill write a spirituality of suffering without presumption?

But the poems also touch on another kind of spirituality, less familiar to Hill. He is, around this time, interested in Gauguin’s turn towards an aesthetic of spiritual ingenuousness. While drafting the ‘Hymns’, in April 1984, he copies into his notebook (and abridges) a passage from H.W. Janson’s *History of Art* (1962):

Gauguin believed that Western civilization was “out of joint”, that industrial society had forced men into an incomplete life dedicated to material gain, while their

emotions lay neglected. To rediscover for himself the hidden world of feeling, Gauguin left Paris for western France to live among the peasants of Brittany. He notices particularly that religion was still part of the everyday life of the country people, & in pictures such as The Vision after the Sermon (Jacob wrestling with the Angel), he tries to depict their simple, direct faith. Here at last is what no Romantic painter had achieved: a style based on pre-Renaissance sources. Modelling and perspective have given way to flat, simplified shapes outlined heavily in black, & the brilliant colours are equally “unnatural.” This style, inspired by folk art & the medieval stained glass, is meant to recreate both the imagined reality of the vision and the trance-like rapture of the peasant women. Yet we sense that Gauguin, although he tried to share this experience, remains an outsider; he could paint pictures about faith, but not from faith.  

Gauguin is important enough to Hill for The Vision After the Sermon to have been a working title for the 1985 Collected Poems; a detail from the work appears on its cover. The ‘Hymns’ dramatise a poetic standing similar to that which Janson describes as Gauguin's: the poet held just outside of faith – ‘on the cusp of devotion,’ as a later poem has it (164) – by his erudition. One of their achievements is their evocation not of a world empty of the divine but one permeated by a divinity to which they can find no access. Theirs is a world in which there are

Visible, invisible,

Powers, presences, in and beyond the blue
Glass, radiantly-occluded Sion

but that revisionary flicker from ‘visible’ to ‘invisible’ captures something of the predicament, evoking the frustration of a light gone out before not quite seen. The first poem opens with what might be read as a dismissal of rude sounds of praise: ‘Eia, with handbells, jews’ harps, risible/tuckets of salutation.’ But the play between the literal meaning of ‘risible’ and what it looks like it means – able to rise,
rise-able – allows us, if we can view the word through an untutored, uncultivated lens, to read the lines differently: if we forget our learning, that is, the risible becomes the rise-able, the transcendent. Gauguin attempted a style of unlearning, a naïf style of bold immediacy. For Hill at this stage of his career, there is no alternative to a poetry of intensive scholarly labour. But these ‘Hymns’ might suggest the stirrings of a dissatisfaction with that particular labour.

The ‘Hymns’ do feel particularly stiff and stilted, containing none of the immediacy of first gestures in their finish. The revelatory paradox and ambiguity of Hill’s best early work has hardened into habit. When the poet prays to the ‘Dame/de Sous-Terre’ to ‘Assoil [her] lordly vassals’, ‘assoil’ may felicitously suggest both, in its meaning, absolution – that is, transcendence – and in what it looks like it means, the soil, the ‘sous-terre’, the earthbound and buried. But, as with ‘risible’, it is the possibility of a lack of cultivation that allows for that paradox, and the words that follow – ‘lordly vassals’ – register as a flat unrevealing stating of opposites. The language of violence breaks into the verse with none of the scrupulous self-consciousness or awful viscera of Hill’s earlier poems, the ‘florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks’, as he has described his style in ‘Funeral Music’, a sonnet sequence about the Wars of the Roses; the use of ‘holocaust’ in particular feels unearned. The verse is at its best, in fact, when evoking a poetic tiredness:

Outside the glass, the pigeons rancid as gulls
Roost in their stucco-dung on the tiered sills.

To compare one bird to another speaks eloquently of a depleted frame of reference: why should gulls be more rancid than pigeons, other than to fit a not-quite-rhyme scheme (a rhyme scheme which itself evokes degradation, like an ornate architectural feature only half visible through bird droppings)? The heavy landing on ‘gulls/Roost’ enacts flightlessness. One hears, and sees, ‘tired’ in ‘tiered’, as though the lines are themselves ‘tired sills’. In short, the sequence seems to obstruct itself with its over-wrought, worked-at language, seems to yearn for another kind of writing. Hill’s strenuous revision seems, in other words, to be getting in the way.

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589 Ibid, p.179.
590 Hill, ‘Postscript: King Stork’ in King Log, p.67.
When we next see pigeons in Hill’s oeuvre, it is, thirteen years later, in section CXXXIV of *The Triumph of Love*. The lines describe a rising rather than a roosting and comment on their own ephemeral beauty rather than their static tiredness:

beautifully-caught
scatter of pigeons in brusque upward tumble,
wingbeats held by a blink. (281)

I hope to account for some of what might have changed in Hill’s poetic practice between the ‘tiered sills’ of the ‘Hymns’ and the ‘blink’ of *The Triumph of Love*.

In *Broken Hierarchies*, the ‘Hymns’, as the blurb announces, have been ‘greatly revised and expanded’, repositioned between *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* and *Canaan*, and dated 1982-2012. They now fall precisely in the gap and cover precisely half of the collection’s timespan, apparently, now, in process up to the moment of publication. No longer three poems, they are now 21; no longer 60 but 420 lines of poetry. Their non-chronological placement in an otherwise chronological book announces itself as an interruption. The poems themselves, too, are no longer chronologically arranged, the original three poems buried unmarked amongst others written as many as thirty years later. Like the original sequence, the revised hymns have received little attention, dismissed, if addressed, as a late misstep. But I want to propose that as a self-conscious bridge between early and late Hill – in particular, in their treatment of revision – the revised ‘Hymns’ are not only appropriate but revelatory.

The 2012 sequence begins not, as the original sequence had, with praise but with a moment of startling, cryptic self-consciousness – representative of the disjointed intellectual surrealism, the intractability, and the constantly shifting ground of the late verse – that retrospectively calls into being a rupture in Hill’s poetic style:

Retainers out: that *florid grim music*
broken by grunts and shrieks. No motion else.

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592 See, in particular, Burrow ‘Rancorous Old Sod’ and Batchelor, ‘Weight of the Word, Weight of the World’.
Amorous bonding putty, mosaic
that breaks up features and wears colours false,

discovered, how? I am pensionable
and you have no news. When last we laid bare
our manifest otherness cable
television had not been installed here. (157)

If a ‘retainer’ is a ‘contrivance or device which holds something in place,’ then to take one out is to loosen and let fall apart, an action which the lines perform by breaking into the original sequence’s wrought style with Hill’s own early prose description of a cultivated style broken into, the ‘florid grim music/broken by grunts and shrieks’, a self-quotation itself newly ‘broken’, on the word ‘broken’, over the line-break. Brokenness, falling-apartness are central preoccupations of the later ‘Hymns’, as they are of Hill’s late verse in general, often implying a continuity between a failing body and a failing poetic. In an essay on the ageing body in Hill’s late works, Sophie Ratcliffe reports that,

in two separate readings in 2005, Hill made criticism of his own teeth a condition of performance; in each case a reading mistake was blamed on his having packed “the wrong set of dentures”. Much of the imagery of the new opening stanzas of the ‘Hymns’, which announce the poet’s ‘pensionable’ status, follows suit, calling to mind broken or faulty mouths: a ‘retainer’ can also be a kind of denture; ‘bonding putty’ is a substance used to fix cracked teeth. Where the original poems had opened with a signifying sound, ‘Eia’, an untranslatable, laudatory Latin expression taken from the Salve Regina which emerges whole in the mouth, the later poetry comes from a broken-mouthed, ageing poet who can only ‘slur’ his ‘gifts’, as he puts it in another poem in the sequence. (163) Elsewhere, the poet is breathless: ‘Faith for old-timers gets more difficult./shorted of breath.’ (157) Or he is incontinent: ‘Older than Falstaff or Lear I

have crap/perfuming my right hand.’ (165) Perhaps the ‘grunts and shrieks’ are now his own.

Older than Falstaff or Lear, Krapp is the presiding tragic figure in these poems, in which an older, revisionary consciousness inserts himself into utterances made half a life-time earlier. The original poems register now as flashbacks; memory has become bitter sustenance: ‘Return, if in mauvais esprit, to Chartres’. (162) The 1985 poems had been situated in a narrative present, positing a consciousness responding to a closely-imagined environment. These later poems are re-situated in a kind of writing present, even an archival present. ‘Dust down the Chartres Virgin from the shelf,’ one poem instructs. (165) ‘For what other reason are there notebooks,/intemperate archives?’ asks the first. (157) As in Krapp’s Last Tape, the sequence is now organised around its archive, which provides its ground, its realm: we are in the midst of revision. And in this sequence of fallings apart, revision is rarely figured as the perfecting activity it once was. In the second poem, revision becomes a reingesting of emission, an attempt at a correction better left to god: ‘nature’s bad sums/righted by grace not time’s coprophagy’. (157) The same poem later reminds us: ‘Shit, even, can be further degraded.’ (157) Elsewhere, revision-as-confession has become revision-as-torture: ‘Making the innocent subject confess/to his first interview is indecent/politics.’ (158) Repentance has become abrasion: ‘attrition by remorse like sand scouring.’ (158) No Keatsian new-leafing tree, this future-tense, looking-back, Krapp-like poet aligns himself instead with the parasitic and fungal. ‘Grafting constrains me to the mistletoe/of chill celebration’, (168) he admits in the final poem. In another:

Mildewy twigs make pale light; a green sheen
rubs off at a touch and holds but barely
a radiance of domain. Unsurely
words appear to meet me on what I mean;

fumble eternity. (163)

Revision functions in this sequence not as the perfecting work of the early poems but as a parasitic and imperfecting activity, an unloosening.
In their unstitching of chronological and spatial unities, the poems now mime the flat perspectivelessness of stained glass, something closer to Gauguin’s naïf style. Our attention is redirected from the ‘powers, presences, in and beyond the blue/glass’, to the glass itself, to the mosaic principle, a method of uniting fragments and fragmenting unity: ‘Amorous bonding putty, mosaic/that breaks up features and wears colours false.’ The paradox of suture and division, union and disunion represented here by the putty that simultaneously bonds and breaks, pervades every aspect of the revised poems, from the compositional to the thematic to the linguistic. Indeed, much of the sequence’s cryptic surrealism makes sense only when read as an enactment of mosaic. In a phrase such as, ‘Parnassian pattern-block/cleft by joint strokes of gravitas and schlock’, the language both describes a collage (Chartres’s Rose window) and itself collages, enacting here a politically suspect aesthetic union of Latin and Yiddish, Roman and Jew – a ‘dissonance contrabanded through [the] sweet sieves’ of the verse, as the following line describes the effect. As a practice that simultaneously splits sameness down the middle and stitches together difference, poet past and poet present held together and held apart, revision is fundamental to, even productive of, this thematic and formal patterning, which is, as I hope to show, a defining feature of Hill’s late verse. The poet is himself mosaicked.

By continually announcing the poems’ revisedness, the multiplicity of poetic consciousnesses is continually foregrounded, as is evident in the changed more of address. The original poems are prayers, delivered to the Virgin Mary in various guises: ‘Salve regina’; ‘O dulcis virgo’; ‘Redemptrice of all vows and fealties’. The addressee of the later poems is harder to locate, their apostrophe characterised by indirection. In the fourteenth poem, for instance, the poet says, with dizzying paradox: ‘It is not you I address, great Chartreine’ (and adds: ‘though I confuse many by writing so/much on the cusp of devotion, so set/in the metrics’). The only definite addressee who does emerge in the later poems is the poet himself: ‘You are incautious,’ he ventriloquises at one point, before glancing over his entire corpus: ‘have her thus accost/your sixty years of accreted banter’. The poet who had once sought communion appears, now, to be talking only to himself, his poetic

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596 Ibid, pp.177-179.
universe populated by the different iterations of self brought about in acts of revision.

One ‘function of apostrophe,’ writes Jonathan Culler in an overview of lyric address,

is to posit a potentially responsive or at least attentive universe, to which one has a relation. Apostrophes invoke elements of the universe as potentially responsive forces, which can be asked to act, or refrain from acting, or even to continue behaving as they usually behave. The key is not passionate intensity, but rather the ritual invocation of elements of the universe, the attempt, even, to evoke the possibility of a magical transformation.597

This is broadly the basis of the original three poems’ engagement with lyric address, in which the poet seeks responsiveness and communion but finds passive indifference, plays courtly lover to a wooden stare. His prayers do not reach their destination. In the later poems, prayer is accordingly re-directed, returned to sender. ‘The figure of apostrophe,’ Culler later writes,

which seems above all to seek to establish relations between self and other, can also on occasion be read as an act of radical interiorization and solipsism, which either parcels out the self to fill the world, or internalizes what might have been thought eternal.598

The later hymns do seem to enact a radical solipsism. The interruptive suture and mosaic of their revision appears to create a circuit of self-address that fills the space of the spiritual with self. The fourteenth poem, in which the poet himself becomes the fullest symbol there is of the mysticism-in-suffering he had sought 30 years previously, might describe the process:

This is a primitive animation.
I am bemused that it works; but work it
does, with sparks breaking out of the circuit –

old tramwires, old dodgems’ besplat motion.

In a school lab I severed a live flex,
the shock like a bursting bag, my heart’s
pace snagging among the bunsens and retorts:
sparkler-haired scarecrow, idiot-crucifix. (164)

The poet appears to find ‘sparks’ of ‘primitive animation’ in a closed self-circuit, finding access in the secular to the untutored mysticism (‘idiot-crucifix’) which the original poems, seeking God, had locked themselves out of with their over-worked finish. Hill’s early verse is characterised by impersonality; there is not a single ‘I’ or ‘me’ in the original ‘Hymns’. In the revised sequence there are 66. It is hard, therefore, not to read the revised sequence as a turning away from God and towards self.

In the image of the electric shock there is a definite magical efficacy that surprises the poet: ‘I am bemused that it works; but work it/does’. It is an unusually direct statement of faith but it appears to be a faith in a spirituality of the self. The sequence ends with a stanza that imagines the work that follows in Broken Hierarchies in a state of pregnant unwrittenness, suggesting that we are to read these poems as in some way reflective of what is to come:

Judge this a lyrical intermission
to acts yet unwritten; not a coda
unaccepting of the late occasion,
the toll of disenchanted Xanadu. (168)

With its characteristic knot of negatives, the unyielding construction ‘intermission/to acts’ (an intermission falls between acts) and its hanging final clause, it is hard to say what this final stanza wants to tell. But it appears, again, to disavow disenchantment. At the end of the chapter, I will try to make sense of this retrospective anticipation by suggesting how the poems’ revision of revision may cast light on Hill’s new poetic ethics. First, though, I want to outline some of the many frustrations and obstructions of the thirteen-year gap as evident in the notebooks of the 1980s and early 1990s.
iv. 'I/imagine singing; I imagine getting it right?'

In the first of the revised ‘Hymns’, the poet recalls ‘tracking down Péguy and faith resurgent.’ (157) There is evidence that Hill did follow in the footsteps of Péguy’s pilgrimage, but not until the ‘Hymns’ were nearing completion. The three poems appear largely to have been written at a remove, responsive in the main to photographs, postcards and research. But a certain, perhaps resurgent faith is, to begin with, suggested in the poetic fragments. The first stanza emerges almost whole almost immediately:

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    kazooos
    Hand-bells might do it, Jews-harps, a risible
    Sounding of joy and mercy. Otherwise
    There is ashes + silence. These for [?]her use,
    Though not all in your praise. Visible, invisible]
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The opening locution, ‘might do it’, restored to the revised sequence, positions the poem’s praise within its workings-out, imagining in a future tense the successful construction of a space in which individual faith might flourish; it signals, that is, a religious optimism less visible in the published poem. In the gestures Hill goes on immediately to write, a resurgent personal faith appears to remain the focus as he attempts to figure different kinds of rising. First, he summons a rising flock of birds:

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a [?]dark sleep
    Susurrus off the grass, a flicker of wings/[?]whicker
    Makes for profound resurgence choirs/airs
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Next, he sketches a stanzaic framework around two rhyme words that evoke a heaving from earth to sky:

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600 Ibid.
from under a great lump of old iron

. . .

. . .

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Too triumphalist, perhaps, the lines remain unfilled-in; instead, Hill turns to a more quietly devotional image of rising, though it is now imbricated with a language of violence:

the candles rise up in their service and a of charged air

And it is not long before a familiar self-doubt enters the notebook with a self-mocking dismissal of the hope for transcendence: “yes, lovely~DEAR, and I’m/The archangel Gabriel’. These lines are followed by an image of downward motion, an apparent correlative for despair:

and the rain-squalls come

blowing across the fields like clouds of lime

Any hope of ‘faith resurgent’ appears to be quickly quashed: as we have seen, in the published poems birds do not rise but roost and defecate; candles do not join a ‘prayer-charged air’, as a revision of those lines has it, but ‘blur the air before your throne’, distorting faith and giving to the Virgin Mary the appearance of a mirage.

It is hard to say why the ‘Hymns’ appear to move so quickly from spiritual optimism to spiritual pessimism. There is a certain poetic infelicity in the drafts that suggests obstruction and blockage, but it is not a particularly judicious form of criticism to peek into a poet’s process and diagnose writer’s block at the first sight of infelicity. More suggestively, though, struggle, blockage, frustration, a lack of inspiration are all subjects that inform Hill’s phrase-making in this notebook. Isolated phrases such as ‘Otherwise blankness’ or ‘diginified stumbling’ begin to

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601 Ibid.
602 Ibid.
603 Ibid.
604 Ibid. These lines will find a home, two decades later, in Hill’s most spiritually optimistic work, The Orchards of Syon, section XIII: ‘Patchy weather, quick/showers gusting the fields like clouds of lime.’ (363)
appear; ‘It is too late; your beauty has gone out/too many times’ reads another, later fragment.\(^{607}\) As though to suggest his frustration with the poems, or even with form itself, in the middle of a page heavy with revision, Hill writes in particularly large letters: ‘HYMN/DAMN’.\(^{608}\) The poems certainly appear to have been a costive production: intended as a seven-poem sequence, Hill gives up after three, the fruit of a year’s worth of strenuous poetic labour.

But throughout their composition there is another kind of utterance that emerges in Hill’s notebooks, suggestive of another kind of poetic, though it will be a further fifteen years before it finds expression. As well as articulations of obstruction and blockage, the notebooks are full of phrases that, like ‘Hand-bells might do it’, look forward to a future felicity, repositioning the poetic gaze from the retrospective scepticism of ‘I have made’ to an optimistic anticipation. ‘It will go forward. Like music,’ reads one such fragment.\(^{609}\) For the first time, a phrase appears, on a page of dense and frustrated workings out, that will recur frequently in different arrangements in the notebooks over the following decade, attaching itself to different poems, for a while even concluding the first of the ‘Hymns’ and eventually settling into Canaan’s ‘That Man as a Rational Animal Desires the Knowledge Which Is His Perfection’. (172) The lines – which, Sophie Ratcliffe has suggested, were, in fact, Hill’s second wife, Alice Goodman’s\(^{610}\) – in their original form read: ‘I/imagine singing; I imagine getting it right?’\(^{611}\) Perpetually delaying the clicking-shut of the box, the lines mark a sea-change in Hill’s poetic imagination; their appearance, in the drafts of the ‘Hymns’, marks, to my mind, the beginning of the development of his late style.

In order to differentiate between early and late Hill, Robert Macfarlane employs a geological metaphor. The early poems, he writes,

laid down in their characteristic triplets, exhibit the permanence of geological structures. They are written in a form so pressurising that grammar and syntax are often crushed within it, and meaning is densely compacted.\(^{612}\)

\(^{607}\) Ibid, pp.9, 12, 71.
\(^{608}\) Ibid, p.34.
\(^{610}\) The Keble Debates: Professor Sir Geoffrey Hill on YouTube, uploaded by KebleCollegeOxford 12 July 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hw77calhKOI>
Canaan, for Macfarlane, is a collection ‘whose slender aerated forms declared their distance from the dark mineral triplets of Chartres’. There are certainly a number of poems in Canaan that fit the description. But there are just as many that do not: dense, pebble-like lumps of matter, ‘great lump[s] of old iron.’ Rather than declaring their distance from the ‘Hymns’, many of Canaan’s poems are in fact part of the same tranche of work, begun as early as 1983, the composition of the two volumes briefly entwined. Macfarlane’s metaphor is still instructive, but descriptive, rather, of a process visible within Canaan, a volume which, I hope to show, charts Hill’s rethinking of revision and enacts within it a process of dissembling and aeration begun in the ‘Hymns’ and visible in the notebooks, such that Hill’s poetic can stop habitually saying of itself ‘I have made’ or ‘This is plenty’, or even, ‘I have not finished’, and begin to say, ‘I imagine getting it right.’

In September 1983, well into the drafting of the three ‘Hymns’, a new quality of responsiveness enters the notebooks. Hill begins to write of the cathedral with a close observation previously absent: ‘The north window is the reddish-gold one’ begins one descriptive note; onto another page he pastes a flier for an upcoming organ recital at the cathedral. It appears he is now in Chartres. But his attention there is focussed less on the cathedral itself than on its surrounding environment. There are pages of descriptive prose, singularly illegible (as though written at speed) which describe that environment. Here is a portion of a section I have been able (mostly) to transcribe, describing a walk along a narrow backstreet leading to the cathedral:

Walked the length of the Rue du Faubourg St Jean – lots of wisteria, espaliering Virginia creeper. I do think there is [illegible] a “clématite” along the wall in the Hotel ground NO [illegible]. (Turn a certainty [illegible]) Impasse St Jean. Old walls crumbling away to mud (flints, fruit trees, fruit-clumps in hedge-roots, [illegible],

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613 Ibid.
615 Ibid, pp.102, 106.
autumn fruits + flowers. Rooster (At 3.30pm!) It does sound like I say it does. Poultry straw smells. Natural strange beatitudes ------- 25.ix.83

Hill’s interest appears to be in the everyday rather than the numinous; plants, creepers clawing into a brickwork crumbling to mud prompt a more expansive response than do the structures of religion. Indeed, it is, here, the natural world’s disassembling of structure that appears to give rise to, or to suggest something like epiphany, those ‘natural strange beatitudes’ (the phrase, signalling an earthly and estranging blessing, will recur). This shift in Hill’s attention in Chartres signals a shift in poetic attention; though he continues to work on the three ‘Hymns’, he leaves them at just three rather than the intended seven, and it is not long before he begins another notebook, one of few he kept as a kind of commonplace book. It would be impossible to characterise the variety of materials he collects here, from dense theology to isolated metrical patterns. But in its creative work it records a movement towards a poetry of natural apprehension, a refocussing of Hill’s spiritual interest, collecting descriptive fragments that suggest not revelation or transcendence but a kind of spiritual self-sufficiency in the natural world. Thus, for example, a willow is simultaneously devotion and divinity: ‘the psalming willow bowed above its own/reflective music and its weary crown’. In another fragment, which, in its published form, will occur at a crucial moment in Hill’s poetic, the natural world becomes its own apprehension, a successful self-grasping:

spidery ontology
that makes the density. The well-grasped things
[?]cling to the cobweb of a winter leaf

In images such these I see a poet turning his attention away from a poetry which either attempts to, or mourns its failure to, apprehend the divine – the natural world is not, here, I think, revelation – and towards a poetry attentive to phenomena and structures of feeling that might echo or map or even partake in the divine but exist

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616 Ibid, p.103.
618 Ibid, p.3.
independent of it, cultivating something like a numinous experience of the non-numinous. Once again, Goodman’s lines recur, this time in a Lear-quotting fragment:

Against the bias
Of nature, supernatural mysteries.
‘I imagine singing, imagine getting it right.’

‘Against’ suggests contact without overlap, the natural and the supernatural touching, but the latter not knowable in the former. In its new context, the final line might suggest, therefore, that the perfected poem, like the supernatural, may be in contact with its earthly counterpart but cannot be found in it. It might suggest, that is, a new theology of poetic perfectedness.

This is, no doubt, to read too definitively and retrospectively what is emerging without definition or direction. In any case, Hill starts work proper for the new collection in a notebook dated April 1985 which begins with a passage of exploratory prose – again, largely illegible. What I have been able to transcribe suggests that Hill is continuing to conceive of a kind of epiphany without divinity:

The rien is [illegible] always, wherever you are (India Armenia[illegible]) known in a moment of ‘vision’ usually an [?]old corner of a path, etc. & a – moment of truth. Who are you, Why all you love? By what right are you here? – or the [?]old Blok-style ‘possession’ [...]

Once again, Hill is locating something like a religious experience, ‘a moment of ‘vision’, in the everyday – ‘an old corner of a path, etc.’ But it appears to be a vision of absence rather than of the numinous. I take ‘rien’ as something like Levinas’s understanding of the word (who will, as we shall see, figure in Hill’s work in the following decade). For Levinas, Sami Sjöberg writes, ‘[r]ien differs from néant’ – that is, nothingness – ‘in that it is “nothing” as an “ambiguïté du néant et de l’inconnu” [ambiguity of nothingness and the unknown].’

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absence whose origin – whether it lies in the world or the individual apprehension of the world – is ambiguous. Thus, Sjöberg writes, ‘Levinas defines rien as that which withholds itself from presence in me’. An apprehension of this withholding, which proceeds from ‘no world beyond our world’, is the closest we can get, for Levinas, to an apprehension of the divine; the divine ‘encounters the human’, summarises Michael L. Morgan, ‘and yet “departs” at the same instance’ leaving ‘a trace of a divine presence that is in fact a divine absence’. Transcendence is thus, Morgan writes, ‘not a transcendence that is present but rather a transcendence that always “has passed by”’. It is around such a theology of absence, I want to suggest, that Hill begins to construct his poetry of natural apprehension – a poetry that does not seek the divine and find no evidence of it, but finds a kind of spiritual contentment in its absence, in the possibility that the divine and the non-divine might touch, might have touched, but that the former cannot be known as presence in the latter. On the same page that he writes this prose, Hill comes up with a not-quite-rhyme that, like the ‘natural strange beatitudes’, and like the spider’s web, will occur in Canaan at what I perceive as an inaugural moment of his late style, and which holds a kind of animate emptiness against a kind of mysticism: ‘SPASM. PSLAM.’ The words do not quite rhyme; do not quite touch. But they are in a relation to one another. Hill’s new poetic is about finding the psalm in the spasm.

Hill’s work during these years pulls in two directions: towards the compacted forms of the early poetry, towards rock and stone, and towards a more open verse, usually centred around natural apprehension, around plant life and growth. Early in this first Canaan notebook, Hill composes two descriptive fragments next to one another whose different futures reveal something of how each approach develops:

& willows saffroned in the earliest spring – Doncaster 27/3/85

Peacocks dyed tail-feathers of cloud – (Ely 27/3/85)

622 Ibid.
626 Ibid, p.3.
By stamping each fragment with a place and a date, Hill ties the apprehensions to life, to their expressive moment, making the immediacy of the poetic apprehension part of their resonance. Immediately he begins to work the free-floating second fragment into a kind of explanatory setting, writing it out again thus: ‘The rain’s [illegible] aftermath horizon(s), the peacock-dyed/Tail feather of clouds.’\(^{627}\) Again, he tags it, ‘Ely, 27/3/85’: it is still attached to origin, to the moment of its coming-into-being, even in revision; he is recording first urge. But one of the difficulties Hill seems to have in the early years of Canaan’s composition is establishing a suitable poetic ground in which he can root his poetic. Other than fragments of natural apprehension such as these, much of what he writes over the first months, even years, feels untethered. Here, for example, is part of a typical page of workings-out:

To be broken as named
- - - -
you you you you
your, your, your, your

[broken as soon as named
as soon broken as named]

it has come into | its | own & is gone

To be broken as named
you/you/you/you
you you you you\(^{628}\)

The lines are just about readable: ‘broken as soon as named’ might again gesture to a Levinasian theology of belatedness, for whom, ‘[t]he Infinite passes in saying’, suggested too in ‘it has come into | its | own & is gone’; in the repetition of empty address, there might be a gesture towards Martin Buber, according to whose theology God transcends linguistic apprehension and can only be addressed, not

\(^{627}\) Ibid.
\(^{628}\) Ibid, p.44.
The lines could, then, constitute a poetic gesture about what cannot be contained in a poetic gesture, eloquent not exactly of a paucity of material or inspiration but of the cultivation of a poetic act without content, an apprehension through absence. Even without attaching such defined ideas to the lines, there is, to my mind, a full and compelling poetic gesture, a poetic energy, visible in this page of workings-out, however free-floating it may be. Rather than harness these energies, however, the expansive gesture is, over the years, compacted into the smallest possible unit and embedded in a context that does not relate to its origin; the fullness of the expressive moment disappears. The gesture occurs in one of the volume’s pebble-like poems, ‘Respublica’, quoted here in full, the relevant section emboldened:

The strident high

civic trumpeting

of misrule. It is

what we stand for.

Wild insolence,

aggregates without
distinction. Courage

of common men:

spent in the ruck

their remnant witness

after centuries

is granted them

like a pardon.

And other fealties

other fortitudes

**broken as named** –

Respublica

---

brokenly recalled,
its archaic laws
and hymnody;

and destroyed hope
that so many times
is brought with triumph
back from the dead. (197)

It is not uncommon for Hill’s lines to move about, to find new resonance in new contexts. But, here, taken from its initial utterance and yoked into a chain of rational meaning in which it does not form an organic term, the phrase ‘broken as named’ loses much of its expressive resonance – a loss which, I suggest, contributes to a flatness, even a failure in some of these poems. Hill’s earlier poems caught movement in their finish. Here, motion is arrested.

That descriptive fragment – ‘Peacocks dyed tail-feathers of cloud’ – finds it way similarly into ‘Scenes from Harlequins’, a sequence of terse syllabics about the early twentieth-century Russian poet Aleksandr Blok, compacted into a setting from which it did not originate:

Holy Rus – into the rain’s
horizons, peacock-dyed
tail-feathers of storm,
so it goes on. (187)

The image functions effectively as a presage of the Russian revolution from Blok’s ambivalent perspective, suggesting simultaneously bruise, brutality and beauty. Yet Hill had taken care to locate the initial expression and subsequent revisions in a present-tense Ely, to root the observation in immediacy. In its migration to another time and another place, much of that immediacy is lost. The image no longer resonates as apprehension but, particularly with the substitution of ‘storm’ for ‘cloud’, it lands as allegory. Rather than unfolding a first gesture, testing it and retesting it through revision, and allowing the process a presence in the finished form, Hill’s revisionary labour in instances such as these compacts his material,
inorganically forcing together instances of different kinds of work – intellectual, academic, descriptive, expressive, ritual – and creating a static and unyielding poetic. As I hope to show, Hill’s ‘late style’ will find a way not only to accommodate the individual expressiveness of such disparate gestures but to make revelatory their tension.

In suggesting that Hill’s poetic work, in the early 1980s, constitutes a kind of petrification, I take my lead from the poems themselves. Stone is one of Canaan's recurrent images, usually figured negatively (‘Evil is not good's absence but gravity's/everlasting bedrock’ (201)). Hill has long been anxious that poetry might petrify. Jefferey Wainwright has written of the way in which, in early Hill, the poet is anxious that poetry 'locks life with its Midas touch – the “stony vine” of Mercian Hymns, the “sculpted vine” of 'Veni Coronaberis’ – and turns everything to display.’ Rather than the vine turned to stone, in Canaan Hill begins to imagine a kind of plant life at the heart of stone. The Blok poems – in which, in blocks of verse, Hill puns on his subject’s name, referring to him as a ‘granite-faced seer’ with a ‘petrified heart’ (184) – describe a poetic reawakening: ‘Again the estranged spirit/is possessed of light.’ (184) Accordingly, life begins to push through the rock-solid:

granite-faced seer
scathed by invisible
planets as men dream of war

like a fresh sea-wind
like the lilac
at your petrified heart
as something anciently known... [sic] (184)

The flower or creeper that pushes through the inanimate, the lilac at the petrified heart, is a recurrence in the collection, drawn perhaps from Hill’s Chartres walk, where the flowers coiling through crumbling stonework held more interest than the great stone cathedral. A later poem in the collection, ‘Sorrel’, imagines a rainstorm

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630 Wainwright, Acceptable Words, p.38.
that ‘seeps among’ ‘nettlebeds and threadbare sorrel,/perpetual ivy burrowed by weak light,/makes carved shapes crumble’, where ivy’s timeless recurrence claws through an ‘ill-weathering stone’ and, indeed, all elements of the image appear to seep and thread amongst one another in a kind of mutual becoming. (208) Or, in an early syllabic sequence, ‘Churchill’s Funeral’, Hill imagines the ruined London churches of the Blitz as a ‘Stone Pietà’ and ends the description with organic life:

with the ragwort
and the willow-herb
as edifiers
of ruined things. (214)

These forms or perpetual growing, ‘anciently known’, become, at the heart of crumbling stone structure, constructive moral agencies: ‘edifiers’.

The edifying disassembly of structure is recorded in the crumbling of the stone-like verse form within which Hill began to work towards the collection. *Canaan* records the disassembling on the page, an effect visible, for instance, in the interaction between the following two poems that sit side by side in the collection, the second ‘Dark-Land’ poem, and the standalone, ‘To the Nieuport Scout’:

Wherein Wesley stood
up from his father’s grave,
summoned familiar dust
for strange salvation:

where to England rous’d,
ignorant, her inane
Midas-like hunger: smoke
engrossed, cloud-cumbered

a spectral people
raking among the ash;
its freedom a lost haul
of entailed riches. (194)

How swiftly they cease to be
incredible
how incredible
the sudden immortals –

a tilt a flare
as though of mirrors
dared by their luck
they outdare it

and spin
from the fumy towers
taking England with them –
flame-tattered
pirouettes
quenched in a cloud. (195)
The forms fit their subjects: the first, which looks like stone, remembers the gravestone from which John Wesley is said to have preached. The second is a praise poem about a downed warplane noted for its mounted machine guns, capturing both its ragged work of destruction and the graceful free-floating of its falling. But together they express something else: the second poem makes the solidity of the first seem more provisional, while the first make the openness of the second look less free. Taken as a whole, form in *Canaan* is neither the closed form of traditional verse nor quite free verse. Rather, it is a form simultaneously solidifying and becoming free, as though its atoms are caught assembling and disassembling on the page.

In the third poem of ‘Scenes with Harlequins’, the poet appears obstructed: ‘I am not myself’. (186) He asks: ‘what can one say?’ (186) One feels Hill’s presence in the answer:

By humour of lament,
spontaneous word of stone,
inspired débâcle
many times rehearsed [...] (186)

Permeated by Hillian paradox, the stanza posits a poetry simultaneously spontaneous and made of stone. Hill’s use of the accents over ‘débâcle’ foregrounds the word’s literal French meaning: a rush of water that clears a path through solid structure. An ‘inspired débâcle’ might metaphorically be an immediate poetry, a spasmic gush. But it is also, here, ‘many times rehearsed’ – worked at, returned to, heavily revised. This is the poetic towards which both the composition and the text of *Canaan* work: one combining crystallisation and return with immediacy; revised, compacted solidity with open-ended process.

Not long after writing that other descriptive fragment – ‘& willows saffroned in the earliest spring – Doncaster 27/3/85’ – Hill considers the specifics of the image in a short passage of explanatory prose:
The very early Spring colours are as much red & saffron and gold-silver as green. I mean mid-to-late March, willows (yellowmist) pussy-willows are silver-grey. What are the reddish hazes? birch? alder? larch?631

He is seeking exactness, wanting to bring a precision of seeing, knowing, expressing, to the first gesture. Subsequently, he returns to the line and attempts to 'get it right':

the tints of leafless spring
are red or saffron

becomes:

[or] the red and saffron
tinctures-colours of leafless—early spring

becomes:

the red
and saffron of a Spring
tinctures tintings hazings632

This is a revision of attention rather than compaction. There is a particular focus and atomic care to Hill's nature poetry in these years. He returns, for example, to the 'spidery ontology' of his previous notebook, spinning image after image across pages of dense workings-out in an attempt to get right a description of light glinting on dew caught in the web. His attempts include: 'the dew-galaxies of the spiders' webs'; 'frost-galaxies/spiders' webs'; 'horrid-spun galaxies'; 'lighting up galaxies'; 'dew-hung'; 'dew-packed'; 'dew-strung galaxies'; 'dew-built'; 'spiders in hedge-roots/their dew-strung galaxies'; 'spiders' legacies'; 'mantled the ashen webs/in hedge-roots, on ditch-banks,/dew flashing galaxies'.633 In the middle of one of these pages, in bigger letters than the rest, as though describing the page itself: 'DENSE

632 Ibid, p.5.
TREES THAT SHONE’. The creative energy is remarkable, the workings-out themselves expressive in an expansive way that would be lost were the image yoked into one of those compressed syllabic quatrains. Here is a reproduction of one notebook page in which Hill works at the image:

cauled with webs
galaxies/of smashed crockery – cauled/with spiders’ webs
pottery fragments & [some tiny flowers studding
a heath-field]

[?]dead-[?]birth of floriferous
[?]could [?]with [?]verbs

he returns
upon himself, goes down
into (the) Sanskrit water & fire
of the Sanskrit cauled/
/ in spiders’ webs

he is lost in Sanskrit
(Sanskrit for ‘he is lost’?)[ivy, set in its ways]

LOST/IN SANSKRIT HE RETURNS/UPON HIMSELF

FORGOTTEN, SELF-FORGOTTEN
LOST/IN SANSKRIT HE RETURNS/UPON HIMSELF GOES DOWN/
INTO THE WATER & FIRE/ AND WAILING SOUNDS CONFUSED/WITH
SOUNDS OF JOY [INTO STRANGE [illegible] HELLS] RUINED
FORGOTTEN, SELF-FORGOTTEN

though the water + fire are only the most
common thing – like dust, [illegible rest of line]

[…]

Slowly, here, the heavily revised lines give way to what looks like an apprehension of the process of revision: ‘he returns/upon himself’. Indeed, in returning upon himself, the poet ends up ‘LOST/IN SANSKRIT’, he ends up ‘FORGOTTEN, SELF-

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634 Ibid, p.61.
635 Ibid, p.67.
FORGOTTEN’, as though he is so lost in this revisionary process that his language has become a dead language, the poet an irrelevant figure. He himself is ‘cauled’ in the ‘webs’ of revision. But it is most of all for its appearance that, I think, this notebook page is useful.

The spiders’ webs find their way into the sequence ‘Cycle’ – as do the phrase ‘Natural strange beatitudes’, the spasm/psalm non-rhyme, and the description of the first colours of spring. ‘Cycle’ is indeed a poem that moves forward by returning upon itself; it is the first poem in Hill’s oeuvre that obviously mimes a state of not yet having clicked shut, and in which revision is revealed in process. Here is the sequence in its entirety:

1
Natural strange beatitudes
  the leafless tints
  of spring touch red through brimstone
  what do you mean  praise and lament
  it is the willow
  first then
  larch or alder

2
The heart feels for its own
  patience
  reflects upon itself
  light is everywhere
  the spiders’
  galaxies
  droppings of the
  star wormwood

3
So there there it is past
  reason and measure
  sustaining
the constancy of mischance
its occlusion
  a spasm
a psalm

4
Are we not moved by
  'savage
indignation' or whatever
strange
  natürlich
dance with antlers
paces over and
  over the same
ground

5
Larch or alder
  first
then willow
  leafless tints
of spring touch red through brimstone

praise and lament
praise and lament

what do you mean
  praise
lament
  praise and lament
what do you mean
  do you mean
beatitudes (206-207)

Phrases repeat, locutions are unfinished, descriptive fragments float free, the final poem returns to the first, revises its arrangement, turns around its phrases, repeats
them, interrogates them, lengthens them, curtails them. The poem resembles the pages of Hill’s notebook, spatially and poetically: it captures some of the energy of the poetic labour and does not force its material into a form that arrests motion.

In amongst Canaan’s knotted political theology, moments of natural apprehension shine through the surrounding density, often describing the effect of light shining on or through plants, or other natural structures, poetically suggestive of religious experience. But it is usually an experience of absence rather than presence. In ‘Of Coming into Being and Passing Away’ – a title recalling that notebook fragment, ‘it has come into | its | own & is gone’ – the poet apprehends something like the rien in the light that shines through the thick red thorns of a rosa sericea:

Rosa sericea: its red spurs
    blooded with amber
each lit and holy grain
the sun
    makes much of
as of all our shadows –

prodigal ever returning
darkness that in such circuits reflects diuturnity
    to itself
and to our selves
    yields nothing
finally –

    but by occasion
visions of truth or dreams
as they arise –
    to terms of grace
where grace has surprised us –
the unsustaining
    wondrously sustained (174)
This poem sees the infinite in the particular: it is the grain that is ‘holy’, not the light that illuminates it. But the infinite, here, is an ‘ever returning/darkness’ which ‘to itself/and to others/yields nothing/finally’. The phrase ‘yields nothing’ is eloquently ambiguous, meaning perhaps that nothing, or nothingness, is the gift darkness gives us, or perhaps that darkness gives nothing away, retains its mysteries: it is an ambiguity du néant et de l’inconnu, an apprehension of the beyond through absence. After all the work he put into getting right the image of light shining through the dewy spiders’ webs of ‘Cycle’, Hill landed on a description of simple economy:

light is everywhere
the spiders’
galaxies
  droppings of the
  star wormwood

The lines look like Hill’s workings-out, phrases circling the white of the page, a blank space at their centre that carries the force of presence. A circle of white shines through the words like light through a web, miming visually both the nothing and the unknown; it is a literal emptiness that functions as a poetic apprehension of a kind of divinity, albeit absent. Further, the provisionality of the words and their arrangement allows that the possibility of true apprehension exists in an unreachable future so that the poem says of itself: I imagine singing. I imagine getting it right.

Plants make structures crumble but they offer process in the place of closed forms, becoming in the place of stone. By allowing this kind of constructive disassembly into his finished work, Hill has reconceived of revision: no longer a labour towards a pre-destined clicking shut, it is a constant opening and re-opening that ‘yields nothing/finally’.

Canaan’s lyrics evolve slowly over the following decade. Only rarely do they emerge as focussed responses to real-world particulars, as ‘September Song’ was a response to Polláková’s artwork. They tend, rather, to coalesce over time, formed, in part, of units of apprehension extracted from a central tangle and embedded in discrete
discursive contexts. They can therefore feel nebulous, their poetic material curiously unconnected to their (sometimes over-)stated subjects, their ethical responsiveness inorganic. Yet there is an intensity to the notebooks, less records of poetic silence than of constant creativity, as though *Canaan* were slow arriving not because there was too little material but because there was too much. In the mid-1990s, Hill will harness his new thinking about revision to create a new and surprisingly programmatic compositional system that allows the combination of excess and lack of focus to inform his poetic, resulting in an unprecedented rate of publication and changing dramatically the tenor of his writing.

v. *to no conclusion from now on but to no conclusion’*

By 1995, Hill is coming to the end of his work on *Canaan* and beginning to think about a new collection. The creativity continues to stream but there is a bigger gap, now, between his intellectual work and his work of poetic apprehension, as though the scholar poet and the nature poet are proving irreconcilable. At one point, Hill even considers moving to a purely intellectual mode, writing:

> trying to keep the imagery [...] out of it – simply plain ‘metaphysical’ or ethical consideration; energy from enjambment etc. Heavy abrupt punctuations.\(^{636}\)

Early in his work towards the new collection, Hill refers to ‘my feeling v. intellect argument’ in a note he makes about different kinds of preparatory matter, apparently thinking about the rhetoric of futurity:

**exordium** – the introductory part of a discourse

1581 St Paul... doeth with a godly *Exordium* touch the arrogancie of the false Apostles

**Prolusion**, a prelude, preliminary essay or attempts

[... See 1795 entry for substantiation of my feeling v. intellect argument]

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\(^{636}\) Ibid, ‘Notebook 42: Canaan/The Triumph of Love’ (1995-1997), BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/42, p.51.ii. In these notebooks, Hill only numbers every verso page. For recto pages, I thus subdivide the numbers as above.
a literary production intended as a preliminary dissertation on a subject which the author intends to treat more fully.

**Prolepsis.** A figure in which a matter is stated in a brief summary manner, before being set forth in detail.

A figure in which objections and arguments are anticipated in order to preclude their use, answer them in advance or prepare for them an unfavourable reception = **PROTOCATALEPSIS**

**Prolegomenon** A preliminary discourse prefixed to a literary work; esp. a learned preface or preamble; chiefly on introductory or preliminary observations on the subject of a book.637

The notes clearly accord with his new poetic teleology, his positioning of the finished poem in a perpetual future. Here, the gap between his imagery and his intellectual work appears to have a bearing on that new teleology. The 1795 *OED* entry for ‘prolusion’ which, Hill writes, substantiates his argument, is a quotation from William Mason’s *Essays, historical and critical, on English church music*:

Its extemporaneous prolusion should flow on with that equable and easy Modulation, which, while it gratifies the Ear, should not too strongly affect the intellect.638

Hill’s ‘feeling v. intellect argument’ may, then, be one that pits the ‘extemporaneous prolusion’ of feeling – of immediacy and expressiveness, a future-directed flow – against the considered, wrought product of the intellectual object. It will be the achievement of *The Triumph of Love* that it finds a way to accommodate both in the same gesture.

It is perhaps Hill’s thinking about prelude and prologue that prompts the key organisational shift in his process. When he nears the end of work on a collection, Hill will often comb through the notebooks for unused fragments, writing them out

637 Ibid, p.22.
in an alphabetised list in order, presumably, not to lose anything of value. He does so as Canaan nears completion. For clarity, here is a sample of the list:

J Wellington's equestrian stone can-can (in Wellington Arch)
K multi-cellular bad faith
L England's iron-bound storm-tree turbulently at rest
M pelagic ghetto-soup
N that voices of [illegible]/[illegible] indistinct
O that stands and grows/with its own surety, the camphor-laurel
  immaculate self-being
P BENIN at best/What will be/Such a fool
Q if she is [?]fair be the [?]judgement
R [terminable agony no less interminable
S [the young martyrs/ageing dreadful at the fire/terminally
T much moved by what passes/for excitable
U [illegible] all
V is myrrh addictive?
W [illegible]/leaping captions

On this occasion, having passed through the alphabet several times, Hill shifts to a numbering system. It is a substantial, influential change. The alphabet is finite, a symbolic sequence with a definite end. A sequence of numbers is endless – always preliminary, always prologue. And so it proves: this time, the sequence does not end. Once he has gathered all the loose material, Hill begins to write out each fragment a second time, continuing to number each individual gesture, revising as he does so, gluing fragments together if they might happen to chime, adding new particles of thought, research, apprehension or reflection to the sequence as and when they occur to him. And once he has written them all out a second time, he writes out this new, longer sequence again, again adding to it, revising it. The system thus becomes both creative process, 'spontaneous prolusion', and revisionary looking back, corrective labour, a method of progress through cycle, revision part of the gush of lifeblood (to recall John Coetzee). Again, for clarity, I include here the first two pages of the new system, with revisions, comprising a combination of revised and new

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material, the majority of which will find its way into the loose first trilogy of Hill’s ‘late verse’: *The Triumph of Love, Speech! Speech!* (2000), or *The Orchards of Syon* (2002):

Not unmoved

1. Much moved by what passes/for excitable

2. the glittering vacant lancets, a sharp /empty/
unpercussive scurry of swifts’ wings
revisiting the sills

3. there will be worse times
nor is this

4. This is not a primer of innocence/exactly

5. small conjugations, live as watch-springs
the second hand twitching into the slot towards/against

6. you shall hear it one last time and know/that you are
dying

7. planets of alkali
the crowd at the gate

8. a snarled and snarling

9. yr patience proven by the rage of others exploited patience proves

10. terminal agony not the less interminable
WAT

11. the young martyrs ageing/in the fire terrible
[?]among

12. the bracken-coloured leaves of winter oak
[in pencil] visitation

13. suprasensual how that would have shaken you \Libus
14. England’s iron-bound storm-tree turbulently at rest

15. and let ignorance/speak yet again with authority WAT

    a still    in blossom    against    torn    crowded by hundreds

16. the damson trees by the blackened gable-end

17. that which our betters/had long ago set down as damned~d~d


19. each separate bead/of drizzle at its own thorn tip/shines [your hosannah]

20. lust of all sense: it [?]pergations/earthsmoke

21. the storm's advent     It is early/LS a first line

22. [?]miscueil, ill-timed [?]otherwise unremarked    unobserved

23. and this/wouldn't be about your lot | then, would it?

24. methylated cool (blue) glow

25. I do not see how this could be judged/otherwise first line

26. huddle of [?]cymbals and now/a another major network's mini-series

27. you have a good word now!

28. passed without observed observable incident640

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640 Ibid, p.29.
The untethered extemporaneous prolusion of poetic expressiveness that Hill had apparently struggled to find a ground for during Canaan’s long gestation is, now, becoming system. In turn, the system becomes a new driver of Hill’s poetic energy. It is not hard to see how it influences the form the collection will take: The Triumph of Love is a series of numbered fragments of loosely bound free verse. Beyond this obvious development, however, as I hope to show, the change informs every aspect of the long poem.

The method – which makes of individual, atomised poetic gestures a larger, fuller gesture, does not force slow work on individual lyrics but subsumes fragments into a totalising motion – allows new habits of revision to enter Hill’s compositional process, which in turn influence the form and content of the poetry. It is an influence visible, for example, in the development of a fragment Hill first writes before he develops the numbering system:

Whose lives then are hidden in God? Whose?
Who knows what has been lost? [?]pelagic
sensibly estimated to the last can be
measured
}

|) the last true ghetto-soup641

Early in the sequence, Hill returns to these lines, writing them out thus:

41 Whose lives are hidden in God? Whose? among?
Who knows what has gone from us, the deep been taken, what is gone from us
pelagic ghetto-soup. The whale’s ?sonar among the diaspora
what has been taken away
acoustic[s] acoustic intelligence sonar
arctic
sonar642
One can see how the process allows small revisions to become part of its motion. Hill has fluently reformulated the question of the second line so that ‘Who knows what has been lost?’ has become, ‘Who knows what has gone from us [...]’ But where revision had previously been for Hill a process primarily of this kind of substitution or reformulation, this new system fosters a habit of accretion. Thus, in the margin, Hill revises the question again, again renegotiating agency (‘gone from us’ becomes ‘been taken’). But rather than substitute the latter for the former, the revised line asks both questions in the same breath: ‘Who knows what has been taken, what is gone from us’. In other words, Hill’s new revisionary system seems to allow his lines to open up and unfold organically, rather than being packed down, adding new terms rather than simply substituting old ones; they gather their revisions. The fragment continues to accrete over the following months, becoming both an enactment of and a reflection on accretion, reading in its published version:

Whose lives are hidden in God? Whose?
Who can now tell what was taken, or where, or how, or whether it was received:
how ditched, divested, clamped, sifted, over-
laid, raked over, grassed over, spread around,
rotted down with leafmould, accepted
as civic concrete, reinforceable
base cinderblocks:
tipped into the Danube, Rhine, Vistula, dredged up
with the Baltic and the Pontic sludge:
committed in absentia to solemn elevation,
Trauermusik, musique funèbre, funeral
music, for male and female
voices ringingly a cappella,
made for double string choirs, congregated brass,
choice performers on baroque trumpets hefting,
like glassblowers, inventions
of supreme order? (242)
The question has not been compacted through revision to a perfect economy of utterance. It is now sixteen lines long, a catalogue of atrocity that gathers terms as it unfolds and in its first half describes, as it accretes, a brutal accretion that is also a violent compaction, a literal petrification, as the victims of atrocity become ‘base cinderblocks’, the foundations of contemporary life. The question hinges on a series of colons rather than semi-colons, a mark signalling equivalence rather than sequence. This compaction is thus given grammatical parity with the subsequent satirical accretive list of forms of memorial art: contemporary life, the poem implies, is founded on an attitude to history that, like memorial, turns historical suffering to stone, holds it separate and static; the memorial poet, poet of closed forms, is responsible for just one stage in a process of petrification. The suggestion that tyrannical violence and certain kinds of poetic response to tyrannical violence might be part of the same logic is, of course, not new here. What is new, however, is that, while the poem takes its complaint all the way back to Hill’s own 1968 ‘funeral/music’ – a sequence of memorial sonnets, closed forms – the poetry simultaneously feels out an alternative logic.

Hill’s new method of progressive return allows, too, for another, more idiosyncratic mode of revisionary expansion: the fragments do not only accrete through revision, they agglomerate. Hill does not work up the sections word by word, line by line; rather, moments of apprehension come into being singly and, as the numerical sequence progresses, they begin to stick to one another or merge, gradually forming bigger and bigger units. The work is dynamic: instead of pages dense with correction, the notebooks record a stream of expression and re-expression, as though all creation and revision is part of the same issue, each fragment – whether it be a revised utterance, a new utterance, a new arrangement of utterances – leading to the next, the work of careful shaping left until a particular section has begun to settle. The fragments therefore resonate now on their own terms, rather than being compacted into a form that dulls their expressiveness; they retain their immediacy. Many of them thus have a surreal, even comic quality. ‘This is correct,’ reads fragment 64 in its entirety, while fragment 75 reads, simply: ‘false’.643 Number 497 reads, cordially, ‘your hat, sir,’ before 499 concedes, ‘Still,

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643 Ibid, p.31.
better out than in’.644 Others resonate with a more obvious poetry: 832 is ‘sodium light on snow’; 840 is ‘born again – but stillborn.’645 Crucially, Hill’s academic work comes to form just one gesture among many, swept along with the current rather than forming a framework. For example, he makes a short series of notes from a book entitled *Face to Face with Levinas* (of which, more below), one of which reads: ‘p.26: retention + protension cf Bloch prevision?’646 Rather than develop the thought, as the ‘cf’ and the question mark suggest he might, Hill simply adds it to the numbered sequence, number 95 reading in full: ‘as in Bloch – prevision?’647 Were the fragment to appear in a poem (it does not), its intellectual context would be irrecoverable, a particle of allusive sense that records only a fleeting moment in an intellectual process: a reader has to look elsewhere to recover a logic. In another instance, Hill records the details of a book he appears to be reading – ‘[Gilbert & Gott, *The Appeasers*, 71 Nov 11 1947]’ – but rather than make notes from it, as he would once have done, and compress his research into poetic form, he boils his reading down now to a simple fragment that records only the fact of his rereading the book, number 766: ‘Reading again The Appeasers.’648 This is a poetry newly striving to apprehend the present tense of all aspects of poetic work.

Fragments float free in this way, regularly returned to and revised as part of the progressive motion, until they happen to find a suitable soil (as opposed to the stony ground of *Canaan*). Often the fragments fit together smoothly enough for the joins to be invisible. But, especially when the fragments join one another less seamlessly, Hill’s new process allows the fullness of the individual utterances’ spontaneity to resonate. Something of what I mean should emerge from an account of the coming-together of the first completed section, section XXIV. At number 128 in the sequence, Hill tentatively sticks together a series of individual fragments in order to create a full poem:

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or do you not even suspect how immortal we
are to begin with? scattered/or despoiled empire
or despoiled empire -(Dereliction of all
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great building) | or upon
what else should the imagination
has | fasten | to riches? Do you even |
suspect how immortal they
are to begin with? How [?]wrought
by cherubs [?]or with a [?]broken
[?]harmony perfects them. I did not say | In the [?]act
Subversion. Subvention is what I said.
It was all for show: What (?) will you say?
England's iron bound storm tree turbulently at rest
or do you not even
suspect how immortal we are/in our worst side
they/these | we are, to begin with?
The speech of formulation [?]foundation
lies [?]on granite and basalt /||[?]grand bias [of], granite poured in basalt
speaking of formulation
and you can [?]see the
what are the properties of myrrh? | earth tilt
Is myrrh/addictive? Liturgically I mean,
Myrrh or whatever. Or is it hyssop
(? its [?]little [?]out in the [?]Baltic | [?]encyclopaedia [steel and
small conjugations live as watch-springs | scripture649

Bad transcription aside, one can see how the qualities of Hill's late style are
beginning to emerge from the process: there is a surrealism in these lines, an
intellectual disjointedness that tempts but resists coherent reading, a constant
shifting of the ground. The disparate fragments, resonating on their own terms, are
stitched together now by an extemporaneous 'I'; voice emerges as the adhesive, as
though the process itself is speaking. The short original fragment, 'Is
myrrh/addictive?', for instance – which originated from pages of research into the
properties of myrrh – is now introduced, here, with an archivally authentic question
– 'what are the properties of myrrh?' – and followed by a revisionary clarification:
'Liturgically I mean,/Myrrh or whatever.' The voice articulates the origin, the

649 Ibid, p.34.ii.
inadequacy and the future of the fragment, admitting to inexactitude and imagining a more accurate version of the text to come (‘or whatever’). The fragments are embedded thus in a soil of compositional doubt, taken on the terms not only of their originating expressive moment but of revisionary return.

It is only voice and doubt that unite these fragments, however: they do not resonate together. Hill tries another arrangement, fashioning a shorter poem from some of the same material, some taken from elsewhere:

<Scattered and despoiled/empire of history>
<Angelus Silesius pray for us>
<Carry us to the house of correction>
<A lifetime of obsession>
<And by these words the victims>
<if you /like consecration/into conjuration>
164 The second-hand leaping toward | to meet | the shot < No "leaping captions!"

Almost every gesture here will appear at some point in *The Triumph of Love*, but scattered throughout the book, indicating how contingent the process is, how provisional the final arrangement of material: on another occasion, the particles could have fallen differently. Again, unhappy with this arrangement, Hill extracts the final gestures and fits them into another new arrangement:

Bring out the masters of the leaping captions, ticket
spin any name from the drum – Cardanus [any number from the drum]
on the significances of eclipses, [number, tickets from the drum]

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650 Ibid, p.41.
651 The first line will feed into section XVII; the second line becomes II; the fourth, XLIII; the penultimate lines will feed into both LXII and CXXVIII; most of the final line will find its way into IX; the final words and the lines in the right hand margin will settle into XXIV.
another assassination en route to the office,

the pavement slick with a mizzle of lime flower.

After the morning clouds burn off

it will be a good day:

lake water thumping in the paddle-boxes

the still foreboding of the heavens.

Scattered and despoiled benefactions

of late appeal, what realism can there be

in these apprehendings – case is not reason –

the fast / slow-motion of the carrousel

course without reason, the second-hand

jerking into the slot?

Children in jelly-green celluloid eye-shades –

dead children \( \downarrow \) mightier than the solemn clowns –

the only miracles were miracles of escape!

29 May\textsuperscript{652}

Less those usefully explanatory central lines – ‘Scattered and despoiled benefactions/of late appeal, what realism can there be/in these apprehendings’ – and the image of the ‘second hand/jerking into the slot’, this is identifiably an early version of section XXIV:

Summon the leaders, the leaping captions,

numbers rolled from a drum: Cardanus

on the significance of eclipses,

Rathenau, ‘industrialist and philosopher’,

famous unnamed assassins’ open tourers,

a road slicked in its dressing of lime pollen.

After some early clouds burn off

as predicted by the harbour master

we will have a clear day –

lake water chopping under paddle-boxes,

the scroll-wave motion of a carousel,

\textsuperscript{652} Ibid, p.43.ii.
jelly-green celluloid eye-shields; children
overexcited by rampageous clowns,
fire-breathers, artists of inept escape. (245-246)

What appears to have made it possible for Hill to construct a first full poem from this experimental process is the admission into the verse of a correlative for the process itself – in this instance, a tombola. As from the tombola’s rolling drum, numbered units of apprehension are drawn from a churning circular motion and slotted into meaningful sequence (here, units of intellectual shorthand followed by a series of disparate images, all of which tempt a reader to make connections but resist total reading). As I hope to argue, The Triumph of Love is a sequence woven from such self-apprehendings.

A few pages after first drafting this poem, Hill will suggest a telling title, ‘Liber Studiorum (in memoriam Frank O’Hara)’, under which he will write, also tellingly: ‘teach us to comprehend’.653 Just as there is something of the allusive imagism of Pound’s Cantos in this new style, so, in its unstitching of continuities, its patchwork of diction, pitch and place, there is something of O'Hara's provisional, camp surrealism. On another page, Hill writes a note that associates the new style with another mid-20th-century artist: ‘It can be done in music – Dallapiccola [?] returned.’654 Luigi Dallapiccola was a mid-century Italian serialist composer whose work is characterised by strong melodic line, a quality that serialism is not often thought capable of producing. If Hill is attempting a poetic equivalent of serialism, and I would suggest that he is, then it is of the Dallapiccolan kind: that is, he wants it to retain the elements of discursive linearity, melody, whilst allowing it to develop organically from process. It is not that there is no poetic logic in a poem like this, but the logic follows a pathway more of process than intellect. Serialism is not aleatoric; it does not dissolve compositional agency. But it limits the ways in which a composition can develop, handing over a degree of authority to both system and material. Hill’s new method of sequence, spiral and agglomeration likewise does not quite leave the poetry’s composition to chance, does not divest him of poetic agency. But there is a loosening of authority, especially regarding the intellectual

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653 Ibid, p.47.ii.
654 Ibid, p.43.
dimension of the verse: it is liberated from the necessity of argument. The result is not only an imagistic surrealism but an intellectual surrealism: the intellectual content develops against the norms and laws of rational thought; feeling and intellect combine. Of course, once the arrangement of the fragments is fixed, Hill polishes the lines as usual (thus the lovely ‘the pavement slick with a mizzle of lime flower’ becomes the refined, ‘a road slicked in its dressing of lime pollen’). But there is no longer any attempt to fit moments of poetic apprehension into closed forms: each gesture is allowed to resonate on its own terms, is allowed its own immediacy, its own moment, even as it joins a sequence of unfolding meaning, a full gesture. Hill’s process seems no longer to subordinate immediacy to finish.

Section LIII of The Triumph of Love, spun around fragment 19 in the sequence quoted above, imagines yielding agency to a higher force:

[...]
Leave it now, leave it; give it over
to that all-gathering general English light,
in which each separate bead
of drizzle at its own thorn-tip stands
as revelation. (253)

The lines provide another correlative for the compositional process: Hill yields a degree of poetic agency to this new ‘all-gathering’ method, which in its gathering allows ‘each separate bead’ to stand singly and reveal itself. ‘Revelation’, of course, suggests God. Hinging on the ambiguity of ‘stands/as’, these lines characteristically equivocate about the presence of the divine in the world. If we read them as descriptive in some way of Hill’s process, they thus equivocate, too, about the presence of the divine in the poetic. Hill addressed the subject in his inaugural lecture, describing his attraction ‘towards an idea by which [I] would much rather be repelled’, an agnosticism [...] whose summation is in the “Adagia” of Wallace Stevens:

After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption. (18)
For Stevens, the poetic imagination, in its ability to order a disorderly universe, is a secular substitute for the divine: poetry, for Stevens, is an atheistic theology. Hill never quite clarifies the status of his attraction to Stevens; the question of the divine in the poetic will remain open throughout his career. But it might be that Hill’s new method, and its new relation to singularity and immediacy, productively reframes the question.

The cyclical motion of the new compositional process is both a catalyst and an apparatus of Hill’s new approach to poetic apprehension. Thus, wheels, cycles, gyres spin throughout The Triumph of Love. The cycle frames the poet’s vision, who ‘last saw it—/Romsley’, notionally the sequence’s setting, ‘through a spinning bike-wheel’. (262) Systems of rotary motion recur: potters’ wheels, water wheels, carousels, turbines. The sequence is itself a system of rotary motion, its end is in its beginning, its final two sections slight revisions of sections V and I, its first and last storm image – ‘Sun-blazed, over Romsley, a livid rain-scarp’; (239) ‘Sun-blazed, over Romsley, the livid rain-scarp’ (286) – suggesting either sunrise or sunset, an end or a beginning. Of course, it is worth facing the obvious: the poem does come to an end. Thus, in these lines, the possibility of the indefinite article has become the solidity of the definite article. The sequence begins with a fear of endlessness, figuring eternity as an endless dying (‘the blown/aorta pelting out blood’ (239)); its form hopefully presents a conception of eternity as cycle, a constant return upon itself. But as this small revision suggests, the poem is unable to transcend linear time. ‘Must we describe/Finnegans Wake as a dead end?’ section CXXXIX asks. (282)

But its guiding motion is circular. Many of the sequence’s circular agencies, like the tombola, emerge as an apprehension of process and come to reflect on poetic apprehension. While he is first experimenting with stitching together fragments, for instance, Hill writes an isolated description of another kind of spinning:

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mounts  swells upward
180  like a potter’s wheel spirals [] and climbs and is feathered, as we are pulled apart655
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655 Ibid, p.42.
The simile has no subject, is a comparison to nothing: it reads as an apprehension of the process from which it emerges. In the following fragment, Hill attaches the simile to another kind of circular agency, another correlative for his process, a spiralling wind, suggesting not autonomous creation, as the potter’s wheel does, but inspiration, opening up the possibility that the imagination and the divine might work together in artistic creation:

Hill will work at these images for quite a while. In the middle of a page particularly busy with deletions and substitutions, he writes, in larger lettering than anything else on the page, and circles, the words ‘apprehendings’ and ‘late appeal’ – words which we have seen find their way into the first draft of the first poem the process produces:

Scattered and despoiled benefactions
of late appeal, what realism can there be
in these apprehendings

If, a decade previously, Hill had been thinking about the belatedness of poetic apprehension – ‘it has come into its own & is gone’ – the pluralised gerund form of the word here suggests a new conception of apprehension, one founded in immediacy and simultaneity. These descriptions of cyclical agency might conform to such a new thinking: they apprehend their own coming-into-being, are thus not

656 Ibid.
657 Ibid, p.43.ii.
belated because they form part of that which they apprehend, are always in process, apprehending. The development of section IX is a particularly clear example of how this present-tense self-apprehension might proceed. The section comes together quickly, most of it in the space of a page. Here, as I want to make an argument about the appearance of the page, and as the Hill archive does not allow photography, I offer a clumsy and no doubt inexact rendering in my own hand:

With its central curve surrounded by free-floating particles of poetry, the page looks like what the lines begin to describe: ‘the inner wall of an hourglass’; ‘faint-drawn/small vortices, bright particles in/dissolution.’ The lines apprehend their own emergence. In its published form, the section becomes a reflection on apprehension, figuring it as a vortex, an eddy of particles with nothing at its centre:

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659 Ibid, Notebook 43: ‘The Triumph of Love’ (1997), BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/42, p.12. The wavy lines at the top left represent text too small to read.
On chance occasions –
and others have observed this – you can see the wind,
as it moves, barely a separate thing,
the inner wall, the cell, of an hourglass, humming
vortices, bright particles in dissolution,
a rolling plug of sand picked up
as a small dancing funnel. It is how
the purest apprehension might appear
to take corporeal shape. (240)

The ‘corporeal shape’ which this particular instance of poetic apprehension takes in
the archive is, in part, that which is being apprehended; it is ‘the purest
apprehension’ because it emerges as present-tense self-apprehension. The
fleetingness of the apprehending is caught beautifully, too, in the final line break. In
the first full notebook draft, Hill had written:

[I think] it is how
the purest apprehension might appear
taking corporeal shape\(^{660}\)

In the published poem, the lines have become:

It is how
the purest apprehension might appear
to take corporeal shape. (240)

The hesitancy of the parenthesised ‘[I think]’ is translated into the lines’ grammar:
now the image is introduced with certainty (‘It is how’) but ‘might appear/taking’
has become ‘might appear/to take’. We read: ‘It is how/the purest apprehension
might appear’, which, even in its conditional tense, conjures the possibility of pure
apprehension. Over the line break, the grammatical ground shifts. We read: ‘might
appear/to take’. The possibility is still there, but the grammar is now suggestive of

\(^{660}\) Ibid.
illusion, misunderstanding. The reality of pure apprehension slips into our reading past even before it has unfurled, yet, on the page, it continues perpetually.

Such self-apprehension might imply a secular theology but the divine remains the ultimate object of Hill’s poetic apprehension. There are two thinkers whose writing on the subject is particularly felt in *The Triumph of Love*. The first is Thomas Bradwardine, a 14th-century English theologian named twice in the sequence. In section VIII, Hill asserts Bradwardine’s significance to his own poetic of divine apprehension:

> [...] If I were to grasp once, in emulation,  
> work of the absolute, origin-creating mind,  
> its *opus est*, its conclusive  
> otherness, the veil  
> of certitude discovered as itself  
> that which is to be revealed,  
> I should add for my own, my self-giving,  
> my retort upon Emerson’s ‘alienated majesty’,  
> the *De Causa Dei* of Thomas Bradwardine. (240)

Brian Phillips has written incisively about how the climax of this section, which announces itself as a moment of self-revelation, in fact draws a veil over itself by offering obscure academic reference in the place of clarity. It is, for Phillips, an elitist poetic failure, one of a number of moments in Hill’s verse, ‘privet hedges obscurely indicating the presence of the mansions they conceal’. Undoubtedly such moments exist in Hill’s verse, but I read the refusal to climax here more as an effort to problematize the linearity of representations of intellect: the veiling is that which is being unveiled, ‘the veil/of certitude discovered as itself/that which is to be revealed’, pure tautology. (240) If, as the poem asks us to, we give up our loyalty to linearity, we can find elucidation elsewhere in the sequence. In section CXXV Hill addresses his metaphysics at length, exploring what he calls, following Wittgenstein, ‘the metaphysics/of tautology’. (276-277) ‘Mysticism,’ the scholar poet of this

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661 Ibid.
section says, 'is not/affects but grammar'. Its key grammar, tautology, is a grammar of predestination:

Some of its moves – I mean tautology's – call to mind chess-moves: moves that are in being before you – even as you – make them. (276)

Tautology collapses sequence, progression, linear temporality. Hill delves into the word’s etymology to present it as a turning on oneself:

τὸ αὐτὸ enjoys its essential being in theology as in logic. (277)

Enter Bradwardine:

The intellectual beauty of Bradwardine’s thesis rests in what it springs from: the Creator’s grace praecendtum tempore et natura ['Strewth! ‘already present in time as in nature’? – ED] and in what it returns to – our arrival at a necessary salvation. (277)

This is the crux of Bradwardine’s theology: the divine is always already present. To apprehend the divine one must therefore apprehend the ‘praecendtum’: the precedent, the already of the present. Hill’s attempts, in both process and product, to collapse linear sequence into tautology (by, for instance, using Bradwardine’s name to refuse intellectual climax, to unveil a veiling) may be a step in that direction.

When he returns to the image of the potter’s wheel, Hill revises the line to imply a connection between tautology – as to-autology – and the poem’s revisionary form. Initially, the wind ‘flattens the head of the smoke-funnel [...] like the potter’s
wheel'; subsequently, the line becomes: ‘turning itself into a potter’s wheel’. Next, it becomes: ‘the wind turning on itself like a potter’s wheel’. And finally in section XI:

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the wind
beginning to turn, turning on itself, spiralling,
shaped on its potter’s wheel. (241)
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The phrase ‘turning on itself’ is not far from Harold Bloom’s description of Hill’s early aesthetic as a ‘poetry turned against itself’, suggesting that self-criticism may be a part of the poem’s formal metaphysics. When Hill flings vitriol at himself, as he so often does in the poem – ‘Obstinate old man’; (239) ‘Scab-picking old scab’; (248) ‘Rancorous, narcissistic old sod’ (250) – the lines may, then, have surprising metaphysical aspiration.

*The Triumph of Love* constantly turns on itself: each section folds back on the previous section, criticises it, attempts to correct it, is in its turn criticised, and so on. Not only does the sequence as a whole mime circularity but it progresses through cycle. Occasionally, the motion is clear. Section XXXII, for instance, ends with a description of the nationalistic pomp that surrounded the formation of Kitchener’s Army:

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[...] The regiments
rehiring by the week,
hoisting the dead-beat with galvanic
blatter of trumpets. (248)
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Section XXXIII corrects the misconception:

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Trumpets? Come off it – that was cavalry!
Wavering bugles took the Chums and Pals. (248)
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664 Quoted in Knottenbelt, *Passionate Intelligence*, p.78.
Often, however, the interactions are subtler. Section XIX speaks in an imperious authorial voice as it directs the reader:

If you so wish to construe this, I shall say
only: the Jew is not beholden
to forgiveness, of pity. You will have to
go forward block by block, for pity's sake [...] (244)

Both the introduction of pity and the suggestion in ‘beholden’ of ‘beheld’ anticipate the following section, in which a dying Jewish man is housed in a sentimental memorial art at the moment of his death and thus perpetually beheld in agony for the sake of a notion of pity which Hill, as we have seen, has long criticised. The voice proceeds with the same rhetorical solicitousness as in the previous section (‘Permit me:/refocus that Jew’) but with no accountability. As Natalie Pollard has noted, the previous section ends: ‘Now/move to the next section’ (244) and, when we do, the authorial imperiousness is ‘now newly, and horrifyingly, contextualized’. The future of section XX is contained, in other words, in section XIX, while section XX returns to its past. The ‘turning on itself’ of self-criticism is a constant enactment of a process of anticipation and return that may form part of the poem’s grammar of mysticism.

A poem, which necessarily exists in sequence in the world, can only go so far to miming Bradwardine’s conception of God in time, of eternal tautology. The other theological thinker whose presence can be particularly felt in The Triumph of Love, Emmanuel Levinas, founded his thought about divine apprehension on a different theory of time, crucial to Hill’s poetic reconception, that allows for such sequence. While writing The Triumph of Love, Hill reads an interview with Levinas collected in Face to Face with Levinas, from which he makes a short series of notes, telling of the tenor of his interest:

p.25: Gott fällt mir ein (translates: God comes to mind)

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Levinas follows a Bergsonian and a Husserlian conception of time (though he modifies both), for both of whom time is primarily a subjective experience divorced from any objective, measurable quantity, an experience Bergson terms *duration.* Husserl employs the terms ‘retention + protension’ to refer to those aspects of present time that make up Bergsonian duration but escape immediate experience, a kind of temporal peripheral vision: the former referring to those moments already experienced which have not yet been translated to pastness; the latter referring to those moments in the future which are no longer unknowable but unavoidable. For Levinas, as we have seen, what we call human life is founded on the primacy of the face-to-face encounter, an experience of otherness which calls the self into question, demands responsibility, and from which all else flows. The face-to-face encounter is an experience of the infinite that breaks into a falsely closed world of selfhood. Its ethical force, writes Michael L. Morgan,

cannot come from the other person, who is just another person like me. It must come from transcendence, not a transcendence that is present but rather a transcendence that always “has passed by” and leaves its residue or “trace” [...].

The ethical relation is ‘not,’ as Levinas has it, ‘the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision.’ But the divine, as we have seen, can only be apprehended in its ‘having passed by’. God may ‘come to mind’, as Hill noted, but as an absence, a kind of non-memory. An openness to otherness, therefore, an openness to the divine, means an openness to those moments of duration that escape the present – a past which is not yet past, a future which is no longer future, a present which is always already over. Hill does not name Levinas in his published poetry but he does

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668 Quoted in ibid, p.207.
669 Quoted in ibid, p.152.
at several points write fragments that engage directly with Levinas’s thought about
time and otherness – as, for example, here:

440 proleptically
[...]
442 Dasein is the being who died/Levinas Time and the Other, 8
443 essential but unplaced
444 alterity670

Section VII – the section which wants to apprehend the ‘conclusive/otherness’ of
the ‘origin-creating mind’, and which obfuscatingly names Bradwardine at its climax –
clearly has Levinas behind it as well, its refusal of climax a way, too, of
apprehending the ‘having passed by’ of the divine, the rien, the impossible reality of
‘origin creating’.

The third quotation Hill copies out from Face to Face with Levinas presents a
stark polarity: ‘Man can give himself in saying to the point of poetry – or he can
withdraw into the nonsaying of lies.’ It is worth reproducing the quotation’s context,
as it provides a clearer picture of what Levinas might mean, as well as a useful
framing for Hill’s new poetic. Here is the passage in full, a response to the resonant
question, ‘Is there any sense in which language can be ethical?’

In Otherwise than Being I pose this question when I ask: “What is saying without a
said?” Saying is ethical sincerity insofar as it is exposition. As such, this saying is
irreducible to the ontological definability of the said. Saying is what makes the self-
exposure of sincerity possible; it is a way of giving everything, of not keeping
anything for oneself. Insofar as ontology equates truth with the intelligibility of total
presence, it reduces the pure exposure of saying to the totalizing closure of the said.
The child is pure exposure insofar as it is pure vulnerability: it has not yet learned
to dissemble, to deceive, to be insincere. What distinguishes human language from
animal or child expression, for example, is that the human being is characterized as
human not only because he is a being who can speak but also because he is a being
who can lie, who can live in the duplicity of language as the dual possibility of
exposure and deception. The animal is incapable of the duplicity; the dog, for

instance, cannot suppress its bark, the bird its song. But man can repress his saying, and the ability to keep silence, to withhold oneself, is the ability to be political. Man can give himself in saying to the point of poetry – or he can withdraw into the nonsaying of lies. Language as saying is an ethical openness to the other, as that which is said – reduced to a fixed identity or synchronized presence – is an ontological closure to the other.671

Where once Hill had worked to fashion a poetry of the said, he is now attempting a poetry of the saying – a poetry that, though worked and sculpted, still speaks directly from its point of origin, still says perpetually, a poetry in which conclusion is divorced from thought (or, better: thinking), is seen as a false product of thought, an always belated limiting of the processes of feeling and intellect – ‘the totalising closure of the said’. ‘[T]o no conclusion from now on but to no conclusion,’ begins number 211 in Hill’s sequence, providing something of a new mission statement.672

*The Triumph of Love*, as is characteristic of Hill’s late verse, is thus spoken in a kind of impromptu mid-draft present tense, the poet anticipating a future to come rather than evaluating a past already accomplished. Sometimes that future arrives immediately, as when the poet says,

> Nor is the language, now, what it once was
> even in – wait a tick – nineteen hundred and forty-five of the common era. (254)

These lines satirically enact the kind of historical forgetting against which the poem rails; the anticipation is a matter of performance. On other occasions, however, the anticipatory present tense functions as an authentic record of archive. In section CXVIII, Hill joins together fragments composed independently of one another and works the joins into the poetry’s language:

> By default, as it so happens, here we have
> good and bad angels caught burning

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themselves characteristic antiphons;
and here the true and the false
shepherds discovered
already deep into their hollow debate.
Is that all? No, add spinners of fine
calumny, confectioners of sugared
malice; add those who find sincerity
in heartless weeping. Add the pained,
painful clowns [...] (274)

Those imperatives – ‘Add’ – are a kind of future performative, performing the act they anticipate, making protension (the future in its becoming present) a feature of the verse. Elsewhere, Hill allows the writing to remain in a literally unfinished state, anticipating a future that will never arrive. Having written the phrase ‘laughing all the way to the grave/stone’, for instance, he crosses out the last two words and, rather than find an alternative, writes in the margin: ‘<end with ‘the’>.’673 (The phrase will not appear in his poetry). In another instance, a deleted line leads to a grammatical hiccup that the poem never quite smoothes over. In revision, Hill removes the first line of an anaphoric section that begins with the phrase ‘It is not’ but does not restore that organising construction to the following lines, so that they cease to make grammatical sense, beginning, now:

Whether we have the Psalms in Hebrew or German
nor by what authority these things are committed [...]674

By the time of publication, the words have only been semi-restored:

It is not [possibly a lacuna – ED]
whether we have the Psalms in Latin or Hebrew
nor by what authority such things are committed [...]675

673 Ibid, p.63.
674 Ibid p.86.ii.
In instances such as this, the poem allows its errors and its revisions into the text as pentimenti. In other instances, the poem anticipates revision to come. 'I have a mind to recast this/as mere entertainment-interludes,' section LIX admits. Section XXI has it both ways:

Should I leave it like this? Or should I add
that, for the life of me, I cannot
see my own future in prediction? (244);

In section LXXV:

I would go back and start
again; or not start at all, which might
be wiser. No. Delete the last four words. (260)

Textual variance becomes part of the poem's weft. In section XXIX, bodies hang from a tree 'like traitors like martyrs', a politically crucial editorial decision yet to be made. In section LXXII, similarly, though less gravely:

Ethics at the far edge: give the old
bugger a shove / gentleman a shout. (260)

The errata slip becomes one of the sequence's recurrent tropes: 'For worldly, read worldly; for in equity, inequity;/for religious religiose'. (250) But the corrections, now, get it wrong:

Delete: sell myself; filched from. Inert:
tell myself; fetched from. For inert read insect. (257)

Revision, that is, is no longer a wholly melioristic practice. Section CXI recalls a critic of Hill's early work, here named 'Lothian MacSikker', objecting to the overly-wrought nature of his verse. MacSikker, the poet says,
told us he saw
a draft typescript: caulk on caulk
of liquid eraser, illegible, overwrought,
more like psoriasis or scabies than
genuine inspiration.676

(Lest we take this as a satirical ironising of the criticism, in *Broken Hierarchies* Hill removes the description from MacSikker’s mouth and puts it into the poem’s own voice: it becomes self-criticism. (272)) Revision is here an inflammatory itching. We scratch an itch because we believe our scratching will solve the problem, that perfection will arrive; in the event, scratching leads not to relief but to abrasion, pain and more scratching. No longer hoping to end, no longer speaking from the place of conclusion, Hill’s new poetic accommodates both its distant and immediate past: we see into the text’s revision history and we see moments into a past that has not yet become history; it accommodates, too, its remote and immediate future: we see into a potentially utopian future and we see moments into an immediate future as it becomes the present; we even see into a worse future. The poem accommodates, in other words, both retention and protension; it has a temporal peripheral vision.

Hill’s new temporality affects a new conception of stone. Christopher Ricks, in a recent interview, uses the term ‘palimpsest’ to describe the genetic critic’s conception of text. He attributes the term to William Arrowsmith, ‘the eminent classicist’, and glosses the genetic methodology as the idea that

in some way the strata is as interesting as what you might think of as the surface.
There are claims you can make for the geology, the archaeology of the thing.677

Always close to Hill, Ricks’s comments are instructive; ‘Cycle’, Hill’s first palimpsest poem, is in fact dedicated to Arrowsmith. The geological metaphor for a record of process recalls one of the most quoted sections of *The Triumph of Love*, section LI:

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676 Ibid, p.60.
Whatever may be meant by moral landscape
it is for me increasingly a terrain
seen in cross-section: igneous, sedimentary,
conglomerate, metamorphic rock-strata, in which particular grace,
individual love, decency, endurance,
are traceable across the faults. (253)

Surface has become depth, landscape underland. Hill’s new, non-teleological
thinking of time has led to a wider temporal gaze, a sense of deep time. The section
erupts with Hillian paronomasia, most tellingly in its final word: increasingly, Hill
traces his moral landscape across his ‘faults’, the text arrested mid-motion, in error,
rather than in its final correction. Stone is reconceived as a flow made momentarily
solid with a past and a future of flux. Early in the sequence, Hill provides instructions
for reading that employ another metaphor of stone:

You will have to
go forward block by block, for pity’s sake,
irresolute as granite. (244)

Each section of verse is conceived as a solid entity. But these are not the ‘base
cinderblocks’ of section XIII, (242) or the ‘everlasting bedrock’ of Canaan. (201) The
phrase ‘irresolute as granite’ unsettles the solidity. Indeed, the words themselves
fluctuate. ‘Irresolute’ is the kind of word that so appeals to Hill, one that, ‘far back
within itself’ (285) contains a fundamental contradiction. The first definition the
OED gives for the Latin ‘resolutus’ is: ‘having a loosened texture, slack’. To be
etymologically resolute, then, is to be loose, unsolid. Thus to be irresolute,
etymologically, is to be solid, firm, compressed; etymologically, at least, ‘irresolute
as granite’ is not the paradox it appears. Of course, however, the primary definitions
the OED gives for ‘irresolute’ are:

1. Not resolved or explained; left ambiguous or obscure. [...]
2. Unresolved or undecided as to a course of action. [...] 

3. Wanting of resolution or decision of character; infirm of purpose; vacillating; characterized by irresolution.679

To be ‘irresolute’, then, is to be ‘resolutus’: unresolved, infirm, vacillating. Granite, too, has an etymological crux: from the Latin ‘granum’, meaning grain or seed, granite, though solid and lifeless, has a core of becoming, a ‘lilac/at [its] petrified heart’. (184) Hill’s new poetry is far from a purely spontaneous, expressive verse. As the poet concedes in section LXX: ‘Still, I’m convinced that shaping./voicing are types of civic action.’ (259) The work of ethically responsible revision – Pound’s ‘define[ing] and yet again defin[ing]’ – remains; the verse is wrought and polished. But the compacted material escapes total control, total ossification. Hill’s new poetic locates its meaning in its strata, records change by allowing its past and future into its present, shows its present becoming past and its future becoming present, and, in doing so, it allows the seed at the heart of granite to bloom.

With its new temporality, The Triumph of Love might be expected to exhibit a Levinasian openness – ‘Language as saying is an ethical openness to the other’ – and thus open up the possibility of apprehending the ‘trace’ of the transcendent, its ‘having passed by’. Yet, as we saw in my account of the revised ‘Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres’, Hill’s revisionary late verse is characterised by what appears to be a proliferation of self, even a solipsistic closed-circuit. Understood as a product of revision, however, that proliferation may begin to look less solipsistic. Number 788 in the compositional sequence sows the seed for section V, a key moment of self-proliferation, reading, in full: ‘I cannot forgive myself. We are immortal.’680 Read in isolation, the line could suggest that the self cannot absolve its own sins: it describes a yielding of agency and authority to the infinite. When Hill returns to the lines, he adds, in revision, a new gesture:

679 Ibid.
Demotically an admission of distraction, poetically, perhaps, a question about the soul before selfhood, when read in archival sequence the additional gesture disrupts the illusion of a continuous intellect. It looks back on its previous version and registers as a self-questioning: where was I when I wrote that ‘I’? (Fittingly, the following fragment, 817, reads, ‘Disturbed chronology’.\(^{682}\)) As Hill proceeds, the section accretes moments of return so that, eventually, the original utterance is reframed as the speech of a confused and stubborn other:

"Obstinate old man – *senex*

*sapiens* it is not. What is he saying:
why is he still so angry? He says, I cannot
forgive myself. We are immortal.
Where was I? Prick him. (239)

‘I cannot/forgive myself’ becomes ‘He says, I cannot/forgive myself: the first utterance is embedded in its self-critical glancing back; revision has cast the self as other, poet of first gesture a third person. The pronominal confusion of the lines makes it hard to locate any stable entity, any coherent poetic consciousness; we cannot say who is addressing whom, who is being spoken of (though the archive reveals that the lines follow a temporal rather than a spatial separation of subjectivity). The closed loop of self-dialogue has, counter-intuitively, effected an escape from personality (or: it apprehends in process an escape attempt).

Reading *The Triumph of Love* as a document of self-othering revisionary self-address brings clarity to many of its less immediately parsable sections. Section XCV is one such section, proceeding by means of painstaking self-criticism: ‘I have found no sign/that you are visited by any angel/of suffering creation’; ‘Violent/sensitivity is not vision, nor is vision/itself order’; ‘You may be possessed/of neurasthenic intelligence as others/have been tormented by helpless self-/knowledge, though I

\(^{681}\) Ibid, p.78.  
\(^{682}\) Ibid.
doubt it.’ (266) It ends with what looks, to my mind, like a fascinating exploration of the power relations of revision, beginning:

You can always
say I call you, forcing my superior
hand at rhetoric. (266)

Taking this as revisionary self-address, I would gloss the lines as something like:

you, my past self, can call upon me, your future self, to revise and improve your work:
you need not worry about error or infelicity, as you can always assume that I am on hand to fix it. He continues:

My question is
rhetorical, in that I expect
no answer. Would it be fairer to say
that I do not invite one? (266)

I, on the other hand, can only address you, who have ceased to exist, as a rhetorical exercise; I am answerable to you but you cannot be answerable to me: you are always beyond my reach, an absolute other.

Let me allow
this to be no defence, merely a registration
of shock; and that, of course, I am putting
words in your mouth. (266)

The poet of the present might always work to serve the poet of the past, but the former always has a crucial upper hand, can always commit the ultimate act of power: putting words in another’s mouth. (One of the primary meanings of ‘shock’, as the OED has it, is ‘the encounter of two mounted warriors or jousters charging one another’, a revealingly antagonistic metaphor for revisionary relations.\textsuperscript{683}) Revision, that is, is always simultaneously a self-serving and a self-overcoming, an exercise and a divestment of power. The section ends:

Even so, I propose to stay with this, perhaps to carry some meaning of our imperfection. (266)

Imperfection recurs in section CXV:

We
are to keep faith, even with self-pity,
with faith’s ingenuity, self-rectifying cadence,
perfectly imperfected [...] (273)

The poem’s self-critical revisionary aesthetic, its ‘self-rectifying cadence’, is here presented as its act of faith. ‘Perfectly imperfected’, like its obverse, The Orchards of Syon’s ‘unfinished to perfection’, (359) suggests that a poem may be finished but it cannot be final. Helpfully, Hill provides some examples, thinking, once again, of a poetry of stone:

e.g., the lyric
art of Spanish baroque, seventeenth-eighth-century Italian song,
which so aspires to make adamant I
am melting, the erotic, thrilled and chaste. (273)

By breaking the phrase ‘I/am melting’ across the line, Hill severs the copula. The I in process is momentarily static, solidified, made adamant. The energy of the line break, however, dissolves the solidity and the solidification of the self becomes a solidification of the self’s dissolution: ‘make adamant I’ becomes ‘make adamant ‘I/am melting’. The poem breathes (‘aspires’) a solid self which, in the moment of its registering, is erased.

Kenosis, Christ’s sacrificial self-emptying on the cross, is a constant presence in this poem; the term itself occurs three times. Section LVI, which takes the form of a school-book comprehension exercise, posing increasingly unanswerable
questions (‘What were they not wearing’ (235)) ends with a question about a martyrdom:

What was meant by ‘the greatness
of the flame? Who cried out from the midst of it
‘if this is kenosis, I want out’? (235)

Section LXXXVI recalls a presumably imagined academic conference whose ‘theme’
is ‘Kinesis to kenosis: Guilt and Redemption in the Trauerspiel’. (264) Less flippantly,
section CXLVI, which celebrates certain thinkers and texts of importance to Hill’s theology, includes the lines:

Paul’s reinscription of the Kenotic Hymn –
God... made himself of no reputation... took
the shape of a servant – is our manumission,
Zion new-centred at the circumference
of the world’s concentration. (285)

Kenosis is a key term in the kind of mysticism towards which Hill is attracted,
particularly in the work of Simone Weil, for whom it is a necessary step towards entry into the transcendent: ‘An imaginary divinity has been given to man so that he may strip himself of it like Christ did of his real divinity.’ 684 Kenosis is the divesting of reputation, the unlearning of sovereignty; as Hill has it in the same section of The Triumph of Love, it is the ‘majesty of surrender’. (285) For David C. Mahan, The Triumph of Love enacts this process in its mode of self-criticism:

As the poet persona continually empties himself of [self-]presumption through repeated acts of “virtuous self-mistrust” that we feel in the very texture of the verse, the energetic pitch of vituperation directed against himself and others follows its act towards its alternate emphasis. Kinesis yields finally to kenosis [...] What this poem ultimately points to through its own series of self-divesting acts is the self-emptying

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of Christ [...] as the pattern, or model, by which love's triumph emerges, albeit paradoxically.  

Kinesis yields to kenosis: Hill's no longer static poetic affords his unlearning of sovereignty. In his short piece 'Poetics and the Kenotic Hymn', Hill responds thus to Eliot's dictum about personality:

If, as it must be, character is something other than personality, each true act of expression is the making of a character, kenotically conceived: an affirmation of self-hood which, even in the instant of expression, is self-forgetting.

In its development of a revisionary aesthetic, *The Triumph of Love* is an accretion of kenotic character-making, of instances of self-affirmation which become a self-forgetting ('Where was I?') as soon as the poet of the present becomes the poet of the past – in the instant, that is, of expression, an instant which now registers in the granite-seed of the verse's perpetual present. In revision's encounter with the self as other, in other words, its simultaneous self-affirmation, self-serving, self-overcoming, and self-forgetting, Hill attempts to achieve the kind of openness required to apprehend the 'conclusive/otherness' of the having-passed-by transcendent and to open up a space that the reader's otherness can occupy. Revision is, to adapt a phrase of Adrian Grafe's, a powerful inscription of powerlessness.

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687 ‘[O]ne might argue that the power of Hill’s poetry is in part due to his acute awareness, if not conscious practice, of kenotic powerlessness, and his inscription of that powerlessness in his work, in the heart of his language.’ [Ibid, para. 17.]
Chapter Five
Conclusion

Without quite meaning to, I have arranged my three chapters according to the fourfold sequence of confession as Coetzee outlines it: ‘a sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution.’ Although each author is invested in each stage, Roth is, to my mind, primarily a novelist of transgression, Coetzee a novelist of confession, and Hill a poet of penitence. Dauntingly, the next stage in the sequence, absolution, ‘means the end of the episode, the closing of the chapter.’ Rather than attempt, hubristically, to close the chapter, however, and in the spirit of my authors, I want end with a few speculative suggestions.

In their development of a revisionary aesthetic, each of my authors reaches beyond the norms and laws of rational thought – whether it is Roth’s rejection of Jerry’s scientific rationalism in American Pastoral, Elizabeth Costello’s dismissal of reason as a ‘a minor function of thought’, or Hill’s unstitching of linear argument in The Triumph of Love. These revisionary modes of thinking often entail, accordingly, a softening of the category of the human. In My Life as a Man, Zuckerman satirises his student self’s ‘addiction’ to the word:

He had to be cautioned repeatedly in marginal notes about his relentless use of that word. "Unnecessary," Miss Benson would write. "Redundant." "Mannered." Well, maybe unnecessary to her, but not to the novice himself: human character, human possibility, human error, human anguish, human tragedy. (17)

Zuckerman’s addiction, here, is a symptom of his adolescent certainties. For the conquering characters of Coetzee’s first book, Dusklands, being fully human, too, means being certain. ‘People who doubt themselves,’ says Eugene Dawn in its first novella, ‘have no core.’ (2) Jacobus Coetzee, in the second novella, similarly, feels able to dismiss his slaves as ‘false creature[s]’ because they lack ‘assurance’. (65)

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689 Ibid.
But, after spending time amongst peoples and ways of life of which he knows and understands little, he himself loses his rationalist certainties, finds himself in a state of ‘anxiety’, and the conquering ‘I’ of his colonial identity unravels, becoming ‘the fictive echo of a tiny “I” whispered across the void of eternity.’ (98) If doubt means unravelling the text of the human, it leads, too, to a moment of expansive sympathy that exceeds human bounds:

With a slight thrust of my wings I inhabited the horses that had lived under me (what had they thought of it all?), the patent leather of my boots, the air that had pressed on me wherever I moved. (77)

Jacobus Coetzee regains his certainties; the rest is history. Magda, in Coetzee’s second book, In the Heart of the Country, however, is, as we have seen, in a constant state of revisionary unravelling and, accordingly, in constant sympathy with the non-human world; she is a ‘poetess of interiority, an explorer of the inwardness of the stones, the emotions of ants’. (38) But her sympathy does not yield knowledge; it entails, rather, a sympathetic understanding of the world’s resistance to her sympathetic understanding:

The farm, the desert, the whole world as far as the horizon is in an ecstasy of communion with itself, exalted by the vain urge of my consciousness to inhabit it. (53)

Magda’s condition is something like the anti-rationalist and anti-anthropocentric revisionary mode of thinking Timothy Morton advocates, in The Ecological Thought (2010), as the only appropriate way in which to address ecological crisis. ‘The ecological thought’ is a way of thinking both about and as ecology. It is, Morton writes, a ‘radical openness to everything,’ an openness ‘without the possibility of closing again’; it is ‘an unresolved chord’.

691 It is an ever-expanding, ever-revising understanding of the interconnectedness of things such that, in the words of Levinas that form the book’s epigraph, ‘Infinity overflows the thought that

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thinks it’. Like Coetzee’s writing of Lucy Lurie in *Disgrace*, it hopes perpetually to expand, rather than narrow, the repertoire of possibility and gain, thus, an ever-expanding understanding of how little it understands. In advocating this mode of thinking, Morton means to reframe personhood such that the category becomes unstable; in an almost direct reversal of Eugene Dawn, he writes: ‘Being a person means never being sure that you’re one.’\(^{693}\) ‘The ecological thought’ is an active, positive state of radical revisionary doubt.

‘At what point,’ Morton asks, ‘do we stop, if at all, drawing the line between environment and non-environment […] Does the environment include or exclude us?’\(^{694}\) Roth poses a similar question in *The Counterlife*. In the barren landscape of Henry’s Zionist settlement – ‘not a color, a flower, a leaf, not a blade of grass’ (64) – Henry finds what Zuckerman describes as ‘a correlative for the sense of himself he would now prefer to effect, the harsh and rugged pioneer with that pistol in his pocket’. (117) The landscape, raw and unrevised, ‘unfinished,’ ‘attesting theatrically at sunset to Timeless Significance’, provides a suitable ground for ‘self-renewal on the grandest scale […] the scale of mythic heroism.’ (117) Contrastingly, the gentle pastoral Zuckerman finds in England ‘appeared to be the creation of a God who’d had four or five chances to come back and perfect it’ and, in its refinedness, provides ‘the ideal setting for a man in search of domestic order and of renewing his life at the midpoint on a satisfying scale.’ (117) In each case, the questions of whether the new environment precedes the new self, or vice versa, and of where the person ends and the environment begins, are irresolvable.

Hill’s late revisionary poetic, too, entails a revision of the relation between the human and the environment such that the certainties of ‘the human’ disintegrate. A poetry of flux and openness, it affords a wider view of time, of deep time, such that even stone, as we have seen, is apprehended in its flow, and ‘moral landscape’ becomes ‘a terrain/seen in cross-section’. (253 – emphasis in original). Deep time, Robert Macfarlane has written,

is the chronology of the underland. […] Deep time is measured in units that humble the human instant; epochs and aeons, instead of minutes and years. Deep time is

\(^{692}\) Ibid, p.xi.
\(^{693}\) Ibid, pp.12, 8.
\(^{694}\) Ibid, p.10.
kept by stone, ice, stalactites, seafloor sediments and the drift of tectonic plates. Deep time opens into the future as well as the past. The Earth will fall dark when the sun exhausts its fuel in around 5 billion years. We stand [...] on a brink.\textsuperscript{695}

The wide lens of Hill’s later, revisionary poetic attempts simultaneously to apprehend impermanence and immediacy, becomes a poetry no longer of the ‘stony vine’ (106) but of crumbling human structure, of creepers coiling through ‘[o]ld walls crumbling away to mud’, offering seed in the place of closed form.\textsuperscript{696}

If the relation between the human and the non-human becomes revisionary and provisional, it is the material accumulation of revision, the archive, that provides a new, firm ground. Costello replaces the floor that has fallen from her realism with an archival floor; Hill resituates the revised (and revisionary) ‘Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres’ in an archival rather than a narrative present; the materiality of the book Zuckerman is writing in \textit{The Counterlife} becomes the novel’s sole constant. Each text occurs in a realm of revision. What might happen to such revisionary aesthetics when the archive begins to disappear?

Over the course of the 2000s, Coetzee, as far as I can tell alone of my authors, begins to write almost exclusively on a word processor. Writing in this way, much (if not all) of the work of revision dissolves into the moment of its happening. Of course, one can save different drafts as different documents, but the archive becomes at best an imperfect record of process. Accordingly, the early stages of at least one of Coetzee’s later novels, \textit{Slow Man}, which were not saved in this way, may be unrecoverable, its genesis lost. His most recent novels – \textit{The Childhood of Jesus} (2013), \textit{The Schooldays of Jesus} (2016) and the forthcoming \textit{The Death of Jesus} (2020) – are not yet archived, so I can only comment speculatively on their geneses. But the stories they tell accord with Coetzee’s migration to word processing software. The characters have no memory: they do not know their names, their relations to one another, what they did before the first page of the first novel. They are characters without archive, in other words, who seem to exist in a perpetual


textual present. Whatever their genuses, the ‘Jesus’ novels are experiments in a fiction without archive.

And just as they have no archive, no firm revisionary ground, these novels have no environment. No longer does revision prompt a widening lens, a widening (non-)understanding of the relation between the human and the non-human, a widening sympathy. The novels exist in a kind of placelessness, situated in an identikit, unidentifiable landscape, something like an early walk-through computer game – or, as Elizabeth Lowry has it in an unsympathetic review, ‘the scenery is so flimsily assembled that it could come straight from Ikea.’ Coetzee’s novels have been urgently engaged with land, and have consistently advocated a revisionary mode of thinking that, like Morton’s ecological thought, strengthens and expands the relationship between the human and the non-human. Without archive, these placeless novels suggest, that relation becomes a non-relation.

Coetzee’s apparent turning away from a writing of land at a time when the subject is of more urgency than it has ever been has confused the novel’s early critics, as though it were a lapse in his rigorous ethical engagement with global challenges. But there is, perhaps, another way of reading the novels. The characters attempt to make sense of their impulses and relations, to find a way to do the best for one another, in a culture of whose archive they do not form a part. They are books, that is, about migration, about how to live ethically in an environment in which one has no roots, in which everything is new and nothing intuitively decipherable. They coincide not only with Coetzee’s own migration to Australia but with the beginnings of an age of mass migration – an age which, alone of my authors, Coetzee is, still, able to face. As he writes in an article published this morning, critical of Australia’s disgraceful immigration policy, in a passage that powerfully reaffirms the category of the human,

[c]ross-border migration is a fact of life in today’s world, and numbers will only increase as the earth heats up, former pastures turn to desert, and islands are swallowed by the sea. There are messy but humane – or at least human – ways of

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reacting to this world-historical phenomenon, just as there are neat but inhuman ways.\textsuperscript{698}

The 'Jesus' novels point to such an age of rootlessness, of ungroundedness. In their depiction of a world of perpetual revision without archive, the realm of the word processor, they might, at a stretch, provide something of an early roadmap.

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