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Literature and its Subjects After Postmodernism

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von
Nadine Feßler

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Für meinen Vater

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

1.1 The Event in Contemporary Literature

> she decided she would stay there and wait until something significant happened to her. This was the challenge she was putting to existence—she would not stir, not for dinner, not even for her mother calling her in. She would simply wait on the bridge, calm and obstinate, until events, real events, not her own fantasies, rose to her challenge, and dispelled her insignificance (*Atonement* 77).

McEwan portrays a subject in a state of pure anticipation, patiently waiting for what life has in store for her, hoping it will be significant. The wish of McEwan's protagonist will eventually be fulfilled. In the course of the novel an event will take place that will set a series of actions in motion which will not only change her life, but also that of others irrevocably. It will help her to become a powerful author, enable her to manipulate fates around her as if they were only textual appearances, and render her the Goddess of their universe. Thus, the event merges issues connected with authorship, ethics and the sacred into one powerful experience.

This dissertation is interested in exactly such highly charged events that alter the course of the narrative and, more importantly, leave as an outcome a determinate imprint on the subject who is strongly affected *by* the event. This passive construction is important here in the grammatical sense, since it attributes to subjectivity something that I recognize as the principle element of characters in contemporary texts: receptivity. The subject is forced into receptivity by an event that makes it react and respond to it. In my opinion it is this dynamic relationship between event and subject that characterizes contemporary literature and that can no longer be categorized as postmodern. It is with a new understanding of eventfulness and subjectivity that literature enters a literary period which I will refer to here, due to the lack of a better word, as 'post-postmodernism.'

The dissertation therefore aims to explore this new post-postmodern aesthetic by analyzing seven books taken from contemporary Anglophone literature and written from 1990 onwards. In order to present a systematic approach I will focus on the two mentioned elements—the event and the subject—and examine what effect their treatment in contemporary literature has on the text in general, and in particular how it influences three topics that played a major role in postmodern texts: authorship, ethics, and the sacred. How these topics are interpreted will not only indicate a distinct renunciation from a postmodern understanding, but also the way in which new concepts of authorship, ethics and the sacred are formulated in contemporary literature. The novels selected for this dissertation were taken from British, Irish, Canadian, American and Indian literature and include the following seven works: David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* (1999), Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love* (2005), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007), and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008). All of the novels selected have touched a nerve in contemporary thought, and have been intensely discussed by literary scholars. This is also reflected in the prizes the novels have won, which underscores that they have approached their issues in new and innovative ways.[1]

In my introduction, an overview of the state of research on contemporary literature since 1990 will be provided in order to point out whether and how different approaches have been used to find a common denominator that relates contemporary works to each other. I will then present my own systematic approach by elaborating on the function of the event as formulated by narratology, show how the event is employed in modernist and postmodernist texts and finally, how the subject reacts to it in the respective cases. Subsequently, I will sketch my own definition of the 'event' and the 'subject' in contemporary literature. This definition draws heavily on the philosophical ideas of two

1 *Ghostwritten* won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1999, *Atonement* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2001 and *Oryx and Crake* in 2003. *The History of Love* was shortlisted for the Orange Prize in 2006, *The Gathering* won the Booker Prize in 2007, *The Road* the Pulitzer Prize in 2007, and *The White Tiger* the Booker Prize in 2008.

contemporary philosophers, Jean-Luc Marion and Giorgio Agamben. With the help of their ideas I construct my own terminology and use it throughout the dissertation to analyze the novels. The sketch provided in this introduction should give a presentation of this terminology and an indication of the theoretical approach the dissertation will take. An extended elaboration will be included in the chapter "Relating the Subject to the Event." The introduction will conclude with an outline of the structure of my dissertation, with a short overview of the analytical chapters that deal with the subject's empowerment in the areas of authorship, ethics and the sacred.

1.2 Defining Contemporary Literature

The critical publications to be discussed here all contend that there has been a shift observable in contemporary literature. This shift is often located somewhere in the 1990s (van Dijk/Vaessens 10; Eshelman xii; Green vii). The reasons suggested to explain this timing are multiple; however, they often seem contrived and more or less arbitrary. Vaessens and van Dijk argue, referring to Minsoo Kang and Maggie Humm, that postmodernism came to an end when it arrived in mainstream media (Kang cited in Hoberek 2007: 233). Timmer describes a growing weariness of writers during the 1990s towards postmodern aesthetics, basing her argument on the critical comments of the writer David Foster Wallace, whom she sees as a cultural voice (14). Toth and Brooks give several reasons for locating this change of aesthetics in the 1990s: they cite Samuel Beckett's death in 1989, note Derrida's attention to ethical issues in the 1990s, and point out an increased interest in theories that have a theological foundation, such as Emmanuel Lévinas's work (2). They also mention a conference in 1991 in Stuttgart that was titled "The End of Postmodernism: New Directions," which featured writers like John Barth, Raymond Federman, William Gass, Ihab Hassan and Malcolm Bradbury (ibid., 3). As a result, they conclude: "By 1989, then, the demise of postmodernism seemed to be, for most, an inevitability. And, by the mid-nineties, the phrase 'after (or beyond) postmodern' was to be found on the cover of any number of critical works" (ibid., 5).

When it comes to a significant date in western history the terrorist attacks of 9/11 are often discussed, however, many critics point out that the changes were visible before this date and could in any case only account for a turning point in American fiction, not for fiction around the world (cf. Domsch 10; Haselstein 15; Timmer 16–17, Schloss/Jakubzik 10; van Dijk/Vaessens 12). Van Dijk and Vaessens give a persuasive explanation for why this reasoning has become so popular, nevertheless. They write of a "reorientation towards the deconstructed values of liberal humanism," which became "more visible after 9/11 because we were suddenly more sensitive to them" (12). In arriving at a conclusion, it seems safe to assume that the change in literature indeed became obvious in the 1990s, but the sheer number of reasons put forward in the relevant publications suggests that there might not be simply one cause to attribute for this shift.

On the level of fiction writing, however, it seems rather intuitive to assume that after thirty to forty years of postmodern play, an exhaustion of postmodern ideas and conventions has set in. Critics like Schloss and Jakubzik, for example, note an "Übersättigung des Lesepublikums mit postmodernen Darstellungen des fragmentierten Lebens" (1–2), Gruber even speaks of a "decline" of postmodernist principles (92). Toth and Brooks argue that postmodernism has become "institutionalized and programmatic," elitist (7), and thus part of a system postmodernists wanted to deconstruct in the first place. Whichever way one might define postmodernism's limitations—as 'too elitist' or 'too mainstream'—each of them covers a different aspect of postmodernism's heterogenic state.

However, there are still some critics who refuse to speak of post-postmodernism just yet. This hesitation might be explained by the fact that even though the question of what comes 'after' postmodernism has become almost redundant, it is often asked with the implication that there cannot be an 'after.' Postmodernism is basically a method that challenges all other methods, systems and preconceived notions. In its constant state of contest, it has made itself unassailable. Rebein, in a hypothetical critique, summarizes these kinds of objections:

> For what could possibly come 'after' postmodernism? Does not postmodernism itself connote a kind of finality, 'the end of things'—not least of which would be the end of innocence with regard to language and mimesis? Does not the term refer to a period of time we are still, demonstrably, in? And anyway, doesn't a denial of the domination of postmodernism amount to a de facto admission of artistic and cultural conservatism? Are we not speaking here of a kind of *regression*, aesthetically speaking? (7).

Rebein emphasizes that there is a logical and even ideological dilemma when speaking of an 'after,' since it pessimistically implies a recurrence to old ideas and forms. This might be the reason that there are still a number of scholars who refuse to call contemporary literature post-postmodern. A few of them view contemporary literature still as part of a very late form of postmodernism. Even though, van Dijk and Vaessens present articles which argue for both late postmodernism and post-postmodernism, in their introduction to *Reconsidering the Postmodern. European Literature beyond Relativism* they eventually identify features of a 'late postmodern literature' (18ff.) which sets the tone for how the individual articles are to be perceived. Green calls his book on contemporary literature *Late Postmodernism* (2005), and describes it being situated in a "phase of decadence and decline" (1) which for him, however, is still taking place within postmodernism. Toth and Brooks, in *The Mourning After* (2007), although talking of a failed or limited postmodernism and claiming that "its demise [...] was inevitable," likewise express resistance towards the idea of the post-postmodern. Even though they mention numerous times the narrowness (and even ideology) postmodernism has created in some respects, they still insist on an "awakening postmodernism" that points "to all those issues postmodernism in its refined form seemed so anxious to circumvent: issues of faith, ethical responsibility, politics, community, etc." (8). For them, contemporary literature is in a state of mourning and is attending postmodernism's 'wake,' rather than leaving postmodernism fully behind. Similarly, Holland, in *Succeeding Postmodernism*, although presenting an insightful take on language, linking it to humanist issues

and liberating it from postmodern play, rejects speaking of post-postmodernism, explaining that it might be too early to make this kind of appeal (14-15).

The publications which I will discuss in the following, take a more optimistic and progressive view, concentrating on the formulations of new ideas and forms. A number of critics observe an increasing interest in established styles and genres that were unpopular before, in particular for postmodernist writers. The example of neorealism indicates how contemporary authors revive known genres by embracing a current viewpoint instead of being completely faithful to the tradition. Gruber underscores that neorealism

> does not attempt to reflect 'the Real'—a claim that has become impossible since the postmodern crisis of representation at the very latest—but understands itself as a representational technique which necessarily selects and orders, offering but one version. It thus acknowledges both the subjectivity of the experience and the intricacies inherent in processes of representation. Yet like its nineteenth-century predecessor and in strong contrast to postmodernism, it is based on the assumption that it is possible to refer to the world beyond the text, a world preceding linguistic representation (92).

Thus, neorealism should not be understood as a return, but rather as an evolution. The rules have changed since the 19th century and the texts that employ such a writing style reflect this. These kinds of alterations when it comes to traditional genres are a common thread in contemporary literature. Domsch's publication, *Amerikanisches Erzählen nach 2000* (2008), examines the recurring interest in established genres—the family novel, the historical novel—, but also notes the emergence of new ones: the white trash novel, and 9/11 fiction. Not only traditional genres are of interest again, also philosophical notions that have been heavily criticized and even rejected in postmodernist texts, have suddenly become significant. Haselstein, Gross and Snyder-Körber note a desire for a form of authenticity in *The Pathos of Authenticity* (2010). They claim that "[a]uthenticity is making a comeback, in the

guises of memory, ethics, religion, the new sincerity, and the renewed interest in 'real things'" (19). In particular the awakened interest in ethics and religion present a distinct renunciation of typical postmodern topics. Haselstein qualifies this interest, underlining that contemporary literature is not operating in a naïve way: "[a]lthough sometimes envisioned as the rejection of postmodernism, the 'new' authenticity remains profoundly shaped by postmodern skepticism regarding the grand narratives of origin, telos, reference, and essence" (19). This is certainly true for every proclaimed 'comeback' in this regard: none of the genres and strategies is utilized in a traditional way; they all reflect their postmodern history and heritage.

The most fruitful publications in this respect are those that deal explicitly with phenomena that have been previously determined exclusively by a postmodern approach, and that are now experiencing a noticeable shift. This applies to issues of subjectivity, identity, language and the role of fiction. The authors of these publications make strong cases for a post-postmodern aesthetic in literature. Fiction is the main topic in Huber's insightful study titled *Literature after Postmodernism. Reconstructive Fantasies* (2014), in which she outlines what role the fantastic mode had in postmodern texts and explains further why this mode, because of its subversive nature, has proved to be so fruitful to postmodern endeavors. She convincingly argues for a change in contemporary texts and how this can be observed best through analyzing the role of the fantastic mode and of fiction in general. Throughout her work she identifies enabling and innovative effects of the fantastic mode, for example when she writes about David Mitchell's *Number-9Dream* (2001): "The recourse to the fantastic mode is no longer a result of the projections of desires, but an attempt to account for the inexplicable, to find meaning and reason behind loss and grief" (193-194). The fantastic mode cannot be reduced to its playfulness or its subversive effect alone, but takes on deep meaning for the subject in contemporary literature and is significant to his/her self-construction of identity. By pointing out the relevance of the fantastic mode in contemporary fiction Huber provides the reader with a way to make a clear

distinction between postmodern and contemporary texts and offers a systematic approach towards identifying and describing post-postmodern writing.

For this dissertation, the issue of subjectivity and how contemporary literature deals with the question of the subject, in contrast to a postmodern approach, is significant. Kucharzewski and others ask in *Hello, I say, It's me. Reconstructions of Subjectivity in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (2009): "Can the subject be put on its feet again by approaches that aptly acknowledge postmodern insights about the powers and the discourses that shape us, without returning to dogmas about human nature?" (3) The authors of this publication argue that contemporary fiction has made this one of its key questions, and have collected a number of articles that underscore their argument. They also point out that the reemergence of the subject has wide-spread effects, since it has generated an interest in other topics previously neglected by postmodernism, most importantly ethics: "literary studies and philosophy have started to investigate the relation between literature, reading and ethics, at the center of which the perceiving subject is established" (4). In the introduction to their book, *Zweiundzwanzig amerikanische Romane aus dem neuen Jahrhundert: literaturkritische Essays zur Einführung* (2009), Schloss and Jakubzik also focus on the increasing interest in issues of constructed identity. They contend that this is a reaction to the dominance of postmodern disorientation that has finally sparked the desire to find a fixed and stable 'anchor' for the self again (cf. 11). Even though, so they say, the concept of a fixed identity has been proclaimed to be an illusion by postmodern writers, they want to explore in what ways it might be not solely illusory but also productive (8).

Timmer is one of the few academics who deals with subjectivity extensively and works towards a systematic approach. She makes a historic and social argument, describing how contemporary authors today, who were born when postmodernism was already extant, must necessarily have a different approach towards postmodern ideas than the 'original' postmodernists who came from the more conservative and constric-

tive backgrounds of the 1940s and 1950s. To her, authors today are more 'used' to the defragmentation of identity, the liberty of sexual identity and postmodern language games. They will not react in the same way to it as a reader or author of the 1960s. Timmer even argues that some of the innovations of postmodernism have become a cliché (15) which naturally stimulates authors to go beyond them, even to go directly against them: "it is not unthinkable that after endless proposals for deconstruction, a desire to construct will break through" (21). Timmer sees especially two issues that are of more concern to contemporary writers, namely the "empathic expression of feelings and sentiments" and "a drive towards inter-subjective connection and communication" (13). Since Timmer is in particular interested in the self and how it is constructed through storytelling, she links in her approach narrative psychology to literary studies and lets herself be guided by the question of "how we still do try to make sense of our selves, *even when* fractured and mediated" (42). In her book, she identifies a new characterizing theme of contemporary literature, writing that "self-narratives [...] eventually seem to be structured not around a centered and stable self-concept, but are constructed, primarily, around feelings" (46) which is a clear move beyond postmodernism's playfulness and conscious insincerity.

Another critic who deals extensively with subjectivity is Eshelman, who also provides a systematic approach, terming it "performatist subjectivity," which is a stabilized version of subjectivity defined as follows: "As a reaction to the plight of the postmodern subject, who is constantly being pulled apart and misled by signs in the surrounding context, the performatist subject is constructed in such a way that it is dense or opaque relative to its milieu" (8). For Eshelman, the main feature of postmodernism is how the "formal closure of the art work is continually being undermined by narrative or visual devices that create an immanent, inescapable state of undecidability regarding the truth status of some part of that work" (1). Against this overarching context Eshelman introduces the idea of a fixed frame against which the subject struggles and gains some sort of constructed and limited

subjectivity. Since Eshelman's concept is crucial for my own argument, I will elaborate on his ideas in detail later in this introduction when discussing my own theoretical approach.

In my contribution to the examination of contemporary literature I will attempt to expand the investigation of the subject by linking it to the event. In the following, I describe how the event is treated in modernism and postmodernism and what effect this has on the subject. The subject's connection to the event is different in contemporary literature than it is in postmodern literature, which makes an analysis of these elements helpful in outlining a post-postmodern approach.

1.3 The Event

1.3.1 Defining the Event

In narratology, 'event' is a fixed term and is defined as the key element in every narrative. For Schmid, the event means a "change of state" (19) which he considers to be the "minimal condition" (ibid.) for a narrative.[2] Lotman has defined the event as a transgression of a textual border: "An event in a text is the shifting of a persona across the borders of a semantic field" (233). An example would be William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) in which Romeo falls in love with the daughter of his family's enemy. This transgression becomes the starting point for Romeo and Juliet's story and their eventual fates.[3] The event

2 Gerald Prince defines the event in the same way, but distinguishes further an event that is caused by an agent from a 'happening' where no agent is involved, e.g. "'the rain started to fall'" (28).

3 However, transgressions can occur in a variety of ways. They do not necessarily promise a progression. Hühn expands Lotman's concept, presenting a variation of events: "Lotman's model allows for the conceptualization of successive and progressive events, but also of regressive events. The protagonist might become immobile in the new subfield or progress further, in which case the semantic field is re-defined, the previous second sub-field changing into a new first sub-field, which in turn is delimited by another boundary that the protagonist, if he/she continues to be mobile, may cross and so forth and so on. But it is also possible for the protagonist, having crossed the boundary, to retrace his/her steps, as it were, re-entering the initial field and revoking or cancelling the event" (2008: 149).

creates a 'before' and 'after,' thereby becoming "a special occurrence, something which is not part of the everyday routine" (Lotman 24).[4] Schmid underscores the singularity of the event, too, by claiming an event is unpredictable; it "breaks with expectations" and he further notes: "[a] highly eventful change is paradoxical in the literal sense of the word: it is not what we expect" (26). Even though there is a basic definition of the event, the way events are treated in fiction varies, in particular when it comes to the issues of expectation and calculation that connect the event to the subject. How the difference in the way the event is portrayed effects the narrative in general will be explained in the following sections.

1.3.2 The Event in Modernist and Postmodernist Texts

The event in the modernist work *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* [The man without qualities] (1930) by Robert Musil conveys key principles of the modernist attitude. In the first chapter of the novel an accident occurs:

> Schon vorher war etwas aus der Reihe gesprungen, eine quer schlagende Bewegung; etwas hatte sich gedreht, war seitwärts gerutscht, ein schwerer, jäh gebremster Lastwagen war es, wie sich jetzt zeigte, wo er, mit einem Rad auf der Bordschwelle, gestrandet dastand. Wie die Bienen um das Flugloch hatten sich im Nu Menschen um einen kleinen Fleck angesetzt, den sie in ihrer Mitte freiließen. Von seinem Wagen herabgekommen, stand der Lenker darin, grau wie Packpapier, und erklärte mit groben Gebärden den Unglücksfall. Die Blicke der Hinzukommenden richteten sich auf ihn und sanken dann vorsichtig in die Tiefe des Lochs, wo man einen Mann, der wie tot dalag, an die Schwelle des Gehsteigs gebettet hatte (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* 10).

4 For an overview of the history of the event in narratology see Peter Hühn "Event and Eventfulness," in which he outlines how the concept of the event can be found in Aristotle, in Goethe's discussion of the Novelle and its later applications in narratology. In "Functions and Forms of Eventfulness in Narrative Fiction" Hühn demonstrates how there can be different versions of the event. A "completed eventfulness" in the case of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (150f.)—and a "staged eventfulness" as in James Joyce's "Grace" (156f.).

An unforeseen accident breaks into everyday life, upsetting those who witness it. The sudden appearance of death disrupts daily routines and suggests to the onlookers that any one of them could have been the unlucky victim. The beginning of Musil's passage speaks of something that 'breaks ranks,' meaning a sudden movement that introduces a fracture. Two causal chains have come together that should not have: a truck driving down the road and a man walking. The pedestrians who witness the accident are shocked, in particular a woman whose companion tries to calm her down by explaining that the braking distance for these types of trucks is too long. This information leads to a curious effect: the woman is relieved. She is relieved because she has been given an explanation: "es genügte ihr, daß damit dieser gräßliche Vorfall in irgend eine Ordnung zu bringen war und zu einem technischen Problem wurde, das sie nicht mehr unmittelbar anging" (ibid., 11). It ceases to affect her, since the accident is integrated into a rational, deterministic system; the event has been 'mastered.' The technical information frames the event, makes it part of a structure and gives sense to it. In retrospect, and enriched with this 'helpful' information, the disturbing accident loses its shocking effect:

> Man hob den Verunglückten auf eine Tragbahre und schob ihn mit dieser in den Wagen. Männer in einer Art Uniform waren um ihn bemüht, und das Innere des Fuhrwerks, das der Blick erhaschte, sah so sauber und regelmäßig wie ein Krankensaal aus. Man ging fast mit dem berechtigten Eindruck davon, daß sich ein gesetzliches und ordnungsgemäßes Ereignis vollzogen habe (ibid., 11).

Because the ensuing process evokes familiar impressions, it can be dealt with. The passage concludes with the word "gesetzlich" [lawful], underscoring that the event has become part of the common world order. The event and how it is employed in Musil's introductory chapter can be connected to general aspects of modernism. The modern subject at the beginning of the 20th century finds itself in a challenging situation. Everyday circumstances have changed rapidly, modern cities emerge, industrialization has already transformed all working conditions, and the individual is expected to adapt to a mod-

ern lifestyle. Musil's passage reflects the unstable reality of the modern city and its attendant fears, but it also shows how the individual tries to deal with this situation. The companion in Musil's passage gives a rather tautological explanation for the accident, attempting to describe the accident as the outcome of a logical and causal chain. He takes control of the event by interpreting it. Since this successfully calms the woman, this creates a comic effect, because nothing is really explained by the reference to the braking distance of trucks. Nevertheless, it serves its purpose—the event can be forgotten, or at least categorized as a tragic but not so uncommon accident. Thus, the event is fully controlled by the subject, who puts it in its place. However, this also devalues the event's influence. Accordingly, the novel treats the event with indifference; after this chapter the reader never hears of the event again.

Postmodern writers employ the event differently than writers from previous decades. Foremost, I would argue the narratological 'event' represents a symbolical center, which implicates a hierarchy postmodern writers tend to undermine. In fact, many poststructuralist writers and thinkers have proposed distinct anti-hierarchical structures. Derrida proposes the notion of *différance* which describes the constant deferral of meaning as an inherent characteristic of language; a process which never stops and thus never allows meaning to take on ultimate form (cf. "Différance" 7). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in *Thousand Plateaus,* introduce their concept of the rhizome:

> the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states.[...] Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations between the points and biunivocal relationships between the positions, the rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis [...]. The rhizome is anti-genealogy (21).

Structures like these do not allow for a singular event that takes on a bigger role than other events, since this would create an unwanted and arbitrary hierarchy. Instead, postmodern literature, fully aware of the event's role, plays with the concept and the conventions of the event by questioning its eventfulness. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) is the perfect example of this. Here, the event is an unspecified chemical accident/spill that produces a big, mysterious cloud. The nature and the exact dangers of the cloud are never revealed. The event is referred to by different names. The radio calls it at first a "feathery plume" (DeLillo 111), then a "black billowing cloud" (ibid., 113) and finally an "airborne toxic event" (ibid., 117). The father and mother in the story are adamant about playing down the seriousness of the event to the rest of the family, denying that it is an event in the first place, which creates a comic effect: "Air-raid sirens sounded again, this time so close to us that we were negatively affected, shaken to the point of avoiding each other's eyes as a way of denying that something unusual was going on" (ibid., 118). Soon, the radio station provides some symptoms of exposure to the cloud. These, like the appearance of the cloud, are repeatedly revised. When the children exhibit some of the symptoms, their validity is constantly doubted; there is no way to know for sure if the symptoms are real, psychosomatic, or unconnected to the "airborne toxic event." This situation alludes to Jean Baudrillard's theory on simulacra, in which he describes the case of a patient who is feigning an illness yet develops symptoms nevertheless: "simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false,' between 'real' and 'imaginary.' Since the simulator produces 'true' symptoms, is he ill or not? He cannot be treated objectively either as ill, or as not-ill" (3). As a consequence, the parents in *White Noise* refuse to react at all and decide to do absolutely nothing. In addition to the general confusion about the symptoms, one supposed symptom is to perceive events as déjà vues. Thus, in a comic reverse, the event produces subjects that are unable to recognize an event as such but who might consider it a mere repetition of a previous situation. The notion of the event is further destabilized by the fact that the only people who consider the cloud an event are religious fanatics: "How do you plan to spend your resurrection?' he [a stranger talking to the father] said, as though asking about

a long weekend coming up" (ibid., 136). The qualification of the event is supported by another instance, namely by the men working at the emergency shelters who are wearing arm wrists that spell out "SIMU-VAC," short for "simulated evacuation" (ibid., 139). The event serves as a simulation practice for a real case scenario, thus blurring again the boundaries between real and imaginary. The nature and truthfulness of the event is therefore questioned and satirized on both an epistemological level (what are the symptoms produced by the event?) and on an ontological level (is the event even real?).

1.3.3 Diminished by the Event: the Postmodern Subject

Subjectivity is destabilized through the treatment of the event. The parents in *White Noise* become unable to take action, simply because they don't know whether they should take the event seriously or not. In fact, the questioning of events always has direct consequences for the subject. In other examples, like Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), events exist in a multitude. Overrun by this sheer mass of events, the subject struggles to decide what to do and how to respond. It is telling that Pynchon's characters are often paranoid being overwhelmed by events that challenge each other and that imply alternative worldviews.[5] Timmer addresses this situation critically: "One of the problems many of the characters and narrators in the novels confront is that they don't know how to choose between many options, possible ways of being" (42). This shows how the destabilization of the event also undermines the subject. In postmodern literature, the event is a stress-factor: it overwhelms and challenges the subject, resulting in a

5 Joseph Tabbi writes on Pynchon in *Postmodern Sublime*: "Pynchon likes to present characters in mental states that fluctuate between the total theory of a paranoid delusion and the ironical 'mindless pleasures' of a total relativism. The overdetermined and wholly private meanings in the first state of mind are dissolved in the second by an irony that would undermine the ground on which any stable meaning might be built. In the end, however, neither state receives authorial sanction, for neither one does anything to advance the radical freedom that clearly concerns Pynchon, however much it eludes his characters" (77).

general diminishment of its state. Thus, the questioning of the event in postmodernism goes along with a general existential and epistemological destabilization of the subject.

In fact, postmodernism can be defined as destabilization *par excellence*. This is most obvious when it comes to the definition of postmodernism itself. The discussion about its definition alone seems to mirror what postmodernism is all about, namely a plurality of systems and ideas in which no one takes a lead. In a seemingly ongoing debate about how to define postmodernism it is part of the rhetoric to underscore that it is impossible to define the term, since the discourse on this matter is heterogenic. Sim writes that "[p]ostmodernism, like modernism before it, has produced a profusion of definitions and redefinitions. [...] Not only does what counts as 'postmodernism' change from writer to writer, but what is 'meant' by most other terms depends on who is doing the 'meaning,' and what they mean by 'meaning'" (144), and Nünning simply states: "there is no postmodernism in the singular" (235). However, even though interpretations of postmodernism are diverse, one aspect appears to be shared by all writers: the constant endeavor to question traditional truths and beliefs that are falsely accepted as 'natural.' Linda Hutcheon suggests in *The Politics of Postmodernism*:

> it seems reasonable to say that the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees (2).

In reference to literature, the conventions of a narrative are questioned, e.g. the role of the author, the reader, the nature of the event, the subject, rules of storytelling and so forth. Raymond Federman who refers to postmodern fiction as 'new fiction' explains what happens to the subject under these conditions:

> the fictitious beings, will also no longer be well-made-characters who carry with them a fixed identity, a stable set of social and psychological attributes—a name, a situation, a profession, a condition, etc. The creatures of the new fiction will be as changeable, as unstable, as illusory, as nameless, as unnamable, as fraudulent, as unpredictable as the discourse that makes them (12-13).

One could say that postmodern literature reveals supposedly 'intuitive' or 'common' frameworks and questions their validity. Lyotard terms these frameworks 'metanarratives,' or 'grand narratives,' which pertain to forms of tradition that affect different areas: social conduct, politics, ethics, religion, and also artistic expression.[6] Lyotard recognizes these overarching frameworks as *narratives* rather than as truths, and thus underscores their constructed nature. As Hutcheon writes above, these frameworks are *made*, and "not given to us." Lyotard argues that these narratives are an expression of various cultural norms, modes and institutions and how these spread their principles through discursive actions:

> Narratives [...] determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do (Lyotard 23).

Thus, metanarratives have a regulating effect: they order thought and determine what is possible. However, since the metanarratives of society have failed to take care of the individual in the 20th century, lead-

6 Lyotard defines postmodernism in *The Postmodern Condition* as follows: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). Zygmunt Bauman sees this similarly, explaining how the notion of rules and orders turned out to be illusionary in postmodernism: "Postmodernity, one may say, is modernity without illusions [...] The illusions in question boil down to the belief that the 'messiness' of the human world is but a temporary and repairable state, sooner or later to be replaced by the orderly and systematic rule of reason. The truth in question is that the 'messiness' will stay whatever we do or know, that the little orders and 'systems' we carve out in the world are brittle, until-further-notice, and as arbitrary and in the end contingent as their alternatives" (32–33).

ing, among other things, to two world wars, revealing humanity's limitations to deal with a plurality of identities, they are subsequently refuted by poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers. They dispose of these frameworks by showing how arbitrary they are and how easily they could be replaced by other systems.

The critique of metanarratives results also in a destabilization of the subject. Zima concludes that "scepticism vis-á-vis the great meta-narratives goes hand in hand with a radical critique or an outright rejection of the notion of subjectivity" (2003: 26). The subject, in fact, has been an illusion all along, as Frederic Jameson writes in *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*:

> not only is the bourgeois individual a thing of the past, it is also a myth; it never really existed in the first place; there have never been autonomous subjects of that type. Rather, this construct is merely a philosophical and cultural mystification which sought to persuade people that they 'had' individual subjects and possessed this unique personal identity (1850).

Instead of being determined by an individual identity, the subject in postmodernism is shaped by various outside forces: language, discourse, ideology and culture.[7] This insight enables the liberation of the subject.[8] Timmer points out how the postmodern subject must be con-

7 How the subject is shaped and deformed by language is satirically and hyperbolically portrayed in *White Noise*. Here, a drug dealer is unable to distinguish words from objects, so when the protagonist tells him "'Hail of bullets'" (DeLillo 311) he falsely assumes he is being shot at with a gun: "He hit the floor, began crawling toward the bathroom, looking back over his shoulder, childlike, miming, using principles of heightened design but showing real terror, brilliant cringing fear" (ibd., 311).

8 Zima summarizes this liberation and elaborates on its philosophical underpinnings: "das Subjekt [ist] eine Scheineinheit, die sich bei näherem Hinsehen auflöst: entweder weil der gesellschaftliche und sprachliche Sinn, der Subjektivität scheinbar gewährleistet, nie vergegenwärtigt, nie vereinheitlicht werden kann (Deleuze, Derrida, Vattimo), oder weil der Einzelne ideologisch, strukturell und sprachlich überdeterminiert ist, so daß von einem Subjekt als autonom handelnder Instanz nicht die Rede sein kann (Althusser, Foucault, Baudrillard)" (2000: 193). He goes into detail about Althusser and notes that "für Athusser [ist] der Subjektbegriff der ideologische Begriff *par excellence*. Er stellt eine Affinität zwischen dem philosophischen und dem juristischen Denken fest [...] Kurzum, das Subjekt ist ein Untertan im Sinne von *His* oder *Her Majesty's subject*,

sidered emancipated, since it has ceased to be fixed to certain expectations or norms of society: "it perhaps became easier to fight for the right to be different; one did not need to adapt to 'appropriate' forms of living, since it could be shown that what is appropriate and normal is not written in stone, but subject to change" (37). In fact, what had been considered the average subject—the Western, white, male subject—is now challenged by the peripheries, the outsiders and (formerly) silenced groups. By disputing the main discourse the focus shifts towards the neglected and invites them to introduce counter-positions. This has been relevant in particular for gender as well as for post-colonial studies. Judith Butler questions the notion of gendered identity in *Gender Trouble* (1990), arguing that it is not an ontological fact, but a construction: "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (140). The post-colonial writer Homi Bhabha also proposes a new understanding of subjectivity or rather of identity in *The Location of Culture* (1994). He introduces a modern 'hybrid' subject that is located in between different nationalities and/or cultures and cannot be categorized as belonging to a certain group or nation (cf. 4). His hybrid subject is defined by its location on a threshold and thus does not adhere to common or 'natural' definitions of identity that link the subject to its 'origin.'

Nevertheless, there has been criticism of this new-found liberty of subjectivity, and it touches upon a problem in postmodern thought that is especially difficult for so-called 'ethnic' literature. Haselstein quotes on this matter the writer and literary critic bell hooks: "Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the 'subject' when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time?" ("Postmodern Blackness" 2482; cited in Haselstein 13–14). Bradbury notes that this is also a significant argument in feminist writing:

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das sein Unterworfensein zusammen mit dem ursprünglichen Akt der Unterwerfung verdrängt hat, so daß es sich in der Ideologie, die es *unbewußt* lebt, frei und autonom wähnt" (ibid., 242).

> there was little appeal to new feminist writers in the idea of a literature of exhaustion; the notion that all stories had been used up or the tradition been completed, leaving the writer with a pastiche narrative kitty, was hardly of great importance to writers who believed that their stories were yet to be told. This had a double meaning for black women writers, who had good reason to see a double sense of exclusion [...] (22).

The notion of subjectivity in postmodern thought is clearly revolutionary but also proved to be too limited, and not affirmative enough in respect to exactly those groups on the peripheries it aimed to support. In this context, a general issue becomes obvious. Even though common concepts of subjectivity and identity were questioned and opened up for discussion, no one seems to have looked for a resolution. Best and Kellner note that "all postmodern theory lacks an adequate theory of agency, of an active creative self, mediated by social institutions, discourses, and other people" (283).[9]

This is one of the problems, I argue, that post-postmodern literature deals with in detail: proposing forms of subjectivity that are affirmative and constructive. Thus, contemporary literature deals with postmodern problems, but instead of presenting an epistemological dilemma, it proposes alternative notions of subjectivity. These subjects are stabilized and even empowered through events. One can find precisely such subjects in French philosophical thought since the 1980s, which has been concerned with moving away from poststructural philosophy. It is this line of thought that forms the basis of this dissertation and that I will give a short introduction to in the following subchapter.

9 This has also been stated by Linda Hutcheon in reference to feminism: "The many feminist social agendas demand a theory of agency, but such a theory is visibly lacking in postmodernism, caught as it is in a certain negativity that may be inherent in any critique of cultural dominants. It has no theory of positive action on a social level; all feminist positions do" (22). Zima underscores this: "Hier zeichnet sich das grundsätzliche Dilemma ab, das aus dem Spannungsverhältnis von Ideologie und Theorie hervorgeht: Die Ideologie macht die Individuen zu handlungsfähigen Subjekten, spornt sie aber nicht gerade zum kritischen Nachdenken an; die kritischen Theorien fördern dieses Nachdenken, sind aber ‚von den Gedankens Blässe angekränkelt' (Goethe über Hamlet) und verhindern tendenziell das Handeln. Niemand wird den Feministinnen verdenken, dieses uralte Dilemma nicht überwunden zu haben" (200: 284).

1.3.4 The Event and the Subject in Contemporary French Phenomenology

The subject regains significance in current contemporary French philosophical thought, in particular in the realm of phenomenology. Here, the subject attains stability as the result of an overpowering event. The event is considered to be unexpected, singular and excessive, turning a mere 'being' into a subject in the first place. This concept of the event has religious implications that have become interesting even to the most secular philosophers.[10] Gondek and Tengelyi, who have summarized this development, write about how the concept of subjectivity is distinguished from a poststructuralist view of the subject:

> Der von einem radikalisierten Strukturalismus vorschnell verkündete ‚Tod des Subjekts' wird in der Neuen Phänomenologie Frankreichs generell nicht akzeptiert; aber natürlich wird damit das allzu selbstmächtige Subjekt der neuzeitlichen Philosophie keineswegs in seine Rechte wieder eingesetzt. Das kommt auch darin zum Ausdruck, dass *Passivität* und *Affektivität* in den neueren Bestrebungen beinahe überall zum Thema werden. Es wird ein Subjekt beschrieben, dem immer schon pathische Ereignisse widerfahren, bevor es dazu kommen kann, sich auf sich zu besinnen und selbstmächtig auf die Welt einzuwirken (30).

In their anthology, Gondek and Tengelyi discuss multiple current philosophical theories that deal with the event and the subject in various, sometimes even contradictory ways. However, all the philosophers discussed agree on one central aspect: "Die neue Phänomenologie

10 Alain Badiou would be one of them. He writes in *Saint Paul*: "For me, Paul is a poet-thinker of the event, as well as one who practices and states the invariant traits of what can be called the militant figure. He brings forth the entirely human connection, whose destiny fascinates me, between the general idea of a rupture, an overturning, and that of a thought-practice that is this rupture's subjective materiality" (2). Referring to Paul implicates that Badiou's notion of the event is one of extreme conversion that presupposes a subject's dedication to the event or what Badiou calls 'fidelity.' 'Being true' to an event gives form to the subject in the first place. Badiou states: "I call 'subject' the bearer [*le support*] of a fidelity, the one who bears a process of truth. The subject, therefore, in no way pre-exists the process. He is absolutely nonexistent in the situation 'before' the event. We might say that the process of truth *induces* a subject" (*Ethics* 43).

in Frankreich versucht, die Welt auf Sinnbestände zurückzuführen, ohne diese Sinnbestände von einem sinngebenden Bewusstsein herzuleiten" (ibid., 37). The subject is not understood as a traditional subject. Unlike Descartes' *cogito ego*, the subject described by Gondek and Tengelyi has no mastery over the event—it is *controlled by* an event.

One of the leading thinkers in this area is the theologian and philosopher Jean-Luc Marion. Marion is considered, along with Jean-Luc Nancy, John D. Caputo, and Slavoj Žižek "to have broken the 'postmodern mould'" (Toth and Brooks 5). He develops his concept in demarcation to Jacques Derrida's, who wrote a seminal book on the 'gift,' a term he uses synonymously with the 'event.' Derrida considers the gift/event a phenomenon that only exists as a concept, not as a reality. The singularity and exceptionality of the gift is not possible in Derrida's view, as he sees it corrupted by calculation and thus expectation. Marion takes on Derrida's objection to the notion of the gift/event and meticulously shows how the gift/event is possible, nevertheless. He succeeds in doing this by redefining the phenomenon and consequently redefining the gift and the event. In fact, he gives priority to the event, arguing that it operates on its own, which puts the subject in the back seat. Though one could claim that this is a passive conception of subjectivity, and therefore not so different from the resigned and incapable subject seen in postmodernism, Marion's concept is highly optimistic, since his passive subject eventually turns into a stabilized and even a 'gifted' subject which is very different from a poststructuralist conception of subjectivity. For Marion subjects are empowered beings, once open to an event that shapes them.

But how does a subject become empowered and capacitated by an event? The event conditions a receptive subject. How this receptivity is produced will be outlined in the following subchapter, where I also introduce my term 'captivation,' which describes a state of receptivity. The term is based on Marion's theory, but also on Giorgio Agamben's notion of the *homo sacer*.

1.4 Being Struck by the Event: Captivation

This subchapter describes a concentrated version of what will be elaborated on in detail in the chapter "Relating the Event to the Subject." For this introduction, I wish to focus on one element that is central for my approach and that informs my own terminology. This is the idea of a receptive and therefore 'weak' subject that is capacitated by an event.

Marion describes a being that comes before the event, a subject that is not a subject yet. He calls it the *receiver*. The *receiver* is portrayed only in a rather vague way; it is a being that is in a waiting position but unaware of this. The open and receptive attitude is a condition for being able to perceive an event. Without this, the event would not occur. The receiver is a weak being in a very Christian conception. Weakness is thus understood in terms of humbleness, patience and acceptance. The subject submits to a higher force that Marion does not call God, but which clearly inhabits a godlike position. This means that the *receiver* and the subject are not really neutral beings for Marion, they are regarded as highly positive and their turning from a *receiver* into a subject is even compared to a revelation. This overt use of Christian terminology makes it difficult to employ Marion's theory for a literary analysis, since weakness is understood in a simplistic way. However, states of weakness can be rather complex and involve social and political factors, too. Thus, the *receiver*'s weakness, which is a significant component for the concept of the event, is too restrictive and one-sided in the way Marion conceptualizes it. There needs to be an understanding of weakness that does not have solely religious implications.

Weakness as an inherent part of a political structure is a key feature of Giorgio Agamben's theory of the *homo sacer*. Downey notes that Agamben

> is interested in lives lived on the margins of social, political, juridical, medical, and biological representation, not for their exceptional quali-

> ties but for their exemplary status: the manner, that is, in which they are both representative of the modernity and an admonitory warning to the ontological status of the modern political subject (120).

Agamben's *homo sacer* lives this kind of a life on the margins of society. The *homo sacer* is, in a negative way, stable and fixed. He is shaped and even imprisoned by his circumstances, since he is locked within the center of the state, doomed to be excluded both from the outside and the inside. The reason for this is of a political nature: only because he can be killed without consequence can the sovereign thrive and the nation state exist. Even though Agamben's work is clearly influenced by Derrida, dealing throughout with issues of power and language, the *homo sacer* is a shockingly determinate figure. In this area, Agamben clearly removes himself from a solely poststructuralist attitude. This has also been noted by Mills who writes that Agamben's "approach to questions of language, subjectivity and representation has reoriented discussion away from the deconstructive approach that has largely dominated in the Anglo-American context of late" (1). Although Agamben's poststructuralist upbringing cannot be denied, he provides figurations that are very different from the looseness of *différance*. His severe view on this political subject is inspired by a contemporary phenomenon, namely that of the stateless refugee who has lost his national identity and lives the paradox of belonging but at the same time not belonging. Agamben calls this situation the *ban*. In my theoretical chapter I will elaborate how the *ban* of the *homo sacer* can be compared to the *receiver*'s aimless state of waiting. In fact, I intend to show how these two figures are two sides of the same coin. Both sides depict limited and restricted beings, although, one version is a harmless and optimistic version, whereas the other is the exact opposite and refers to a violent form of restriction. To read the *homo sacer*'s weakness as receptivity certainly goes beyond Agamben's theory, since he is not dealing with receptivity in any way or even allowing the *homo sacer* to experience an event. While using some of Agamben's ideas to bolster my literary analysis, it must be emphasized that my interpretation of Agamben is clearly shaped by Marion's notion of subjectivity. In the conclusion of my theoretical chapter, I will demonstrate that

Marion's *receiver* and Agamben's *homo sacer* present extreme forms of weakness, which are located at different ends of a spectrum of receptive beings/subjects.

To describe this spectrum of receptivity I introduce the term 'captivation.' The term captivation originated in the early 16th century and is defined as follows: "The action of taking or holding captive; the fact or state of being taken or held captive; now only fig., of the attention, mind, fancy, affections" (*OED* 102). Even though the term is only used figuratively today, my goal is to reactivate the archaic meaning of the term, turning it into a portmanteau that incorporates both 'to be held captive' and 'to be captivated by something'; one describing a forceful form of restriction, the other a milder one. The spectrum of captivation thus contains on the one hand the *homo sacer*, violently imprisoned, and on the other the *receiver*, who feels drawn to a captivating force. Thus, captivation can become apparent in different forms: it can be a restriction caused by environmental, political or social conditions, by age, lack of knowledge, ignorance, trauma, physical or psychological dependency, but it can also be a fascination generated by images, events and people. To summarize, the notion of captivation stems from an expansion of Marion's concept of the *receiver*'s receptive state, which I augment by contrasting the *receiver* with Agamben's *homo sacer* and by showing how each is positioned at an opposite end of a spectrum of weakness.

The concept of captivation is also inspired by Eshelman's notion of the 'frame.' The frame is a constraint that is expressed in different ways:

> the *frame*, which must be understood as a temporal, spatial or ethical limit imposed on someone from without. The frame itself may be thought of as having a *theist* or *sacral* dimension on the one hand and *anthropological* or *human* on the other. The theist side of the frame impinges on, crimps, or temporarily cuts off the continuous passage from one state of affairs to another in an authoritative way. Such frames are imposed from above or without and cannot be easily overcome or placed in doubt. They are, for the most part, onerous givens that—like theist cosmologies every-

> where—subject the characters within them to severe tests of faith, courage, or perseverance (98).

The frame imposes itself on the subject and limits the subject's abilities to act. This concept is set in clear contrast to a postmodern understanding of the frame which, following Derrida's analysis of Kant's ergon, is both inside and outside, opening the piece of work up to an uncontrollable and unlimited context.[11] Eshelman's frame is, in contrast, coercive and impermeable. Struggling against (or consciously manipulating) this frame becomes the subject's way of attaining subjectivity, an act that Eshelman terms a "narrative performance," which "marks the ability to transcend a frame in some way, usually breaking through it at some point and/or reversing its basic parameters" (12). This frame can also be projected onto the reader, and challenge him/her to transgress the implicit borders erected between reader and text (cf. ibid., 53ff). Captivation works in a similar way, however the term reflects forms of constraints located between imprisonment and a kind of hypnosis or an intense fascination. Furthermore, the subject's ability to 'transcend the frame' as Eshelman puts it is in my conception only possible through an event. Consequently, I argue for an interplay of captivation and event that shapes the subject. Differently from Eshelman, I do not consider captivation something that can be overcome completely, but I am in agreement with him that captivation/frames can be 'reworked.' The subject remains bound to its captivation in some way, even though it might not suffer from it in the same manner as before, but finds a different relationship towards its captivation, and even employs it to advantage.

The next subchapter will outline the areas in which this dissertation explores the subject's captivation and its resulting empowerment through an event. The focus of the analytical chapters is meant to indi-

11 When outlining his concept of the frame Eshelman contrasts his notion with that of Jacques Derrida's formulated in *The Truth in Painting* (1987) in which Derrida discusses Kant's ergon. This dissertation also deals with Derrida's treatment of the frame in the introduction to "Captives of the Sacred."

cate how the subjects deal with their captivation, how this triggers an event, and how they turn into capacitated figures. The forms in which empowerment presents itself are also described in this section.

1.5 Contemporary Events: Authorship, Ethics and the Sacred

In contemporary literature, I identify three areas in which a subject receives an empowerment through an event. The topics authorship, ethics and the sacred present recurring themes in contemporary fiction. They are also topics that experienced a very distinct interpretation in postmodern fiction, being questioned, destabilized or simply denied their validity. Because their treatment in postmodern fiction is so clearly defined, it seems imperative to explore precisely these topics to make a case for post-postmodern literature. Authorship, ethics and the sacred are shown to be transformed by engaging empowered and capable subjects that present their own interpretation of how to be an author, an ethical or a sacred subject.

Authorship is probably one of the most discussed topics in postmodern literature and in articles on postmodernism. Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author" (1977) is the seminal piece of work on this matter. Authorship, in the eyes of postmodern writers, has one central flaw: it implies a form of authority that the anti-authorial thinkers of the 1960s take issue with. Barthes' critique is not directed solely at authors, but at figures of guidance common in literature. These guiding figures are reintroduced in contemporary literature, however, their power to guide and, thus, to mislead, is represented critically. The reader takes on an important role in this, becoming involved in the fiction more than he or she probably wants to be. Referring to current American literature, the literary critic de Dulk maintains that "the aim of these works is not to constantly push the reader out of the story, as is often the case in postmodernist meta-fiction, but rather the other way around: to draw the reader in. They all treat fiction as a dialogue between writer and reader" (239). In contemporary fiction, readers are pressured and manipulated. They are confronted with powerful author figures

that try to impose their opinion or views on the readers, who must then decide whether they want to play along or struggle against the attempted domination. They are, in either case, forced to react. This invasion of the reader's sphere has been discussed by Eshelman, who writes on Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*: "[the novel] demands (and in a certain sense creates) a new type of reader who is willing to enter into the closed frame of the text and, at least for the time being, identify with its artificially rigged center before going off on his or her own" (57). This type of novel bases its aesthetic effect on the reader's response, which is a trend in many current novels.

A related issue in this regard is ethics. When the reader is made part of the narrative, being forced to engage in a way that seems unnatural to him, the reading process takes on an ethical component. To read and to interpret means making an ethical judgment, or to even being inclined to take sides. That the selected novels purposely seek out ethical concerns is evident with regard to the types of settings and plots that are chosen. Two of the selected novels, *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake*, deal with a postapocalyptic world that introduces the possibility of discussing responsibility on a large scale, namely the responsibility of humanity for planet earth and the questioning of a so-called 'civilized' world. Neither do the other novels shy away from asking big ethical questions. *The History of Love* portrays a family that belongs to the third generation of Holocaust survivors, discussing trauma and healing as well as forgiveness; *Atonement* and *Ghostwritten* reflect critically on the responsibility and power that accompany authorship; *The Gathering* deals with sexual abuse and the responsibility of the family; and *The White Tiger* depicts modern forms of slavery, asking how to distinguish self-defense from murder. The material that is of interest to contemporary fiction provides a testament to a certain form of sincerity and earnestness that is rather uncommon in postmodern literature. For Nünning, who refers to current British Literature this is proof that ethics is one of the significant topics in contemporary fiction: "[i]f one wanted to come up with a sort of umbrella concept, designating an interest that is shared by many of the authors that I have discussed, it would be the return to ethical questions" (254). Other critics agree

with this; van Dijk and Vaessens describe, in reference to McEwan's work (in particular to *Saturday* (2005)) how there is a "definitive gravitation towards the values made taboo in postmodernism" (12), which is a statement I would like to borrow in order to describe all the novels under discussion here. In fact, when discussing the novels under the aspects of authorship and sacredness they so frequently touch upon ethical questions too, that it is almost impossible not to include the question of ethics in every analytical chapter.

The last chapter of this dissertation is dedicated to post-postmodern sacredness. Sacredness, the divine and the holy are concepts that have been destructed or at least questioned since modernism. In postmodernism, the notion of the 'death of God' has become a common sense view and the sort of security and trust that a religious sphere provides has not been replaced by anything else. In contemporary literature, the sacred sphere is not simply reintroduced. Instead, one can observe a transparent reconstruction and recreation of the sacred that redefines the term. The sacred emerges out of banal events, accidents and mistakes. These events turn the unknowing characters into sacred beings; they are adored, listened to and even prayed to. They are sacred, because their actions come across as inspired by a higher power, even though in reality these sacred characters are helpless, struggling and even desperate. Although these sacred subjects might only *appear* sacred, their actions are highly consequential and suggest that even though their power might not stem directly from a sacred source, it *could*—since things considered 'impossible' are made possible. This is in line with Nadine Böhm's observations in her dissertation *Sakrales Sehen. Strategien der Sakralisierung im Kino der Jahrtausendwende*, where she presents arguments concerning the sacred in contemporary film which are very similar to my observations on contemporary fiction. She writes that the protagonists are portrayed in such a manner that they appear to be more powerful than they really are, or that their actions are linked to a 'higher power,' which legitimizes them:

> Sakralisierungen, zunächst heuristisch als Aufladung oder Assoziierung kultureller Güter mit religiöser Valenz definiert, stellen, so meine These,

> eine dominante Weise der Appropriierung religiöser Diskurse im populären Film dar und werden primär auf drei Weisen funktionalisiert: erstens auf diegetischer und medialer Ebene dazu, Hauptfiguren über Referenzen zu religiösen Symbolsystemen mächtiger erscheinen zu lassen, ihr Handeln unter Bezug auf 'höhere Mächte' als geheiligt darzustellen und damit zu legitimieren oder auch um dem Film selbst als Medium eine sakrale Qualität zuzuschreiben (12).

It will have to be shown whether this is also valid for literary configurations of sacrality and how the effect of a higher power is created on a textual basis and what consequences this has for the subject.

Before starting with the analyses in this dissertation, the next chapter will provide a detailed discussion of Marion's and Agamben's theories and describe how their ideas can be employed by interpreting an exemplary short story by David Mitchell. The chapter will also explain why it is necessary to augment Marion's theory with Agamben's concepts and how this establishes the basis for my own terminology.

2 Relating the Subject to the Event

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will outline the theoretical framework of this dissertation. The goal of this chapter is to come up with a concept of subjectivity that is centered around an event. Thus, the following could be characterized as the search for a term that defines a subject that is created as the result of an event. Some of the questions related to this pursuit are: how can a subject experience an event in the first place, what is such an event like and how can the effect of the event be expressed in terms of subjectivity? In exploring this subject I will be employing two philosophical theories that deal with very different projects: that of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben who investigates issues of politics and law, and that of the French phenomenologist and theologian Jean-Luc Marion who attempts a redefinition of phenomenology. While Marion and Agamben definitively differ thematically and stylistically, they do share key structures.

Marion depicts two forms of subjectivity—the weak and the strong—yet does not treat them as antagonistic, but rather as two sides of the same coin, arguing that in order to become empowered it is necessary to be 'weak' at first, which clearly reflects a Christian belief system. According to Marion, only weak beings can be receptive enough to experience a transformational event which enables them to transcend their prior position. Agamben has a completely different project in mind. He analyzes the modern state and investigates how sovereignty in the 20th century can be considered biopolitics. Agamben's 'subjects' are rather schematic political 'figures.' They are located at different ends of this spectrum: there is the weakest being on one end—the refugee, the camp inhabitant and other configurations of the weak that Agamben sums up with the term *homo sacer*—and the most powerful—the sovereign—on the other end. Other than these two figures there is nothing; they constitute the modern biopolitical state in Agamben's view. Both theories essentially gravitate around a weak being, utterly

determined by its circumstances, and both theories also propose a very potent being, likewise a product of restricting circumstances. Yet, only Marion provides a theory of the event, seeing it as the link between weak and powerful being. Whereas Marion's subject experiences a transformative event due to its former restriction, Agamben's *homo sacer* remains stuck in its position.

Agamben's analysis of modern politics comes across as hopeless at times, which has provoked critics into calling his politics 'nihilistic,' neither is Marion's theory without flaws, being almost too optimistic when he speaks of phenomena that empower subjects, appearing out of thin air. Certainly, the two theories can be (and have been in the case of Agamben) criticized for some of their assumptions. However, both theories on their own offer figurations that are very unique and innovative, but also simple. The fact that they are also situated 'after' Deconstruction (in Marion's case more so than in Agamben's) makes them attractive as literary instruments, and both theories lend themselves to such a use. In Agamben's case, this has been evident mainly in connection with contemporary works;[12] Marion is lesser known in comparative literary studies. His thoughts on phenomenology are examined primarily by philosophers and theologians. Nonetheless, since Marion's theory deals with event-structures—the basic element of every narrative—I consider his theory very applicable to literary works.

In the following I will use a story by David Mitchell to elaborate how both Agamben's and Marion's theories could be employed for a literary analysis. I will demonstrate how both theorists propose figures and

12 See for example Oliver Ruf, ed. *Ästhetik der Ausschließung. Ausnahmezustände in Geschichte, Theorie, Medien und literarischen Fiktionen*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009. The article by Christian J. Krampe ("Der Autor im Ausnahmezustand. Innen und Außen des Lagers in Chuck Palahniuks *Haunted*". 281–299.) focuses in particular on the figure of the *homo sacer*. The other contributors deal with canonical authors like Kleist, Grabbe, Musil, Doctorow and Büchner. Agamben's theoretical work has also been employed for literary analyses by De Boever who has written two books on this topic: *Literary Sovereignties: The Contemporary Novel and the State of Exception*. New York: Continuum, 2012 and *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Novel*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, in which he discusses how the novel can be considered a camp.

patterns that become very productive for such an analysis, but I will also show at what point these models stop being usable and where they inevitably would fail. It will become evident that what lies at the center of the problem is the question of how weakness and how empowerment are defined by Marion and Agamben respectively and how these definitions must be altered and even broadened in order to use them for interpreting literature. At the end of this chapter I will therefore propose my own terminology that takes Marion's and Agamben's figurations of subjectivity into account, but introduces a more 'neutral' term to describe these subjects.

2.2 David Mitchell's "An Orison of Sonmi~451": The Ascension of the *Homo Sacer*

2.2.1 The Clone as *Homo Sacer*-Figure

David Mitchell's "An Orison of Sonmi~451" is part of the novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004), which consists of six separate stories, each taking place within their own time period (ranging from the 19th century to a far advanced future) and featuring their own narratives and characters. Up until the sixth story, each story's narrative is interrupted at a pivotal moment, thus generating suspense and a sense of urgency. After completing the sixth chapter, which is told in its entirety, the subsequent stories are revisited in reverse order: the fifth is finished, then the fourth, and so on. Although each narrative is 'fragmented,' the text as a whole is held together by various interconnections between the stories—this is crucial to one aspect of my argument, namely that dealing with constructed forms of 'transcendence.'

"An Orison" is the fifth story and it takes place in an unspecific future in a country called 'Nea So Copros.' In this society, technology has advanced to produce clones in the millions. The clones serve as workers for different industrial branches. The main character, Sonmi~451, is employed at a fast food restaurant called 'Papa Song.' There are multiple hints on a linguistic level that point to the fact that the world

in "An Orison" is organized almost exclusively around capitalism and efficiency. In the language of this future, many words are shortened and supposedly 'unnecessary' consonants have disappeared (instead of 'frightened' it is "fritened" ("An Orison" 201), 'night' becomes "nite" (ibid., 198) and 'light' "lite" (ibid., 207)). In addition to this, many objects are only referred to by their brand names: a camera is a "nikon" (ibid., 202); shoes are "nikes" (ibid., 198) and a watch is a "rolex" (ibid., 213). Considering the rather obvious economic mindset of this society, it is significant that the everyday world of Sonmi is nevertheless enriched with religious vocabulary. A chip that is necessary to leave the restaurant—which the clones are not given—is termed "Soul" (ibid., 189); the set of rules the clones have to adhere to are referred to as "Catechisms" (ibid., 196). These religiously inspired terms only serve, however, to cover up economic, biopolitical and profane content. The catechisms keep the workers in line and the absence of a "Soul" imprisons the clones in their underground workspace where the restaurant is located. It appears that these religious terms often conceal ugly truths, and are in some instances even proof of the moral and spiritual decline of Nea So Copros. The following example underlines this. At the end of their twelve-year servitude, the clones are usually awarded with what is called "Xultation" (ibid., 190) (a shortened form of 'exultation'). They are promised they will be transported to their leader's holy ship, so-called "Papa Song's golden ark" (ibid., 190), located in Hawaii, where they are turned into consumers themselves:

> Their collars were gone [...] they waved from a world beyond our lexicon. Boutiques, hairdressers, dineries; green seas, rose skies; wildflowers, rainbows, lace, ponies, cottages, footpaths, butterflies. How we marveled! How happy our sisters looked (ibid., 190).

This rather capitalistic version of an afterlife nevertheless contains common religious notions: it is a sphere that is beyond one's reach where everything is supposedly better and more beautiful. However, during the course of the novel it is revealed that this vision is a lie, a sham to keep the clones in line. In reality, the clones who board the ship are killed and their bodies recycled. Their bodies are made into

nutrition (so-called "Soap" (ibid., 189)) for the next generation of clones.[13] This means that there is never any kind of freedom for them. Even in death they serve an economic purpose.

Sonmi can be considered what Agamben calls a *homo sacer*, which was originally an archaic figure in Roman law:

> The Sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian law, in fact, it is noted that 'if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the plebiscite, it will not be considered homicide.' This is why it is customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred (*Homo Sacer* 71; Agamben quotes here from Pompeius Festus' *On the Significance of Words*).

The *homo sacer* is excluded from human and sacred law at the same time. He suffers from a double exclusion and as a result inhabits a liminal sphere, a third space. Agamben argues that 'sacer' does not mean he is a divine being: "What defines the status of *homo sacer* is therefore not the originary ambivalence of the sacredness that is assumed to belong to him, but rather both the particular character of the double exclusion into which he is taken" (*HS* 82). To this double exclusion Agamben later refers as 'ban.'[14] The ban does not simply exclude subjects as

13 This is a reference to *Soylent Green* (1973), a science-fiction movie directed by Richard Fleischer. The movie ends with the protagonist's horrid discovery that the food that is sold under the name of 'soylent green' is made of dead bodies.

14 Agamben borrows this term from Jean-Luc Nancy: "Taking up Jean-Luc Nancy's suggestion, we shall give the name *ban* (from the old Germanic term that designates both exclusion from the community and the command and insignia of the sovereign) to this potentiality [...] of the law to maintain itself in its own privation, to apply in no longer applying" (*HS* 28). Although Agamben never specifies his reference to Nancy, I believe he draws from "Abandoned Being" in which Nancy elaborates on the connection between abandonment and the law which goes in a similar direction that Agamben proposes: "to be *banished* does not amount to coming under a provision of the law, but rather to coming under the entirety of the law. [...] The law of abandonment requires that the law be applied through its withdrawal" (ibid., 44) (cf. "Abandoned Being" 43f.). Geulen describes the semantics of the German word 'Bann' which the term 'ban' refers to: "Im Ausdruck ‚Bann' hört man förmlich das Moment der Stilllegung und Deaktivierung (wie z.B. in der Formulierung ‚gebannt zuschauen')" (2005: 78).

Agamben writes: "He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable" (*HS* 28). To outline the figure of the *homo sacer* Agamben compares him to another antique figure, that of the *devotus*: in Roman times, a devotee was chosen to be sacrificed to the gods in order to win a battle or a war. If the devotee survived the battle unharmed, a colossus had to be buried in his place, serving as "his double, which takes the place of the missing corpse in a kind of funeral *per imaginem*" (ibid., 97). If this ritual could not be carried out the devotee was condemned to remain "a paradoxical being, who, while seeming to lead a normal life, in fact exists on a threshold that belongs neither to the world of the living nor to the world of the dead: he is a living dead man" (ibid., 99). For Agamben, the *homo sacer* is similar to a surviving devotee—except in the case of the *homo sacer* no colossus can be buried. Hence, the *homo sacer* lacks a releasing ritual or event in order to be 'returned' to the human sphere.

Agamben considers the ban the foundational structure of western politics. Western politics has tried from the beginning to exclude natural life (*zoē*) from the life of the *polis*: "In the classical world [...] simple natural life is excluded from the *polis* in the strict sense" (*HS* 2).[15] However, this determination alone has included natural life by accident; natural life is included by exclusion. A relationship between political life and biological life has been formed, even though it is one of nega-

15 Agamben's use of classical terms in connection with modern problems has been widely criticized and given him the reputation of working ahistorically. Lemke writes on Agamben's use of the term 'life': "Der Gedanke einer Kontinuität zwischen einer Biopolitik in der Antike und der Gegenwart ist jedoch wenig überzeugend. Das ‚Leben' in der Antike und in der Moderne haben kaum mehr als den Namen gemein, und zwar schon allein deshalb, weil ‚Leben' ein spezifisch moderner Begriff ist. [...] Agamben neigt dazu, die historische Differenz zwischen Antike und Gegenwart, Mittelalter und Moderne zu verwischen" (84). In this context it is also significant that Agamben neglects the gender dimension of life. Deuber-Mankowsky notes that Agamben discusses in *Homo Sacer* "weder Gebürtigkeit, noch Geschlechtlichkeit, weder Sexualität, noch das Verhältnis der Geschlechter, weder die heterosexuelle Prägung der symbolischen Ordnung und politischen Kultur noch der Anteil der Frauen an der Reproduktion des Lebens [...]. Der ganze Bereich der Frage der sexuellen Differenz ist [...] aus Agambens Horizont verbannt" (103).

tion. Murray comments on this: "The very split or division between *zoē* and *bíos* produces bare life: that is, the attempt to control or manage 'life'" (2011: 206).[16] *Bare life* is an included version of 'natural' life which is, according to Agamben, produced by the "politicisation of life" (Murray 2011: 206), rather than being an ontological given. [17] To 'manage life' means integrating it in some way into politics, e.g. by defining biological, natural life and by setting out rules about how to treat it, e.g. when does life start, can an embryo be experimented with, should euthanasia be allowed in cases of severe illnesses, etc.? Agamben sees the endeavors to 'manage life' as a key feature of western politics. With proposing the ban as a political structure, Agamben relinquishes the mythos of the social contract introduced by Hobbes.[18] According to Agamben, it is not a contract that determines the relationship between sovereign state and the people, but the ban—the inclusion of natural life in the sphere of politics, or the creation of a double exclusion which generates *bare life*.

16 Zartaloudis underscores this fact by writing that *bare life* is "not a proto-religious or a pre-juridical structure, but an originary political one" (148). Bodenburg employs the very fitting German term 'Setzungsakt' to describe the production of *bare life* of which there is no adequate English translation: "Zutreffend ist in jedem Fall, dass es sich beim nackten Leben nicht um eine vorsymbolische, jeglicher Ordnung vorausgehende Naturtatsache handelt, sondern um den Effekt eines Setzungsakts, dessen Struktur von Ambiguität gekennzeichnet ist, weil das nackte Leben ausgesondert und in dieser Weise in den souveränen Machtraum eingeschlossen wird" (79).

17 *Bare life* is a term that is derived from Walter Benjamin's use of the term in *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*. Benjamin's term "bloßes Leben" refers to the pure existence of life. Benjamin mentions this term only a few times and without giving any clear definition. About the relevance of this essay for Agamben's work De Boever writes: "Walter Benjamin's essay 'Critique of Violence' is a foundational text for Giorgio Agamben's study of sovereign power because it lays bare the link between violence and law that is so important for Agamben's critical project" (2008: 82).

18 Lüdemann argues against Agamben's corollary and claims that the introduction of the ban does not make it necessary to relinquish the concept of the social contract. Lüdemann argues for a combination of both and, thus, for a reevaluation of Hobbes' social contract. She proposes to view the contract *as* ban: "Nicht Vertrag *oder* Bann lautet hier die Alternative, sonders es läßt sich der als Bann verstandene Vertrag hier dem Vertrag im Sinne eines privatrechtlichen Instruments der freien Einigung schon konstituierender Rechtssubjekte gegenüberstellen" (236).

Today, the ban's paradoxical structure has been made accidently visible through the installment of human rights. Human rights, counter-intuitively, demonstrate the dangerous connection between life and politics *par excellence*: "Human rights, in fact, represent first of all the originary figure for the inscription of natural naked life in the political-juridical order of the nation state" (*Means without end* 20). A contemporary example that illustrates the uncomfortable by-products of human rights is the state-less refugee. For Agamben, the source of the problem is the connection between human rights and citizenship: "In the system of the nation-state, so called sacred and inalienable human rights are revealed to be without any protection, precisely when it is no longer possible to conceive of them as rights of the citizens of a state" (*Means without end* 19–20). When one is not a citizen—that is included into a political sphere—one loses the protection of the law, that is, one is abandoned by the law. The refugee is the modern sacred man, the new *homo sacer*: "When their rights are no longer the rights of the citizen, that is when human beings are truly *sacred*, in the sense that this term used to have in the Roman law of the archaic period: doomed to death" (*HS* 22). This also means that the modern *homo sacer* is not necessarily a criminal who is being punished by being ostracized; in fact, Kishik argues that this example makes clear that anyone can be turned into a *homo sacer*: "With a blink of an eye, a flick of a pen, or a press of a button, any 'good citizen' from any 'respected' country [...] can be excluded from the state-run 'protection plan' and thus be exposed to random acts of violence" (18).[19] As a consequence Agamben demands recognition of the refugee as the demarcation of a general problem and asks to "build our political philosophy anew starting from the one and only figure of the refugee" (ibid., 16). The figure of the refugee and his

19 DeCaroli investigates other ancient Roman and Greek texts and comes to the conclusion that the people who were 'banished' were often not punished for a crime, but for the pure possibility of endangering the current order and for potentially creating new laws: "we find banishment pronounced, not against those who have broken the law, but against those who upset the order upon which the law is founded" (66). Referring to Aristoteles DeCaroli calls them 'gods among men,' people that create and bring in new laws, superseding the old order.

fellow *homines sacri*—the camp inhabitant, the *Muselmann*,[20] the refugee, the comatose[21]—are not regrettable 'exceptions,' but products of the ban, that is logical results of the sovereign state.[22] Abandonment by

20 In *Remnants of Auschwitz* Agamben identifies the 'Muselmann' as *homo sacer*. Here, Agamben underscores that not only life, but also death is not allowed to become meaningful in the case of the *homo sacer*: "what defines *Muselmänner* is not so much that their life is no longer life (this kind of degradation holds in a certain sense for all camp inhabitants and is not an entirely new experience) but, rather, that their death is not death. This —that the death of a human being can no longer be called death (not simply that it does not have importance, which is not new, but that it cannot be called by the name 'death')—is the particular horror that the *Muselmann* brings to the camp and that the camp brings to the world" (70). This is clearly inspired by Hanna Arendt's thoughts on this matter who writes in *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft:* "[d]ie Lager dienen nicht nur der Ausrottung von Menschen und der Erniedrigung von Individuen, sondern auch dem ungeheuerlichen Experiment, unter wissenschaftlich exakten Bedingungen Spontanität als menschliche Verhaltensweise abzuschaffen und Menschen in ein Ding zu verwandeln, das unter gleichen Bedingungen sich immer gleich verhalten wird, also etwas, was selbst Tiere nicht sind" (694). "Erst wenn der Mensch aus der Welt der Lebenden so ausgelöscht ist, als ob er nie gelebt hätte, ist er wirklich ermordet" (ibid., 688).

21 In his chapter "Politicizing Death" (*HS* 160–165) Agamben considers a coma patient a *homo sacer*. He refers to the case of Karen Quinlan: "Karen Quinlan's body had, in fact, entered a zone of indetermination in which the words 'life' and 'death' had lost their meaning, and which, at least in this sense, is not unlike the space of exception inhabited by bare life" (ibid., 164).

22 The multitude of *homines sacri* in Agamben's work has been criticized, mainly because it compares the experience of KZ prisoners to those of the every day world, which do not necessarily bear the same political relevance. Geulen terms Agamben's sequence a "bizarre Reihe" and states: "Was Agamben als herrschendes Paradigma erkannt haben will, macht nicht Halt vor den Unterschieden, die man zwischen einem Wissenschaftler, der freiwillig seinen Körper zu medizinischen Untersuchungen bereitstellt, und einem gefoltertem KZ-Häftling gern gewahrt haben möchte" (2005: 114). Lemke joins this criticism by saying: "muss sich seine Analyse den Vorwurf einer unzulässigen Trivialisierung gefallen lassen, wenn ihm Auschwitz als eine Art Lehrbeispiel dient, das sich immer wieder aufs Neue wiederhole, wenn innerhalb des Lebens Zäsuren eingerichtet werden" (78). In a rather polemic fashion Werber takes on this line of argument in a small article with the telling title "Die Normalisierung des Ausnahmefalls. Giorgio Agamben sieht immer und überall Konzentrationslager." From recognizing the concentration camps as an inner matrix, it does not follow that every exception from the law should be seen as an exact replica of a concentration camp. As Agamben suggests, there is a spectrum of different locations that territorialize the state of exceptions or which adhere to the same rules (or lack thereof) as concentration camps. In contrast to these critics there is Dickinson, who tries to give an explanation as to *why* Agamben identifies so many *homines sacri*: "The existence of so many *homines sacri* today merely reiterates Agamben's point that politics is little more than a continuous reenactment of the original 'exclusive inclusion' which renders humanity capable of positing itself as sovereign over its own animality" (73–74). I argue that Agamben so readily ignores the

the law is deeply embedded inside the law and, in fact, not an accident but a necessary element of law. Murray summarizes: "In order for the law to work it must create an 'inside'—what is within the juridical and political process—and what is outside that space. That there is a space beyond the law—i.e. both beyond its protection but also beyond its prosecution [...]—gives the inside of the law meaning" (2010: 63).[23] Thus, abandonment by the law is, in fact, the foundational structure of the law. Since the state takes into account the production of these helpless figures, Agamben views modern politics as essentially biopolitics: "The fundamental categorical pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, zoē/bíos, exclusion/inclusion" (ibid., 8).[24] Seeing bare life not as an exception, but a core structure in western politics, makes the exception a central feature. Thus, he, provocatively, but in line with his argument, claims that

ethical status of subjects in order to reveal a deeper pattern. Deuber-Mankowsky writes on this topic: "Es geht ihm nicht um die ethische Rechtfertigung von Entscheidungen, sondern um die Herausarbeitung der großen, der fundamentalen Zusammenhänge, welche den Zwang zu Entscheidungen über Tod und Leben und zu neuen Definitionen von Lebensanfängen, von unterschiedlichen Arten des Todseins, von leben- und sterbenswertem Leben und mit ihm die Bioethik allererst hervorgebracht haben. Es geht Agamben um die Durchleuchtung einer Kultur, die, so seine These, ihren inneren Zusammenhalt durch die Schaffung von Zonen der Indifferenz zwischen Leben und Tod findet" (95–96).

23 This logic of division, declaring an outside and an inside, is more common in the realm of theology as Dickinson notes: "The realm of signification, or the differentiation between what is considered 'inside' a given political sphere and what is 'outside,' is the act act most traditionally associated with divine intentions. It has been the divine who most typically partitions the realms of existence (even the afterlife) into separate spaces for believers and unbelievers, the chosen and unchosen alike [...] Now, however, this traditionally sacred art of division is presented (or 'revealed') by Agamben as a wholly human by-product" (67).

24 Agamben's interest in biopolitics stems from an engagement with Michel Foucault's work. However, Deuber-Mankowsky notes that their approaches are very different: "Anders als Agamben versteht Foucault Biomacht dezidiert als historisches Phänomen. Ihre Entstehung ist gebunden an die Herausbildung der modernen Wissenschaften" (112). Mills remarks on their differences: "while Foucault's genealogy rejects the search for origins and instead traces the emergence of particular configurations of relations of force, Agamben seeks to illuminate the 'originary' relation of law to life" (60). Mills also points out that Foucault, in *History of Sexuality*, locates the beginning of biopolitics in the 17th century whereas Agamben sees the inclusion of *bare life* into the *polis* as foundation of politics, claiming that "biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception" (*HS* 6; cf. Mills 59f).

the concentration camps of Nazi Germany are the "hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political sphere" (ibid., 166). The exception is for Agamben the expression of a rule. Drawing on Benjamin's famous quote, Agamben identifies the Nazi camps as "the space that is opened up when the state of exception begins to become a rule" (ibid., 168–189; emphasis omitted).[25] Agamben claims, that it is the exception, meaning the *homo sacer* and concentration camps, that makes western politics what it is, outlining a political system determined by figures of death .[26]

The ban is not only the determining structure of the *homo sacer*. Curiously, the double exclusion is also a key characteristic of the most powerful figure in a state—the sovereign. The sovereign belongs to the law and is excluded from it at the same time. He is, as the *homo sacer*, included by exclusion: "The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order" (ibid., 15). This makes them parallel rather than opposed figures:

> Here the structural analogy between the sovereign exception and *sacratio* shows its full sense. At the two extreme limits of the order, the sovereign and *homo sacer* present two symmetrical figures that have the same structure and are correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns (*HS* 84).[27]

25 Walter Benjamin writes in *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (1940): "Die Tradition der Unterdrückten belehrt uns darüber, dass der 'Ausnahmezustand' [sic] in dem wir leben, die Regel ist" (74).

26 Agamben's sole focus on the *homo sacer* and regarding him as the key figure of western politics has been criticized by Lemke who recognizes this as a simplification of politics: "Er [Agamben] legt nahe, dass der Ausnahmezustand nicht nur der Ausgangspunkt der Politik, sondern ihre eigentliche Bestimmung sei. Damit würde sich Politik in der Produktion von *homines sacri* erschöpfen—eine Produktion, die freilich insofern unproduktiv genannt werden muss, als das ‚nackte Leben' nur produziert wird, um unterdrückt und getötet zu werden. [...] Agamben verkennt, dass Biopolitik wesentlich politische Ökonomie des Lebens ist, seine Analyse bleibt im Bann der Souveränitätsmacht und blind für all jene Mechanismen, die unterhalb oder jenseits des Rechts operieren" (80).

27 Agamben also deepens this analogy in the chapter 'Sovereign Body and Sacred Body' where he talks about Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology.* An interesting reading in connection to this topic, that introduces gender into the discussion of sovereignty—which Agamben neglects in his own study—, is provided by Barbara Vinken in "Marie-Antoinette oder Das Ende der Zwei-Körper-

In fact, they are not only parallel figures but one is dependent on the other as the quote above points out. Proof of this is the fact that the *homo sacer* is linked to the sovereign's main power, namely to decide upon the state of exception. According to Carl Schmitt the power to decide is the defining characteristic of the sovereign. Agamben bases his understanding of the sovereign on Schmitt's who draws from Jean Bodin.[28] Schmitt writes on the sovereign's power to decide:

> Die Ordnung muss hergestellt sein, damit die Rechtsordnung einen Sinn hat. Es muß eine normale Situation geschaffen werden, und souverän ist derjenige, der definitiv darüber entscheidet, ob dieser normaler Zustand wirklich herrscht. Alles Recht ist ‚Situationsrecht'. Der Souverän schafft und garantiert die Situation als Ganzes in ihrer Totalität. Er hat das Monopol dieser letzten Entscheidung. Darin liegt das Wesen der staatlichen Souveränität, die also richtigerweise nicht als Zwangs- oder Herrschaftsmonopol, sondern als Entscheidungsmonopol juristisch zu definieren ist (*Politische Theologie* 19).

In a state of exception, [29] as Agamben states in reference to Hanna Arendt, "everything is possible" (*HS* 170).[30] In this situation "the killing of man" is not considered "natural violence but [...] sovereign violence" (ibid., 21), and thus is not considered murder. Killing is neither a crime nor a religious act, but a sovereign act. This means life becomes

Lehre" in which she analyzes how Marie-Antoinette's 'two bodies' are constructed and interpreted by her contemporaries —either for ideological or for defamatory reasons— and how one could argue that Marie-Antoinette is even more firmly located in Christian thought (in particular in connection to love), and, thus, in political thought than any other male sovereign ever could be.

28 Schmitt explains in reference to Jean Bodin: "Das Entscheidende in den Ausführungen Bodins liegt darin, daß er die Erörterung der Beziehungen zwischen Fürst und Ständen auf ein einfaches Entweder-Oder bringt, und zwar dadurch daß er auf den Notfall verweist. Das war das eigentliche Imponierende seiner Definition, die die Souveränität als unteilbare Einheit auffaßte und die Frage nach der Macht im Staat endgültig entschied. Seine wissenschaftliche Leistung und der Grund seines Erfolges liegen also darin, daß er die Dezision in den Souveränitätsbegriff hineingetragen hat" (*Politische Theologie* 15).

29 The state of exception is, according to Agamben, determined by indistinction: "a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other" (*State of exception* 23).

30 Cf. Arendt 697.

bare life in a state of exception. Without the *homo sacer,* the sovereign state would not be able to function, since it is the production of *bare life* that is its main instrument of power: "The inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power. It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power" (*HS* 6; emphasis omitted).

To return to "An Orison," Sonmi is such a *homo sacer* figure, bound by a double exclusion. Her life is *bare life*—neither human, nor sacred. She is part of the socio-political realm, but she does not have the same rights as others—in fact, she never really possessed any rights, since as a clone she is doomed to servitude by birth. In a later scene she is even depicted as killable life. A few doctoral candidates turn her into a human target. Equipped with bows and arrows, they aim for pieces of fruit placed on Sonmi's head, echoing Wilhelm Tell and other Germanic legends that describe an apple-shot [Apfelschuss]: "Boom-Sook [the doctoral candidate] weighted my [Sonmi's] safety against his honor. He balanced the plum on my head and told me to hold very, very still. He counted his ten steps, turned, loaded and took aim" ("An Orison" 223).[31] Sonmi's outsider position *inside* the society of Nea So Copros is most obviously expressed by a spatial restriction. She is not allowed to leave the dome in which the fast food restaurant is located:

> It was a sealed dome about eighty metres across, a dinery owned by Papa Song Corp. Servers spend twelve working years without venturing outside this space, ever. [...] Instead of windows, AdVs [sic; refers to adver-

31 The apple-shot is connected to sovereignty as Koschorke points out. Koschorke explores how in *Wilhelm Tell* belonging to a state—through the concept of 'brotherhood'—is coupled with the act of exclusion. To found a state demands exclusionary action, which is in this case applied to the character called Rösselmann. About this scene in which the priest Rösselmann is discussed to be excluded from their society Koschorke writes: "Überspitzt formuliert: es ist, als hätte Schiller Agamben gelesen. Der erste gesetzgeberische Akt, auf den er sich die Gründer der Nation verständigen läßt, besteht in einem Bann. Das Volk als neuer Souverän, das seinerseits durch die Tyrannis in einem Raum der Rechtslosigkeit gestoßen war und von diesem Außen her sein Gegenrecht begründet, konstituiert sich durch Exklusion" ("Brüderbund und Bann. Das Drama der politischen Inklusion in Schillers *Tell*," 121).

> tisement] decorated the walls. Set into the eastern wall was the dinery elevator; the sole entrance and exit (ibid., 187).

In order to operate the elevator that leads outside, Sonmi would need a chip called 'Soul.' This chip, however, is only available to humans. This specific choice of word—terming this chip 'Soul'—suggests that the clones are viewed as missing something essential which would make them human. However, this choice of words is misleading, since Sonmi suffers not from a metaphysical deficiency, but rather a judicial one—as a clone, she possesses no rights. In Sonmi's case it is apparent that her status has nothing to do with sacredness (as the term *homo sacer* implies); she is less than human and less than divine, she belongs to neither sphere and she has literally been 'produced' to inhabit the realm between human being and machine.

However, as the story progresses, something happens to Sonmi that frees her from her status as a *homo sacer*. An event extricates her from her position as meaningless clone and changes the course of her life:

> First, a voice began speaking inside my head. It alarmed me greatly, until I learnt nobody else heard it; the voice of sentience. [...] Second, my language evolved [...] Third, my own curiosity about Outside increased. [...] Fourth, I suffered alienation (ibid., 205–206).

She experiences her birth as a conscious subject and perceives the world anew with awakened and attentive eyes. Later she is told that when she was an embryo, she had been part of an experiment which caused her 'ascension' (this is how her birth into consciousness is referred to in the novel). Scientists are trying to create 'ascended' clones—clones that are closer to human beings and that possess intellectual powers. However, in Sonmi's case, the experiment was just a *pro forma* experiment and not really supposed to be successful. A doctoral candidate steals the research of a deceased colleague to produce material for his own thesis and presents it as his own work (cf. ibid., 229–230). The experiment is part of a fake project and is only conducted out of duty, to complete the task and to profess it to be his work. Thus, although

there are intentions and motivations at hand, none is directly linked to the outcome. The doctoral candidate, Boom-Sook Kim, only wants to receive a doctoral degree. He even remains unaware of what he has accomplished:

> [The interviewer asks] And Boom-Sook Kim stayed unaware of the furore his Ph.D. had triggered? [Sonmi answers] Only a fool who had never squeezed a pipette or handled a petri-dish in his life could have remained unaware, but Boom-Sook Kim was such a fool (ibid., 230; emphasis omitted).

Sonmi's subjectivity is the result of a lucky accident. When Sonmi's ascension is revealed, everyone tries to use her for their own purposes and agendas, even planning to euthanize her. A compromise is made—she is allowed to educate herself at a university, but must remain under the state's observation. While studying and broadening her mind, Sonmi becomes involved with an underground group of 'abolitionists' who are fervently fighting to free clones from their destitute lives. The government has concocted a plan of its own for Sonmi, however. Her ascension has been used against her. At the end of the story, Sonmi reveals that her whole life after her ascension, while true, was also scripted, a "theatrical production, set up while I was still a server in Papa Song's" (ibid., 363). She has been used as a political puppet for the government and is supposed to serve as an example for the notion that no human being should trust clones: "To make every last pure-blood [human being] in Nea So Copros mistrustful of every last fabricant. [...] To discredit Abolitionism. The whole conspiracy was a resounding success" (ibid., 364). Sonmi becomes—like Agamben's *homo sacer*—a servant enabling the government to enforce and maintain its powers. This means that the life she had led was at no time her own, and was instead always guided and formed by outside forces.

Even though she is apparently drawn back into what Agamben calls the 'sovereign sphere' (a sphere in which everyone can be turned into *bare life* at the sovereign's will) I argue that Sonmi is no longer *homo sac-*

er.[32] In the beginning of Sonmi's story, it is mentioned that one of her fellow workers was also experiencing ascension, attempted to escape, and, as a result, was immediately shot (cf. 200). Compared to this, it is remarkable how Sonmi is treated after she is arrested (for engaging with enemies of the state): she is put on trial in front of a judge, which means that she has become more than a commodity, to be recycled or dismembered when it is no longer useful, or even shot on sight. She has become more than just *bare life*, because she cannot be killed without reason. Thus, the law applies to her (instead of abandoning her) and a ruling must be delivered to determine her fate.

The fact that she has become more than a clone is also supported by other details: Before her arrest and her trial she worked actively on creating rights for herself and other clones. She has written what she calls 'Declarations,' a declaration of rights for clones and a rulebook on how to deal with ascension. This seems to go beyond the government's expectation. At the trial, the persecutors try to dismiss this document, claiming it has been written by a human being and could not possibly be composed by a clone: "Many xpert [sic] witnesses at your trial denied *Declarations* was the work of a fabricant, ascended or otherwise, and maintained it was ghosted by a pure-blood Abolitionist" (ibid., 362). Sonmi produces an excess that cannot be utilized in the government's plan. Unfortunately for the government, her manifesto has developed a life of its own:

> Every school child in Nea So Copros knows my twelve 'blasphemies' now. My guards tell me there is even talk of a State-wide 'Vigilance Day' against fabricants who show signs of the *Declarations*. My ideas have been reproduces a billionfold. [...] I quote Seneca's warning to Nero: No matter how many of us you kill, you will never kill your successor (ibid., 365).

32 "The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life—that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed—is the life that has been captured in this sphere" (*HS* 83; emphasis omitted).

She becomes a political figure, a revolutionary and later even a martyr (ibid., 364), even though she was intended (by the government) to be a warning to humanity, what would happen if clones would not be kept in line. A second detail underscores the threat she poses to her government. On her flight into freedom she has changed her face in order to look more human, but when the trial approaches, the government forces her to undergo a surgery that restores her old face: "Unanimity [the governmental force] refaced me for my peaktime courtroom appearances. The star actress had to look the part" (ibid., 337). As the passage reveals, she has ceased to be an 'authentic' clone; this the government unwittingly acknowledges by forcing her to change her appearance.

After her death, it becomes obvious that she has not only ceased to be a *homo sacer* and turned into a political being, but has undergone an even bigger transformation. In the story following "An Orison," titled "Sloosha's Crossin an' Ev'rythin' After" which takes place in an even further removed future, Sonmi has become a god:

> Valleysmen only had one god an' [sic] her name it was Sonmi. [...] Sonmi helped sick'uns [sic], fixed busted luck, an' [sic] when a truesome [sic] 'n'civ'lized [sic] Valleysman died she'd take his soul an' [sic] lead it back into a womb somewhere in the Valleys (ibid., 255).

Clearly, Somni has transcended the political realm and entered a religious sphere. In a way, Sonmi has attained transcendence and reached a 'beyond,' namely through the novel's structure. Outside her own story and time, she is considered a god. Her ascension has truly shifted her position. She has surmounted her limitations and restrictions; a clone, a figure originally deemed to be socially and existentially meaningless, has become the origin of a new belief system.

In that respect, her status must be considered much closer to the sovereign's, not because she has become a god, but because her death reveals an excess. This becomes most evident when comparing *homo sacer*'s death to that of the sovereign. Both sovereign and *homo sacer* can-

not die a 'normal' death. *Homo sacer*'s death means nothing and is not even registered, whereas the sovereign's death means more than can be dealt with:

> We know that the killing of *homo sacer* does not constitute homicide [...] Accordingly, there is no juridico-political order [...] in which the killing of the sovereign is classified simply as an act of homicide. Instead it constitutes a special crime [...] It does not matter, from our perspective, that the killing of *homo sacer* can be considered less than homicide, and the killing of the sovereign as more than homicide; what is essential is that in neither case does the killing of a man constitute an offense of homicide (*HS* 102).[33]

Agamben analyzes Ernst Kantorowicz' *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, R. E. Gisey's *The Royal Funeral Ceremony in Renaissance France* and Elias Bickermann's *Die römische Kaiserapotheose*. All these studies deal with the curious fact that when a king dies, he appears to leave behind an 'excess.' The king possesses two bodies, his natural body and what Jean Bodin has identified as "the perpetual nature of sovereignty, which allows the royal dignitas to survive the physical person of its bearer (Le Roi ne meurt jamais, 'The King never dies')" (ibid., 92). This is the reason why the king is buried twice, first his natural body and afterwards a wax effigy of the king. Kantorowicz and Gisey see this ritual influenced by Christian theology; the body of Jesus might die, but never his holy essence. Agamben, however, by drawing on Bickermann, sees a distinct biopolitical foundation for this ritual and furthermore a connection to the *homo sacer*: "What unites the surviving devotee, homo sacer, and the sovereign in one single paradigm is that in each case we find ourselves confronted

33 Zartadoulis sums up Agamben's analysis as follows: "The King, in this mythological sense, never dies and it could also be said in parallel that *homo sacer*, in this sense, never dies a 'proper' death (neither a mere death, a passing away, nor a homicide nor a sacrifice). The King can be killed physically, though he cannot be killed by a simple act of homicide (instead, juridically, it constitutes a special crime), but his absolute power never dies and cannot be sacrificed (for instance, juridically speaking the sovereign can only be tried under special circumstances and procedures and not through a normal trial)" (153).

with a bare life that has been separated from its context and that, so to speak surviving its death, is for this very reason incompatible with the human world" (ibid., 100). Sonmi is a sovereign, because like him (and the *homo sacer*), she is in a double capture in between the human and the sacred sphere, but unlike the *homo sacer* her death reveals an excess that cannot be contained.

The notion of an ascended subjectivity, having shifted from *homo sacer* to a human being, martyr, god and even sovereign figure does not fit into Agamben's conceptual system. The *homo sacer* is a crucial element of the sovereign nation-state in Agamben's view, since he believes the modern state is founded on these so-called 'exceptions.' To overcome the *homo sacer* would mean overcoming the structure of sovereignty.[34] However, Agamben never suggests how to solve this problem in political terms. Geulen notes that he merely describes and analyzes the problem rather than providing solutions: "Rather than leading the exodus from sovereignty, Agamben has enlarged the terrain and shed light on previously unrecognized zones of political theory and practice" (2006: 374). Other critics have read Agamben in a similar way, for example Weiß, who notes: "How to overcome the 'paradigm of modernity' and the 'Camp,' Agamben does not know. Because of Agamben's premises it seems unlikely to identify or to find such a concrete loophole" (141).[35] Schütz similarly sees Agamben as basically describing a dead end[36]: "once the division between status and life has inscribed itself, the possibility of becoming again—of teaching ourselves to become again—*homines non sacri* has shut down behind us" (128–129).[37]

34 Laclau comments on this: "We are not told anything about what a movement out of the paradox of sovereignty and 'towards a politics freed from every ban' [*HS* 59] would imply. But we do not need to be told: the formulation of the problem already involves its own answer. To be beyond any ban and any sovereignty means, simply, to be beyond politics" (22).

35 "Wie man dem ‚Paradigma der Moderne', wie man dem ‚Lager' entkommen könnte, weiß Agamben nicht. Von seinen Prämissen aus scheint es einen solchen konkreten Ausweg nicht geben zu können" (transl. by N. F.).

36 A very critical view of Agamben's theory of the *homo sacer* is provided by Ernesto Laclau who claims Agamben's philosophy is "[p]olitical nihilism" (22).

37 Anton Schütz regards this as an inherent problem of the nature of law: "No way leads back to a space without law—and therefore without abandon and bare life—back to the *homo non sacer*" (126).

In "An Orison," however, the government fails in keeping Sonmi reduced to *bare life*; she cannot be killed without a trial and she cannot be held back from entering the religious realm. The government has lost its grip on her, unwittingly helping her not only to reintegrate into spheres she was never even part of (the human and the sacred sphere), but unable to stop her from transcending both spheres and becoming an excessive subject. She is catapulted from her status as a *homo sacer* and becomes human being and god at the same time. Sonmi has not only left her captivity; strictly speaking, it is her very captivity as a clone that has allowed her to 'dislocate' or 'catapult' herself to a higher level. Her status as *homo sacer* has, in a way, 'prepared' her to become all that she later is. Every single achievement is linked to the fact that she is a clone. The fact that the law registers her as a subject is only meaningful to a clone. Thus, even her execution can be seen as a 'success,' since before she was determined to be executed either way—without a ruling or even a reason. The fact that her position as a *homo sacer* conditions her later success removes her further away from Agamben's concept. In fact, to hark back to one of Agamben's examples, it is as if Sonmi is a surviving devotee who is offered a releasing event—similar to the burial of the colossus. Because this clearly goes beyond Agamben's theory, I find it necessary to introduce a theory that deals with events of such a life-changing nature and which also turns a restriction into a positive trigger. Sonmi's sudden turning into a subject through an unexpected event fits very well into Jean-Luc Marion's theory, which will be outlined in the following.

2.2.2 The Event as Gift

As a preliminary remark it is necessary to comment on Marion's and Derrida's use of the terms 'gift,' 'event' and 'phenomenon,' before both their concepts of the gift are presented in detail. For this, some of their principles will be delineated at this point, but they will be discussed in more detail throughout the chapter.

Marion and Derrida both deal in their theoretical texts that are relevant for this dissertation with one phenomenon, namely the gift, and they both perceive it as an event rather than an object. The reasons for this are different with each of these philosophers: in Marion's case this can be explained by Marion's understanding of phenomenology and in Derrida's it must be explained by his view of western metaphysics in general. In phenomenology, Marion's area of expertise, the gift 'happens' to us, thus, it takes on the form of an event. One can simply speak of the gift *being* an event. Miller explains:

> in metaphysics, gifts are objects; in phenomenology, gifts are 'occasions' or 'happenings'. Here, the register of the gift shifts from thing to event. [...] Gifts are first and foremost the event of their being given. Posterior identifications of gift-objects, givees [sic], and givers may follow with some justification from the event, but they are not themselves constitutive of that event (Miller 80). [38]

In Marion's case, this makes all phenomena events, of which the gift is the phenomenon *par excellence*. To summarize, one could say that Marion deals foremost with phenomena, however, he describes them as coming across *as* events, of which the prime example is the gift. Derrida has a slightly different approach. He considers the gift an event, because both are defined as singular phenomena. The singularity of the gift is its main feature and this is also valid for the event. However, this demand for singularity is not only characteristic of the gift and the event, but, in Derrida's view, representative of multiple phenomena that all demand some form of singularity or priority. The notion

38 Derrida and Marion both think of the gift as an event. Marion defines the event in *In Excess* as follows: "(a) They cannot be repeated identically and reveal themselves in this way precisely identical to themselves alone: unrepeatability, thus irreversibility. (b) They cannot be accorded [se voir assigner] a unique cause or an exhaustive explanation, but demand an indefinite number of them [...]. (c) They cannot be foreseen, since their partial causes not only remain insufficient but are only discovered once the fact of their effect has been accomplished" (36). Similar to this, Derrida explains the conditions of an event in "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event": "One of the characteristics of the event is that not only does it come about as something unforeseeable, not only does it disrupt the ordinary course of history, but it is also absolutely singular" (446).

of singularity underlies many philosophical concepts (origin, authenticity, truth) so that Derrida recognizes singularity and hierarchy as prevalent concepts in western thought. As a matter of fact this is also the main issue that Derrida has with metaphysics: Derrida denies the idea of such singular phenomena completely, instead he regards every phenomenon as conditioned by other elements.

In this dissertation, and in particular in this chapter, the terms phenomenon, gift and event are used more or less synonymously, not because they are in fact the same thing, but rather because they share main structures that Marion explains in phenomenological terms and Derrida in context of Deconstruction. In addition, I draw on different publications by Marion and Derrida in which the focus is sometimes more on the gift, the event or the phenomenon. However, I will privilege the term 'event,' since this term becomes crucial for the analysis of the novels.

Derrida and the Gift

Derrida is critical of the idea that a singular event exists.[39] This is what drives his critique against Marcel Mauss's *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1954). In *Given Time* he states: "For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt" (*Given Time* 12). Derrida points out the calculative strategy intrinsic to every form of gift. He claims that the gift is not a singular phenomenon, but rather embedded in the structure of

39 Dooley explains in reference to Marion's project, that the idea of an unconditioned event goes back to Friedrich Nietzsche. See Mark Dooley. "Marion's Ambition of Transcendence." *Givenness and God. Questions of Jean-Luc Marion*. Eds. Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy. New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2005. 190-198. Nietzsche notes in *Der Wille zur Macht*: "Man möchte wissen, wie die Dinge an sich beschaffen sind: aber siehe da, es gibt keine Dinge *an sich*! Gesetzt aber sogar, es *gäbe* ein An-sich, ein Unbedingtes, so könnte es eben darum *nicht erkannt werden*! Etwas Unbedingtes kann nicht erkannt werden: sonst wäre es eben *nicht* unbedingt. [...] Erkennen heißt, sich in Bedingung setzen zu etwas'" (262).

economy. For Derrida, economy is characterized by its circular, "odyssean" (ibid., 7) structure.[40] In opposition to this, a gift has to be located outside this circular structure:

> It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure. If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic* (ibid., 7).[41]

However, the gift cannot remain aneconomic, because it is constantly drawn into the circle of economy. Derrida explains how this becomes evident in the grammatical structure of the verb 'to give':

> Let us suppose, then, an intention-to-give: Some 'one' wants or desires to give. Our common language or logic will cause us to hear the interlace of this already complex formula as incomplete. We would tend to complete it by saying 'some >one<' (A) intends-to-give B to C, some 'one' intends to give or gives 'something' to 'someone other'. [...] These three elements, identical to themselves or on a way to identification with themselves, look like what is presupposed by every gift event (ibid., 11).

The three elements—giver, the act of giving, and receiver of that gift—are vital to the structure of gift giving, and each anticipates the next step in the process of giving a gift. At the end of this process, the receiver is expected to give a gift of his own, in order to thank the giver. Through this expectation, the gift turns into a trade. The most basic condition, the gift's threefold structure, is revealed to be exactly the one

40 Gernaliszick claims in *Kredit und Kultur: Ökonomie und Geldbegriff bei Jacques Derrida und in der amerikanischen Literaturtheorie der Postmoderne* that economy and language are treated in a similar way in Derrida's theory: "In seiner Theorie der Dekonstruktion setzt Jacques Derrida Schrift und Geld gleich: Schrift und Geld sind materielle Markierungen und folgen gleichen Regeln. Sprache und Kommunikation korrelieren mit der Geldwirtschaft. Sprachsystem und Geldwirtschaft werden von Fiktionalität und Konventionalität—des Sinns oder der Werte—bestimmt" (1).

41 Mauss would not object to the circular structure Derrida describes *per se,* but Mauss makes an effort to point out that he regards the gift a phenomena that *presupposes* economy, not one that stands in contradiction to it.

condition that makes the gift impossible from the start. Reciprocated with a counter gift, the gift enters the economic realm and becomes a mere trade object. Horner sums this up as follows: "Once there are 'strings attached,' what is given is no longer a gift, but a sign of something else. Perhaps it is a bribe. Perhaps it is like a contract, binding me in debt once accepted" (2001: 1).

In light of these remarks, is it even possible to speak of a 'true' gift? Can the gift ever exist in phenomenological terms, or is it condemned to remain a concept that can never find its true expression in reality? Derrida argues that for a true gift to appear, the circular structure of economy would have to be broken, for example by making it impossible for one of the three elements to be activated. The subject is one of the main 'problems' of the gift, since it invites economics in—in the form of expectation, calculation and return.[42] Derrida concludes:

> For there to be a gift, *it is necessary* [il faut] that the donee not give back, amortize, reimburse, acquit himself, enter into a contract, and that he never have contracted a debt. [...] It is thus necessary, at the limit, that he not *recognize* the gift as gift. If he recognizes it *as* gift, if the gift *appears to him as such*, if the present is present to him *as present*, this simple recognition suffices to annul the gift (ibid., 13).

Derrida proposes an impossible scenario: He posits a definition of a gift that conditions a subject which itself defies common understandings of subjectivity. Derrida demands that the subject commonly considered as self, control-center, origin and master of its actions be reconceptualized. To be prohibited from participating in the economic circle, the subject must be completely unaware of its doings and not at all the master of its actions. This makes the subject redundant: "The

42 Derrida's critical stance towards the concept of the subject is a key element of this general critique of metaphysics and what Derrida calls 'logocentrism.' In the interview, "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject," Derrida states that "[t]he subject is a fable" (264) and later points out what is relevant for this context, "the subject is also a principle of calculability" (ibid., 272).

question of the gift should therefore seek its place before any relation to the subject, before any conscious or unconscious relation to self of the subject" (*Given Time* 24).

Marion and the Gift

Marion deems Derrida's conditions for an impossible gift—that overturns major tenets of metaphysical thought—not a stumbling block but the blueprint for his notion of a possible gift.[43] In order to explain Marion's thoughts on the gift it is necessary to introduce Marion's phenomenological project first, since this lays the foundation for the design of the gift.

The phenomenon in Marion's philosophy is regarded as something new and unexpected. Marion shares this view with other contemporary phenomenologists since 1980, as Gondek and Tengelyi explain: "Wir können feststellen, dass die zeitgenössischen Phänomenologen in Frankreich das Phänomen als ein Ereignis bestimmen, in dem etwas Neues ins Bewusstsein einbricht" (39; emphasis omitted). Accordingly, the phenomenon in Marion's view has absolute priority and is not bound to any subject, horizon or cause.[44] With this assumption, Marion distinctively rejects the traditional view of phenomena, formulated by Immanuel Kant and later reworked and extended by Edmund Husserl. Marion, in fact, criticizes their views of the phenomenon, claiming that in Kant's and Husserl's body of work, phenomena "only attain the rank of objects; their phenomenality thus remains borrowed,

43 Marion writes: "In effect, the so-called 'conditions for the impossibility of the gift' (no givee [sic], no giver, no given object) would become precisely the conditions for the possibility of its reduction to and for pure givenness by triple *epokhé* of the transcendent conditions of the economic exchange. The objection itself would open onto the response: the gift is reduced to givenness and givenness to itself once the givee [sic], the giver and the objectivity of the gift are bracketed, thereby detaching the gift from economy and manifesting it according to givennes purified of all cause" (*BG* 84). Mackinlay adds: "Marion agrees that the impossible can never be objectively present, but argues that it can nevertheless be given, although only as dazzling and overwhelming excess, and not in a way that can be comprehended and grasped by determinate concepts" (9).

44 Horner notes: "In Marion's view, phenomenality is ultimately determined for Husserl—as for Kant—by two basic conditions of possibility for experience: a delimiting horizon against which the phenomenon can be contextualized, and a subject without whom no phenomenon can appear" (2005: 109).

as derived from the intentionality and from the intuition that we confer on them" (*In Excess* 30). In contrast to this, Marion attempts to "treat phenomena as phenomenality, without the kind of assumption [...] that has traditionally framed them" (Leask 183).[45]

The phenomenon's appearance stems from 'givenness' itself. Horner explains that this philosophical concept refers to the given world around us: "If something is a given, then it is assumed, it is already there, or it is simply what presents itself" (2001: 3). The fact that the given presents *itself* is crucial to Marion who writes "the origin of givenness remains the 'self' of the phenomenon, with no other principle or origin besides itself" (*Being Given* 20). The phenomenon becomes the first principle of Marion's phenomenology; nothing precedes, defines or manipulates it; it comes first, without any conditions attached to it. With this, Marion deactivates the structure of 'reason' that he sees prevalent in metaphysical thought and a key factor of economic processes. About the logic of reason Marion writes critically: "In principle, nothing has the right to exempt itself from the demand of reason. Every pronouncement, every action, every event, every fact, every object, and every being must furnish a response to the question that asks why?" ("Reason of the Gift" 108). In contrast to this, Marion's proposed phenomenon is "born free of sufficient reason" (ibid., 117), "without having to render reason for itself" (ibid., 113), unless "it is said that the real reason for appearing [...] consists in not having a reason" (ibid., 130). Mackinlay writes that "rather than events being dependent on a cause, he [Marion] presents them as phenomenological facts that have priority over any cause, and are even uncaused" (2005: 169). Even more, by eliminating causality, phenomena attain an ethical right by themselves as Marion elucidates when talking about the phenomenon

45 Marion refers here to Husserl's concept of the horizon. Husserl writes on the horizon: "Jeder hypothetische Ansatz des praktischen Lebens und der Erfahrungswissenschaft bezieht sich auf diesen wandelbaren, aber immer mitgesetzten Horizont, durch den die Thesis der Welt ihren wesentlichen Sinn erhält" (102). Marion summarizes Husserl's concept of the horizon and its consequence on the phenomenon as follows: "Every intuition, in order to give within certain de facto 'boundaries,' must first be inscribed de jure with the 'limits' (Grenze) of a horizon, just as no intentional aim at an object, signification, or essence can be carried out outside a horizon" (*BG* 185; emphasis omitted).

par excellence, the gift: "The gift is never wrong, because it never does wrong. Never being wrong, it is always right (literally, has reason). Therefore, it delivers its reason at the same time as itself" ("Reason of the Gift" 133).

Mackinlay points out that to privilege givenness takes away power from the subject: "Assigning primacy to givenness in this way means seeing phenomena as given rather than as in any way constituted, and excluding any suggestion of phenomena appearing under conditions imposed on them by a subject" (2010: 10). This means that Marion sees the role of the subject differently from how it is described by Descartes or Husserl. Descartes proposes a self-installing, self-assuring and self-conscious subject.[46] He views the subject, the *ego*, as center of human agency, providing the "ground of all knowledge" (Gschwandtner 187).[47] Marion criticizes the centrality of Descartes' *ego* and "its obsession with presence and permanence" (ibid., 191) which are aspects that have been criticized by Derrida and other poststructuralist thinkers as well. Marion is also opposed to Husserl's understanding of the subject since Husserl, according to Marion, limits the phenomenon by reducing it to the 'intentional act' of the subject. Husserl argues in *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* that every object appears only in reference to the subject who directs its attention towards it: "Sinneseinheiten setzen [...] sinngebendes Bewußtsein voraus" (120). For Gondek and Tengelyi the critique of Husserl's notion of intention is typical of philosophers who belong to what they termed 'New phenomenology in France.' Gondek

46 Marion has intensely studied Descartes and has written the following books on this topic: *Descartes' Grey Ontology: Cartesian Science and Aristotelian Thought in the* Regulae. 1975. South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 2008; *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes*. Paris: P.U.F, 1981. *On Descartes' Metaphysical Prism: The Constitution and the Limits of Onto-theo-logy in Cartesian Thought.* 1986. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999; *Cartesian Questions: Method and Metaphysics.* 1991. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999; *Sur la pensée passive de Descartes*. Paris: P.U.F, 2013.

47 Gschwandtner in *Reading Jean-Luc Marion. Exceeding Metaphysics* explains how in Marion's reading of Descartes his own notion of the subjectivity concept is foreshadowed, showing how Marion tries to find traces in Descartes' writing that hint to a more passive subject or as Gschwandtner puts it, how Marion reads Descartes in a "phenomenological fashion" (199).

and Tengelyi argue that these new phenomenologists attempt to find "einen Zugang zu den Sinnbeständen und Sinnregungen der Welt [...], ohne diese Sinngebilde auf eine Sinngebung durch das intentionale Bewusstsein zurückzuführen" (23).[48]

In accordance to Gondek's and Tengelyi's description, Marion proposes a subject that stands in contrast to both Descartes and Husserl. The main difference being that his subject is not an active being, but solely a receiving one which he terms *receiver*. [49] The *receiver* is far less central and self-controlled than the subject in Husserl's or Descartes' theories. The most obvious difference is that the *receiver* does not determine the object/phenomenon by looking at it, on the contrary, the *receiver* is determined by the phenomenon, since it is the phenomenon that gives the *receiver* his or her subjectivity. At first Marion describes how the *receiver* is reduced to a 'screen,' to a passive material that becomes necessary for the phenomenon to appear:

> we [...] no longer decide the visibility of the phenomenon. Our initiative is limited to remaining ready to receive the shock of its anamorphosis [...] This powerlessness to stage the phenomenon, which compels us to await it and be vigilant, can be understood as our *abandoning the decisive role* in appearing to the phenomenon itself [emphasis added] (ibid., 132).

The *receiver* becomes a witness and crucial to the event, since he or she makes the event appear in the first place. Without the waiting *receiver*, it would not be possible for the phenomenon to appear.

> The receiver [...] transforms givenness into manifestation, or more exactly, he lets what gives itself through intuition show itself. In receiving what gives itself, he in turn gives it to show itself—he gives it form, its first form (ibid., 264).

48 Mackinlay sees this critically: "However, in many instances this dethroning seems to be accomplished simply by enthroning a new sovereign rather than by overturning the dominion of sovereignty as such" (2005: 172).

49 Mackinlay presents in *Interpreting Excess* the idea that the receiving subject must be necessarily more active than Marion outlines it to be. He argues that in order to receive the phenomenon there has to be some sort of hermeneutic process (cf. 2).

Although the phenomenon operates independently, it needs the *receiver* as the form-giving element: "The response is what makes the call visible. [...] The call must be understood, received, heard, and accepted; otherwise it remains vain and empty" (Gschwandtner 215). Thus, the *receiver* appears to retain some form of limited creatorship, as Carlson writes: "As the one who (passively, in all humility) receives, I am also the one who (actively, productively) reveals—and indeed saves or creates" (169). The power and priority of the phenomenon is thusly bound to the *receiver*. However, the *receiver* does not remain empty-handed after this process, but is, like the phenomenon, manifested through this encounter. The subject receives not only a gift, but the ultimate gift, namely his or her subjectivity: "I receive *my self* from the call [of the gift] that gives me to myself before giving me anything whatsoever" (*BG* 269).[50] The *receiver* is not located in a nominative position as this has been the case with Descartes or Husserl, instead he or she is bound to a dative position:

> The pure and simple shock (*Anstoss*) of the summons identifies the I only by transforming it without delay into a me "to whom." The passage from the nominative to the objective cases (accusative, dative) thus inverts the hierarchy of the metaphysical categories (ibid., 268).

Before the subject comes across the event, it is not yet a subject. Marion contends that the appearance of phenomena is not constituted by a subject's intention, but by what he calls 'counter-intentionality' or 'counter-experience' (a structure that has been put forward in phenomenology since the 1960s by thinkers like Merleau-Ponty, Henry, Lévinas and Ricoeur).[51] Carlson explains this term as follows:

50 Zima points out the ambiguity of the term 'subject': "Subjekt ist, etymologisch betrachtet, ein zweideutiges Wort, das sowohl Zugrundeliegendes (hypokeímon, subiectun) als auch Unterworfenes (subiectus = untergeben) bedeutet" (2000: 3). In Marion's case the subject is clearly the latter, since his subject is a subjected being.

51 See Gondek, Hans-Dieter und László Tengelyi. *Neue Phänomenologie in Frankreich*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011.

> Marion's conception [...] of the saturated phenomenon [this is how Marion calls the gift and other phenomena *par excellence*] is based in a radical reversal of intentionality, inspired largely by Emmanuel Lévinas, according to which it is not the active, nominative subject of consciousness and language who sets the conditions under which the phenomenon appears, but much rather the unconditional and irreducible givenness of the phenomenon that first gives birth to a radically passive, vocative, and dative "subject" (155).[52]

The event is, thus, not controlled by a subject, but instead imposes itself as a forceful effect on the subject.[53] As Carlson points out, Marion is certainly inspired by Lévinas who likewise argues against the centrality of the subject and demands instead the 'Other' to be seen as 'first principle': "The primary phenomenon, therefore, is the emergence of the other, who emerges by breaking my horizon" (Peukert 159). What Lévinas attributes to the 'Other' can be related to the gift as Marion describes it. Both the gift in Marion's theory and the Other in Lévinas' theory are conditional for the subject to appear.[54] However, where Lévinas sees a transcendent power reflected in the face of the Other,

52 A problem of traditional philosophy that Marion tries to overcome concerns alterity. In Husserl's philosophy the Other is reduced to just another object that is constituted by the subject perceiving the Other. Mackinlay elaborates on this issue: "A unifying theme running through these critiques [against Husserl and Heidegger] is a concern for otherness (alterity) or transcendence. After Descartes identifies the *ego cogito* as the foundation for all knowledge, anything that transcends our own consciousness can be understood only in relation to that consciousness, which is its ground. Thus, what is other is no longer understood in terms of its otherness, but rather as more of the same. From Descartes onward, Western thought is haunted by this failure to conceive otherness as alterity, reducing it to the same" (2010: 8).

53 This is also the reason why the gift/event is linked to anonymous sources as Gschwandtner explains: "Until the response has happened, it [the call] remains anonymous. If I knew beforehand who or what was calling me (Being, God, the other, life), I would no longer be devoted but in control. There would be a dialogue instead of a radical interruption and passivity" (217). The gift/event must be anonymous, otherwise the reaction of the *receiver* would be influenced in some way and the *receiver* would expect the gift and, thus, determine the gift.

54 Lévinas writes on the figure of the 'Other' in *Totality and Infinity*: "But the other absolutely other—the Other —does not limit the freedom of the same [which refers to the 'I', the 'me', N.F.]; calling it to responsibility, it founds it and justifies it" (197).

Marion insists on the givenness of the banal world.[55] This is the main difference between the two thinkers. Marion tries to distance himself from a theological argument. A gift, to Marion, could be anything, even a common object, since Marion does not presuppose that there is any transcendence inherent in it. Transcendence is created by the context in which these banal objects arrive at the subject—that is, without intention, as if from 'nowhere.'

Next to an alteration of subjectivity, for Marion excess is a central aspect. It is the key to extricate the gift from the economic circle.[56] An excessive gift cannot be reciprocated, thus it brings the three-fold structure of the gift out of balance. In addition, the concept of excess breaks with metaphysical assumptions, particularly that of self-identity: "This principle [the principle of identity] supposes that nothing can be, at the same moment and in the same respect, other than itself" ("Reason of the Gift" 123). However, this is precisely what Marion is arguing for,

55 For Lévinas, language is the stage where this confrontation between Other and self occurs. Lévinas notes that "discourse relates with what remains essentially transcendent [the Other, N.F.]" (*Totality* 195). The Other 'calls' me into being, calls me to be responsible. Lévinas recognizes in language the word of God that manifests itself in the confrontation with the Other who he sees as a transcendent being: "The Other remains infinitively transcendent, infinitively foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us, whose virtualities are inscribed in our nature and developed by our existence" (*Totality* 194). The focus on language makes Lévinas' theory highly situative; it is an ever-changing process and positioning between self and Other that evokes the call of responsibility again and again in different variations. Although, Marion also employs the term 'call,' it contains no inherent linguistic determination, since Marion refers to the call of 'givenness.' The potentiality of the gift is not seen as a transcendent exterior, but in 'givenness' itself, in the banal world.

56 Excess is also an aspect Derrida talks about when thinking about a possible gift, referring to excess as 'madness' and opposing it to reason. Reason can be understood in the sense of 'reasonable, rational, logical' or as 'cause.' With the blending of these two connotations of reason, Derrida implies that 'madness' is located outside the economic and rational realm and may be without cause. Since being 'without cause' is one of Derrida's prerequisites of the gift, one can assume that a possible gift is necessarily one that is 'mad,' which suggest an excessiveness found for example in the 'potlatch' (cf. Mauss *The Gift* 8). Bernhard Waldenfels writes on this topic: "Wenn es ein Geben gibt, dass sich dem Tauschgesetz entzieht, so nur als ein anomales Geben, das die jeweilige Ordnung überschreitet. Schenken als emphatische Form wäre der Überschuß des Gebens über das Gegebene hinaus" (399; emphasis omitted).

a gift becoming something other than itself, surpassing its own status as banal object and attaining more meaning. In fact, according to Marion, it is precisely this excess that determines the structure of the given:

> That the given gives not only itself, but also a given other than itself, implies the opening of an uncontrollable excess, growth [...] Simply put, here the given always and necessarily *gives something other than itself*, and thus more than itself; it proves to be uncontrollable and inexhaustible, irrepressible and impossible (in other words it makes possible the impossible), *having neither master or god* [emphasis added] (*BG* 118).

Marion's example for this kind of excess is fatherhood, in which the child itself is given the gift of life and itself presents a gift to his father. The child is given pure excess—something it can never reciprocate; it can never give back to his father what it has been given. To his father, however, the child is a gift, too, which "brings about a possibility [...] whose future [...] cannot be foreseen, nor deduced from causes, nor anticipated, but must be waited for" ("Reason of the Gift" 118). The seed the father gives becomes more; what is given remains not the same.

Marion's excess means an excess of intuition. Following Kant, to be able to grasp the world, structuring concepts are needed; one has to be 'prepared' for what one sees. Horner explains this in reference to Kant as follows: "we do not know things as they are in themselves, but only as they appear to us by way of the faculties of the mind" (2005: 20). In Kant's view intuition remains 'blind' without concepts that structure it: "Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer, Anschauungen ohne Begriffe blind" (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft* B 75). Marion, however, is precisely interested in phenomena that resist this line of argument and that instead expose an excess of intuition that make any categorization impossible. Marion terms these phenomena 'saturated.' These saturated phenomena should not be misunderstood as uncommon or special phenomena. Marion underscores that these phenomena are 'common.' Gondek and Tengelyi explain: "Den zeitgenössischen Phänomenologen geht es eindeutig darum, aus den Vorstößen der Vorgängergeneration Konse-

quenzen zu ziehen, die ausdrücklich die Normalform der Phänomene betreffen. Es werden nicht mehr nur paradoxe Phänomene, Hyperphänomene oder Nichtphänomene phänomenologisch erfasst und erörtert, sondern es wird eine Umwandlung des Phänomenbegriffs selbst angestrebt" (25). Mackinlay agrees with this, writing: "saturation should [...] be regarded as the normal way in which *all* phenomena appear. [...] saturation should no longer be understood as a rare exception to 'ordinary' phenomenality; instead 'poor' and 'common law' phenomena (such as objects) should be seen as unusual exceptions to the norm of saturated phenomena" (2010: 216–217). Saturated phenomena cause a failure of comprehension:[57]

> confronted with the saturated phenomenon, the I cannot not see it, but it cannot any longer gaze at it as its mere object. It has the eye to see but not to keep it. [...] it does not see it clearly and precisely as such since its excess renders it irregardable and difficult to master. The intuition of the phenomenon is nevertheless seen, but as blurred by the too narrow aperture, the too short lens, the too cramped frame, that receives it—or rather that cannot receive it as such (*BG* 215).[58]

The eye (or the 'I') is too limited to be able to process what it has seen; the receiving end is always lacking and proven to be inadequate in contrast to what is given to it. Even though Marion considers Kant's categories limited when it comes to the relation between intuition and concept, he views Kant's "aesthetic idea" as an example of a saturated phenomenon. Kant defines the aesthetic idea in the following fashion: "Unter einer ästhetischen Idee aber verstehe ich diejenige Vorstellung

57 Marion outlines four types of saturated phenomena: event, idol, flesh and icon (cf. *BG* 228–241).

58 Another example that Marion uses for this kind of excess is the first experience of language: "The excess of intuition over intention bursts open irremediably from the point of my birth—and, moreover, I will speak not only by means of having [repeatedly] intuited in silence, but especially after having heard others speak. Language is first listened to, and only then it is uttered. The origin remains to me, indeed, originally inaccessible, not by default, nevertheless, but because the first phenomenon already saturates all intention with intuitions. The origin, which refuses itself, does not nevertheless give *itself* in penury (Derrida), but indeed in excess, determining in this way the regime of all givens to come" (*In Excess* 44).

der Einbildungskraft, die viel zu denken veranlaßt, ohne daß ihr doch irgend ein bestimmter Gedanke, d.i. Begriff, adäquat sein kann, die folglich keine Sprache völlig erreicht und verständlich machen kann" (*Kritik der Urteilskraft* § 49). Marion comments on this as follows:

> because it [the aesthetic idea] gives 'much,' the aesthetic idea gives intuitively more than any concept can expose. [...] The impossibility of the concept arranging this disposition comes from the fact that the intuitive suberabundance no longer succeeds in exposing itself in a priori rules, whatever they might be, but rather submerges them. Intuition is no longer exposed in the concept; it saturates it and renders it overexposed —invisible, unreadable not by lack, but indeed by an excess of light (*BG* 198).

These phenomena cannot be experienced in categories like the ones that Kant proposed, but are appearing "counter to the conditions for the possibility of experience" (ibid., 215). They are "given without an adequate concept" (Horner 2005: 111), which explains why Marion also refers to them as 'paradoxes.'[59] Coming back to Marion's demand that phenomena should not be determined by a horizon, Marion describes how saturated phenomena fill out not only one horizon but multiple. One example is the historical event:

> the battle will demand additional horizons [...] of an indefinite number: military horizons [...], diplomatic, political, economic, ideological [...], etc. The plurality of horizons practically forbids constituting the historical event into *one* object and demands substituting an endless hermeneutic in time (ibid., 229).[60]

The power and the excess of the event are expressed in various metaphors, one being 'the improper name': "I am called by a name that I am not, have not chosen, and perhaps do not want (a name 'dif-

59 Or as Marion puts it himself: "In the kingdom of the phenomenon, the concept is not king, but rather the intuition, which alone has the privilege of giving" (*BG* 193).

60 Another example is the flesh of Christ: "it is clear that the acts of Christ, even reduced to writings, exceed the horizon of this world, are not of this world, demand other horizons and other worlds. This principle of the plurality of worlds, or rather horizon, governs all dimension of the phenomenality of Christ's flesh" (*BG* 239).

ficult to bear')" (*BG* 292). This insinuates that the subject has been selected and, consequently, has to accept the mission that this entails. Another metaphor is the term "seizure" (ibid., 268), a medical term which describes a neurological process that affects the whole body and cannot be controlled by will. Marion compares the occurrence of the gift also to a 'weight': "This pressure bears down in such a manner that it makes us feel not only its weight, but also the fact that we cannot in any way master it, that it imposes itself without our having it available to us—we do not trigger it any more than we suspend it" (ibid., 159). These comparisons all suggest the denial of a hermeneutic approach. The event in Marion's conception cannot be seized, labeled and put aside.

The terms 'call,' 'seizure' and 'weight' also suggest a displacement or at least an imposition, as is clearly stated by Marion: "The interloqué [the *receiver* in the process of being called into duty by an event] suffers a call so powerful and compelling that he must surrender [s'y rendre; transl.] to it, in the double sense of the French s'y rendre: being displaced and submitted to it" (*BG* 268; emphasis omitted).[61] This means that the subject is brought into a specific position in order to be able to receive the event. The displacement has visual consequences. As Mackinlay writes, Marion understands "all phenomena as anamorphic" (164). Thus, the subject's receptivity and the process of its recognition of an event are described as an anamorphosis.[62] An anamorphosis describes a positioning of two sides that become visible to each other only when inhabiting the 'right' position. Marion's example to illustrate an anamorphosis is Hans Holbein's (the Younger) painting, *The Two Ambassadors* (1533), in which a grey speck in the centre of the painting is recognized as a human skull by its viewer when gazing at it long enough. For this to happen, the *receiver* has to take on an

61 With the term 'interloqué' Marion describes the receiver who is in the act of receiving the gift. The French term could be translated with 'baffled person.' Thus, Marion conceptualizes a subject that is overwhelmed by what is happening to him.

62 The Oxford English Dictionary defines an anamorphosis as follows: "a distorted projection or drawing of anything, so made that when viewed from a particular point, or by reflection from a suitable mirror, it appears regular and properly proportioned; a deformation" (306).

attentive and open, but undirected, attitude. He must—without consciously knowing what he is doing—adjust his perception towards a spot: "not only must a gaze know how to become curious, available, and enacted, but above all it must know how to submit to the demands of the figure to be seen: find the unique point of view from which the second level form will appear." (*BG* 124) Marion refers to this as "align[ing] oneself" (ibid., 117) to the object. The *receiver* must be patient, since it might be necessary to make "numerous and frequently fruitless attempts" and to "admit that it would be necessary to alter one's position (either in space or in thought), change one's point of view" (ibid., 124). The powers of the subject are obviously restricted in this process. The only activity the subject presents is that of utter accessibility: "It reduces him to merely watching for, freezes him in place, puts him in immobile availability for what might not finally come or indeed never begin" (ibid., 268). The excess of the gift turns the *receiver* into a subject that Marion terms the *adonné*, the *gifted* in English translation (*BG* 268).[63] Marion offers no more insight into this new subject and in what way the *adonné* is gifted. Besides its newly earned status as a subject, what are its capabilities? For Marion, the *gifted* is simply defined as a figure of possibility, something emerges that has not been there before; through the gift it is enabled to do and become more than expected. To receive such an excessive gift is not necessarily a singular experience; according to Marion one can receive gifts multiple times: "l'adonné does not receive itself once and for all (at birth) but does not cease to receive itself anew in the event of each given" (*In Excess* 48).

Marion's treatment of excessive intuition and his notion of counter-intentionality separates him not only from traditional phenomenological thought, but, according to John D. Caputo, it also distinguishes him from poststructuralist thinking:

63 Adonné has been translated as 'gifted' by Jeff Kosky in *Being Given*. This translation is problematic in Gschwandtner's eyes: "*Adonné* [...] means to be 'devoted,' 'given over to,' or even 'addicted.' ('Gifted' works neither as a translation of the French term nor as a description of Marion's use of it.)" (213).

> Deconstruction turns on an intention that can never be fulfilled, on a gift that can never be given, where presence, intuition, and givenness are constantly being deferred and detained, where intention is permanently haunted by an ungivable givenness. That does not frustrate desire but is constitutive of desire's very structure. The very idea of this intention is that it intends what will never be given, *can* never be given, its givenness being impossible, *the* impossible, which we always intend and never meet, which we always desire but never have. For Marion [...] [f]ulfillment is frustrated not because intention is cut off from intuition but because intention is flooded with givenness that it cannot contain or intend (78).

Whereas in poststructuralism intention fuels a desire that can never be realized, the phenomenon in Marion's theory goes beyond every expectation and intention, providing more than can be hoped for. This fulfils what Marion is aiming for in this theory—it gives the phenomenon full priority over anything else: subject, expectation, causality and horizon.

Sonmi's Event and its Excess

Sonmi's story illustrates this relationship between the receiving end and the overwhelming event perfectly. The event in "An Orison" does not solely consist of the half-heartedly executed experiment that unexpectedly provides Sonmi with an inner voice. The event is also manifested in the way Sonmi reacts to it and how *she* gives form to the event. In fact, Sonmi is not the only clone in Mitchell's story that experiences 'ascension.' First, her colleague, Yoona ~939, goes through this process, but is shot when she tries to flee the fast food restaurant. Sonmi reacts in a more careful way in response to her new self. At first she is only waiting: "What could I do but wait and endure?" ("An Orison" 206). Then she simply accepts and bears what happens to her: being brought to the university, then shuttled to a stronghold of the political underground, then admitted into its membership. At the end of the story, she implies that she knew the whole journey was the government's carefully constructed plan to manipulate her for their own purposes, yet she plays along nevertheless. Before her execution, she explains to an

attendant archivist: "I had left the doors and windows open for them, but my captors contrived a spectacular siege with snipers and megaphones" (ibid., 363). The following dialogue ensues:

> [Archivist:] You are implying that you xpected [sic] the raid, Sonmi?
> Once I had finished my manifesto, the next stage could only be my arrest.
> What do you mean? What 'next stage' of what?
> Of the theatrical production, set up while I was still a server in Papa Song's.
> Wait, wait, wait. What about...well, everything? Are you saying your whole...confession is composed of...scripted events?
> It's key events, yes (ibid., 363).
> [...] Two brief last questions. Do you regret the course of your life?
> How can I? 'Regret' implies a freely chosen, but erroneous, action; free will plays no part in my story (ibid., 365; emphasis omitted).

Sonmi suffers the event and states that she was never given any other choice and that, accordingly, regret would make no sense in her case. She submits herself completely to what her 'ascension' results in, even to the extent of putting her own life at risk. As a consequence, she presents the event as only she can—namely by the birth of herself as an individual and excessive subject.

Her subject status manifests excess in almost every aspect of her development. She becomes a human being, author, revolutionary and eventually god—an excessive force.[64] This becomes most evident when looking at how her death is treated. To kill Sonmi after she has accomplished so much means more than killing a common human being; it entails symbolic significance. However, this significance is curiously of political essence. Sonmi as *gifted* is similar to the king (or the sovereign). Her life has become more than *bare life*, since her killing has

64 It is noteworthy in this respect that she tells this story by speaking into a device that is called 'Orison.' Boulter notes: "'Orison' is an archaic word meaning prayer: Sonmi's testimony [...] thus functions as a prayer to the future, an appeal—and is this not what prayer actually is?" (135). Thus, her story is charged with sacred connotations from the beginning, making it take on greater dimensions.

become more meaningful; she cannot be simply erased as her clone colleagues are. She leaves a remainder behind, which turns her into a political figure and a god to the afterworld.

2.2.3 Conclusion

As I have shown during the course of this analysis, Sonmi fits all the characteristics of a *homo sacer*, yet she is released from her imprisonment by an event. This event provides her with an excess that makes her not only a human being, but more than anyone would have expected. In fact, the way Sonmi turns from a weak and imprisoned being into someone empowered makes her similar to what Marion describes as the transformation from being a *receiver* to being *gifted*. The only difference lies in Sonmi's access to political power, which is something that is never discussed by Marion who disregards power issues in favor of givenness.

Having read Sonmi as a *homo sacer* rather than a *receiver* (although she eventually experiences an event) anticipates my critique of Marion. Marion's concept is not neutral, but highly optimistic. The example of Sonmi makes this very obvious. The society Sonmi lives in is determined to artificially produce 'inferior' beings that are doomed to servitude. To perceive her later entrance into consciousness a 'gift' without taking into account that this might be rather proof that these clones are not as far from humanity as they were thought to be, would come across as naïve. Marion's *receiver* is a figure that lacks context, since the nature of the weakness is rather vague. Weakness is interpreted mostly in a positive way, since the *receiver* is awarded with a gift that is characterized by being "never wrong" ("Reason of the Gift" 133). This is because it is precisely the weakness, according to Marion, that makes his/her reception possible in the first place, as Carlson sums up: "my weakness becomes my power, my incapacity my capacity" (163). Clearly influenced by Christian ethics, weakness—referring to kindness, submission and humbleness, all represented in the figure of Christ—is seen as strength and not as fault. In Sonmi's case this is problematic, since her weakness is the result of political and unethical

decisions. Her status is not an attitude; it is not self-chosen. Sonmi has no other choice than to simply allow what happens to her. This shows exemplarily how Marion's concept of a weak subject, when applied to contemporary situations depicted in fiction, could be considered cynical or even inadequate. Marion's concept is simply not free of theological background and this makes employing his concepts as analytical instruments problematic.

In the same manner, Marion's concept of the *gifted* could, too, prove to be problematic. For Marion, the *gifted* is an inherently positive being that is the product of a revelatory event—changing the subject completely by opening his eyes. Naturally, for Marion, the question of whether the event might have ethically dubious consequences does not arise.[65] However, the question remains: Does an empowered or transformed subject necessarily have to be read positively? Could this empowered subject not also be a negative phenomenon? This is an aspect that Marion completely neglects. This is different in Agamben's case. Agamben proposes a figure whose powers are unethical (even though Agamben never reflects on this explicitly): the sovereign. Although, the sovereign and the *gifted* are both defined by excess and to some extent power (or at least the potential to become powerful), the sovereign's power is based on the weakness of others and his ability to create weak beings, *bare life*. He is located on the opposite side of the *gifted*, since he is considered to be 'evil' in a sense, even though his evilness is produced by a political system rather than being an individual choice. His power does not stem from his own weakness, but the weakness of others. In comparing the sovereign's death to Sonmi's death—since both deaths become extremely meaningful and are not treated as 'normal' deaths—I pointed out how Sonmi moves away from her status as a *homo sacer* and becomes more like the sovereign. Nevertheless, Sonmi's status as a sovereign never appeared in its most

65 Horner who has written one of the central introductory works to Marion suggests more ambivalence in the concept of the gift than Marion, in my opinion, proposes himself: "A gift is most often taken to be a positive thing, but the word nevertheless demonstrates some instability. For example, the Latin (and Greek) *dosis*, which enters English as "dose," bears the meanings of both 'gift' and 'poison'" (2001: 9).

extreme (or evil) form—namely the ability to declare *bare life*. Sonmi only declares herself *bare life*, no one else.[66] Although Agamben's figures reflect certainly current political and social situations—e.g. the human rights issues that are associated with the question of cloning—, which makes his theory very adaptable to contemporary fiction, the figure of the sovereign seems to be quite an extreme figure of power, as the *homo sacer* is an extreme figure of powerlessness. In the same manner that Marion's description is too positive and too religious, Agamben's concept seems to be too harsh and negative, turning the subject in control automatically into an 'evil' being which is not the case with Sonmi. She possesses a sense of solidarity and justice that clearly separates her from Agamben's one-dimensional figure of the sovereign.

In sum, the spectrum of figurations of subjectivity in literature is too complex and too various to define them as either 'good' or 'bad.' All four terms, *receiver*, *gifted*, *homo sacer* and *sovereign* have been shown to be fitting to some extent, but eventually they are too restrictive and too embedded in their original contexts. The terms *receiver* and *gifted* would be cynical in situations in which subjects are clearly discriminated against or violently attacked, the terms *homo sacer* and *sovereign* might be too serious and harsh when it comes to restrictive situations that, however harsh, can be compared to neither the situation of a refugee or a camp inhabitant, which is the blue print for the *homo sacer*, nor to the sovereign who is declaring others *bare life*. In both cases, the terms would fail to describe the subjects adequately and would also blur their original meaning. What is necessary, then, is to come up with terms that grasp the main structures of these concepts, but that are more descriptive rather than prescriptive. Thus, for a literary analysis it is necessary to design a subject concept that can be assigned to various situations in which subjects are formed.

66 Agamben regards the capability to declare oneself as *bare life* as the action of a sovereign: "as if supreme power were, in the last analysis, nothing other than the capacity to constitute oneself and others as life that may be killed but not sacrificed" (101; emphasis omitted).

2.3 Captivation and Event

As both Marion's and Agamben's figurations of weakness and power are too extreme when it comes to employing them as instruments for a literary analysis, I consider it necessary to introduce my own terminology that takes Marion's and Agamben's figures into account, but locates them on a spectrum of subject figurations rather than considering them exemplary. What remains central to this terminology is the event. I insist, with the support of the exemplary analysis in this chapter, on the functionality and productivity of Marion's notion of the event. Thus, my definition of the event concurs with Marion's: the event is so excessive that it changes a weak subject and shifts it to a new position, allowing it to experience transcendence. By seeing the event as central to the question of subjectivity I clearly distance myself from Agamben (who does not aim for a theory on the subject anyway) and side with Marion on this aspect.

What constitutes the core of both theories is a form of *immobility linked to weakness.* In both theories weak beings are produced by restricting and even immobilizing circumstances. Both present their own concepts for this process that becomes central to their theory. Agamben introduces the double exclusion, the ban, and Marion the anamorphosis. It is necessary to underscore that I am fully aware that Marion and Agamben treat weakness very differently. Marion believes weakness is only a preparation for an event that releases the subject from its weakness, whereas Agamben has no such concept. Agamben's ban is not a preparation for something else, Agamben, in fact, suggests that the *homo sacer must* be held captive so that its opposite, the sovereign, can thrive. As explained earlier, this unchangeability of the *homo sacer* is one point of Agamben's argument where I clearly distance myself from him. I argue for the necessity of the event and therefore for the potential of change inherent in the figuration of subjectivity. Thus, these restrictive circumstances do not only delimit the subjects, but, following Marion, make them receptive to an event. The subject is pinned down to a location where the event will occur. Thus, it is the imprisonment that makes the subject experience an event. However,

between *homo sacer*'s captivity and the *receiver*'s, there are stark differences. Agamben describes essentially a prison cell in Guantánamo, a structural captivity of a political system, whereas Marion speaks more of an aesthetic 'capture' by an event. Thus, there is a spectrum of forms of captivity, even to the degree where it cannot be conceived as 'captivity' anymore. In fact, Marion's receiver is more *captivated* than held captive, since he falls prey to an anamorphosis. To illustrate this range between the captive and the captivated on a terminological level I chose the term 'captivation.' The term originates in the early 16th century and in its archaic form it denotes two things: it suggests a fascination with a thing, a person, a phenomenon or an event, but it also indicates a form of captivity in its archaic meaning: "The action of taking or holding captive; the fact or state of being taken or held captive; now only fig., of the attention, mind, fancy, affections" (*OED* 102). Thus, it incorporates both forms of captivity: a mild and a violent one. For this reason I will install the term 'captivation' as a portmanteau that combines 'captivity' with 'captivation,' which means reactivating the archaic meaning of the term. The two figures, *receiver* and *homo sacer*, essentially delimit a range of what captivity can be like, from captivation (in the sense of captivating) to captivity. In between these figures there is enough room for variations, for subjects who can be exposed to very different forms of captivating or captive forces.

Captivation can take on different forms: intense fascination, hypnotic state, imprisonment by social, political or environmental conditions, constriction by age, lack of knowledge, ignorance, traumatisation or physical or psychological dependency. These captive states delimit the individual, restricting his or her abilities to think, plan and act. For this reason, captivation might not even be recognized by the characters, since they have come to accept their circumstances without knowing any differently. Sometimes, the characters submit willingly to their captivation. In these cases, the characters are rather captivated then held captive; they are fascinated by the power that holds them and might even be unaware of the fact that they are delimited. In other cases, however, captivation is clearly recognized as a limitation and even a confinement that the characters try to deal with by either struggling

against it or finding ways to deal with their situation. All these different reactions to a captivation inform the respective captivations and shape the subject who undergoes this captivation. In fact, it is the subjects' individual and often idiosyncratic reaction *to* the captivation that enables them to experience events later on. It is the interaction of captivation and the subjected individual that creates an untapped potential. The subjects become receptive precisely because they are subjected to a captivation. To draw on Sonmi's example again: Sonmi experiences her conscience as an event only because she was drugged into being a mindless being before. Without her captivation the event would have been banal. Thus, the term captivation describes a *stage of perceptiveness* that goes beyond Marion's description of an aimless waiting period, which is rather vague, but it also goes beyond Agamben's impenetrable prison cell. Instead, captivation is understood as a force that shapes and forms the subject, manipulates or captivates, pushing the subject into physically or psychologically confined spaces. Since the subjects, cornered into these spaces, eventually experience an event, one could even argue that *the event* draws them to them as Marion claims, exploiting or controlling their captivation to draw them close. This is, however, a difficult argument to make when it comes to novels that traditionally have individuals as the main focus and main interest, and don't portray events as forces with a mind of their own. However, what can be said is that in some cases the proximity between a captivation and the appearance of an event becomes every obvious, underscoring how captivation is a necessary step for the subject becoming receptive and open to an event. Overall, captivation is a force that turns from a confining into an enabling force when an event *rearranges the subject's position towards the captivation*. Thus, the former limitation turns into an advantage, the weakness becomes one's power—captivation paves the way for an event.

It is noteworthy that captivation effects *both* states, the weak *and* the powerful, which indicates propinquity between the two states. The *gifted* and the sovereign can be also considered captive figures, determined by their spatial position and the ensuing power. Even though, they don't suffer from their confinement, but profit from it, they

remain bound to their position. This can be seen in Sonmi's case, since, despite her power, she is never able to escape the grip of her government completely, but is to some extent subjected to its rules until the end. The complex and often counter-intuitive relationship between captivation and empowerment is certainly one of the main issues of this dissertation and will be further discussed in the analytical chapters.

What is empowerment like? Similar to a captivation, from a critical perspective an empowerment can be considered positive *or* negative. Again, Agamben and Marion describe figures that are positioned at the opposite ends of one spectrum: Agamben describes the most violent outcome, the sovereign who uses his power to subject and kill the weak, whereas Marion describes the most positive, a *gifted* being, who is freed from his weakened state and experiences a revelation. I will be considering empowerment under three aspects that are prevalent in contemporary novels – authorship, ethics and the sacred – and analysing how these empowered subjects relate to them. The focus will be on *the particular kind* of authors, ethical or sacred beings they are and how their status as empowered subjects could change the notions of authorship, ethics and sacredness. What is the character of empowerment in reference to these areas? What kind of authors, ethical beings or sacred figures do empowered subjects become and how does this reflect on these issues? By describing the empowered subjects in these three areas I therefore wish to illustrate how contemporary literature proposes a different concept of subjectivity in comparison to postmodern literature.

3 Captives of Authorship

3.1 Introduction

At the end of Paul Auster's *City of Glass,* the main protagonist and the book's fictional author, Quinn, vanishes, leaving only a red notebook behind. This plot twist enacts Roland Barthes' theory of the "modern scriptor," who is distinguished from a traditional author by being "born simultaneously with the text" (145) and thus does not exist 'before' the text or, as Auster's novel suggests, without it. In postmodern fiction, the text is more meaningful than its author. The text is defined in a new way and considered to be a "tissue of signs" (Barthes 147). Texts relate to other texts, incorporate known motives and ideas, play with them and reinterpret them. The individual text is not original, but is instead considered to be a palimpsest: "[t]he text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (ibid., 146). Furthermore, in postmodernism it is understood that a text does not mainly refer to some notion of 'reality,' but rather to other texts, thus, to a textual universe. A similar argument is made in *City of Glass* when it is said about Quinn: "What interested him about the stories he wrote was not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories."(7)[67] As Matías Martínez[68] has pointed out, intertextuality is a crucial element of postmodern fiction and redefines the definition of authorship. He goes on to note that Barthes and Kristeva have therefore defined the author as the "mouthpiece of foreign discourse" [Sprachrohr fremder Rede] (465).[69]

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67 Frederic Jameson views this as part of the reading process; the reader is always informed by what he has read before: "we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand-new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions" (*The political unconscious* 9).

68 Cf. Matías Martínez. "Autorschaft und Intertextualität." *Rückkehr des Autors. Zur Erneuerung eines umstrittenen Begriffs.* Eds. Fotis Jannidis, Gerhard Lauer et al. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1999. 465–479.

69 Rimmon Kenan explains how intertextuality relates to the critique of representation: "Like textuality, intertextuality is frequently opposed to representation. Whereas representation is based on a reference from words to things, intertextuality is a reference

The traditional author stands in the way of such an understanding of the text, since he or she is supposed to close or curtail the meaning of a text: "[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (ibid., 147). Michel Foucault would agree with this argument. In *What is an Author?* (1969) Foucault writes that the author is a restrictive and limiting force that determines interpretation. For Foucault, the author is an "ideological figure":

> the author is not an indefinite source of significations that fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion. One can say that the author is an ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function. When a historically given function is represented in a figure that inserts it, one has an ideological production. The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning (118–119).

Language and fiction are viewed as an unlimited force that should not be restricted, but embraced instead to the fullest, even to the extent of producing more meaning than the interpreter can manage. It is not the author who produces such myriad meanings, the overdetermination of meaning lies in the nature of the sign itself. In this scenario the author is reduced to a scriptor. The scriptor's power is not to create, but as Barthes writes, "to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any of them" (146). To underscore the text's autonomy means to withdraw authority from the

from words to words, or rather from texts to texts. The concept of 'text' is often expanded to designate the whole world. The world, as a network of signs, becomes a text (or series of texts); intertextuality replaces representation" (12).

author. In Barthes's view the concept of a traditional author figure (and Barthes capitalizes this term throughout his essay) invokes religious connotations. For Barthes, to search for what the author intended is similar to looking for the hidden meanings of a god. In fact, he argues strongly against this kind of image of the author: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (146). According to Barthes, the author, as a religious figure, has to 'die,' meaning he/she has to be pushed to the background in order to weaken his/her influence on how one should read a text. Burke compares this event of the 'death of the author' to the 'death of God' in modernism: "The death of the author might be said to fulfill much the same function in our day as did the death of God for late nineteenth-century thought. Both deaths attest to a departure of belief in authority, presence, intention, omniscience and creativity" (21).

Arguing against presence, intention and omniscience is something the poststructuralist thinker Jacques Derrida is known for. In his philosophy, one can find conclusions similar to those of Barthes and Foucault. One of Derrida's main tenets is his denouncement of presence as a guiding principle in metaphysics: "It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence—*eidos*, *archē*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia*, (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alethia*, transcendality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth" ("Structure, Sign and Play" 279–280). The author can be considered a center, as a place from which a message is 'sent' to the reader. This message cannot, however, possibly be controlled by its author. Derrida argues that every text evokes contexts that accompany the main text. He questions the assumption that a context's meaning can be controlled, calling it a "teleological and ethical determination" ("Signature Event Context" 325) and claims that not only the text, but also the context itself cannot be fully determined (ibid., 310). A text is potentially open to being connected and disconnected to multiple texts, producing numerous possibilities of being read and understood:

> Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written [...], as a small or large unity, can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitively new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring ("Signature Event Context" 320).

A center, or an "absolute anchoring," mentioned in the passage above would be equivalent to the concept of the traditional author—the man behind the curtain who is holding the strings. This idea of a 'first cause' is something Derrida questions, not only in this instance, but on other levels, too, arguing that "what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure, a principal responsibility" ("Différance" 6). This, of course, has theological implications that relate Derrida's general philosophy to Barthes' critique of the author. Both criticize implicit theological patterns, which Burke describes as follows:

> The author is to his text as God, the *auctor vitae*, is to his world: the unitary cause, source and master to whom the chain of textual effects must be traced, and in whom they find their genesis, meaning, goal and justification. The author thus becomes, in Derrida's words, the 'transcendental signified' and attains the supernal privilege of being at once the beginning and the end of his text (22).

The author, regarded as a God-figure, defies the postmodern concept of anti-hierarchy. As a result, the idea of the author as a figure of authority, order, and reason has become outdated in postmodern fiction. Postmodern writers, such as Kurt Vonnegut and John Barth, try to circumvent this kind of authority and to find new ways of narrating that do not allow for or that undermine a powerful and unquestioned author. Rimmon-Kenan summarizes the effect as follows: "In deconstruction, the very notion of a narrator becomes superfluous. The text is performed by language, not by a specific person, voice, or even *instance*" (14). Narratives such as *City of Glass* (1985), or Salman Rushdie's *Mid-*

night's Children (1981), are two obvious examples in which the figure of the author itself is attacked. In Rushdie's novel, the narrator slowly comes apart during his narrating process: "Please believe that I am falling apart. I am not speaking metaphorically [...] I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug [...] I am literally disintegrating" (43).

Authorship in Contemporary Literature

In this chapter I intend to distinguish the current portrayal of authorship from a postmodern one by analyzing the renewed interest in powerful forms of authorship in contemporary literature. The author, as a concept, is reinstalled, but with an awareness of postmodern doubts and hesitations, which explains why authorship is often discussed on a metafictional level.

This chapter is divided into two parts: "Authorship by Mistake" and "The Captivated Reader." Part One focuses on a return of authorship by accident, in which individuals turn into author figures and move into the center of the narrative without this being planned. Authorship is not a power acquired and connected to unquestionable authority, but rather delivered through an event, surprising individuals and putting them on to a new path. The individual is only partially in control of his or her authorship; in general, he or she is not able to choose how to deal with this new power. Part Two describes how the reader becomes actively involved in the novels, a process that allows for the strengthening of authorship. The power of the author figure is in some cases even based upon the reader (*Atonement, Ghostwritten*). The reader is captured by the novel's spell, the spell of narration and storytelling, and thus unable to break free. However, this struggle is necessary, since it manifests the power of the fictional author.

3.2 Authorship by Mistake

3.2.1 *Atonement*—The Child as Author

3.2.1.1 Introduction

Ian McEwan is arguably one of the most renowned contemporary British authors. His work *Atonement* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2001 and his novel *Amsterdam* won the Booker Prize in 1998. His early work explores violence and sexual explicitness, for example, in *Black Dogs* (1992) and *The Cement Garden* (1978), which inspired his nickname 'Ian Macabre.' However, in particular his later works display an increased interest in ethics: "The moment of decision-making serves here as a central motif of [Ian McEwan's] novels and lends itself to the investigation of the ethical questions and possible answers inherent in each novel" (Puschmann-Nalenz 190). It is these ethical questions that are central to this analysis, since they touch upon authorship and the responsibility that goes along with it.

Atonement reflects on the nature of authorship through its main character, Briony Tallis, whose process of becoming an author is central to the novel. The novel consists of three parts and an epilogue. The first part of the novel captures the events of a hot summer day in 1934 when the Tallis family are expecting various guests—the so-called 'cousins from the north,' and their oldest son Leon, who is visiting them with a fellow student, Paul Marshall. It also tells the story of Briony's 'crime,' which is to falsely accuse the housekeeper's son, Robbie, of rape. The second section follows Robbie's experiences as a soldier in France, and the third section depicts Briony as a young adult trying to come to terms with her guilt. Only in the epilogue is it revealed that Briony herself wrote the whole narrative, from the first to the third section—a fact that was hidden throughout the novel. The narrator is not an impersonal omniscient narrator installed by McEwan, but a narrator established by his fictional character and author figure Briony.

3.2.1.2 Briony Tallis—The Subject in Question

Briony is a figure who occupies a liminal space that determines her state as a captive subject. Her captivity is presented in a rather 'weak' or 'natural' form. She finds herself limited by her status as a child. Her liminal sphere is depicted as follows: "Briony inhabited an ill-defined transitional space between the nursery and adult worlds which she crossed and recrossed unpredictably" (McEwan 141). Kerler describes her as a "go-between from the world of the children to the world of adults" [transl. mine] (173).[70] Thus, her captivation is a natural fact, a transitory state that she is bound to leave at some point. Briony is aware of her limitations and strives to gain more insight into the world; however, she believes her surroundings prevent her from doing so. Yet, it is precisely this restriction that opens up possibilities for her that only she is able to recognize.

Her liminal and captive state makes her turn toward fiction, where she can take on different roles. Her fascination with fiction is a key characteristic of Briony, as the novel begins with her who, in anticipation of her brother's coming home, prepares the performance of a play she has written, 'The Trials of Arabella.' It is telling that the novel starts with Briony's artistic efforts—in fact, the first words are "[t]he play" (McEwan 3)—, since it draws attention to Briony's creativity, which is a significant aspect of the entire novel.[71] Often, Briony retreats to a slightly secluded area of the Tallis estate, near a small temple, in order to immerse herself in her dreams. The temple was once an "eye-catching feature," but has since been neglected, and is described as having "no religious purpose at all" (ibid., 72). The place provides Briony with a space in which she can invent imaginary castles and turn ugly real-

70 The original quote reads: "Kippfigur bzw. *go-between* zwischen Kinder-und Erwachsenenwelt" (173).

71 This has also been commented upon by Möller, who quotes several critics supporting her reading: "Interestingly, the novel starts with a description not of Briony herself, but of her play 'The Trials of Arabella,' thus on the one hand setting the tone 'the book's preoccupation with imagined lives,' (Childs, Contemporary Novelists, 172) but also, even more importantly, confronting the reader with Briony's literary imagination before he or she gets to know her as a personality; as Brian Finney put it, '[s]he is an author first and a girl on the verge of entering adolescence second'(Finney, 79)" (61).

ity into shimmering fantasy. At the temple, Briony busies herself with beating down nettles, trying to free herself from the boundaries laid upon her:

> Flaying the nettles was becoming a self-purification, and it was childhood she set about now, having no further need for it. [...] Planting her feet firmly in the grass, she disposed of her old self year by year in thirteen strokes. She severed the sickly dependency of infancy and early childhood (ibid., 74).

In a violent and impatient manner, Briony tries to cut the ties to her childhood, similarly to cutting off the umbilical cord. Her actions at the temple remove her further and further from reality and lead her into a trance; her blows are transformed into the strokes of a swimmer taking part in a competition: "No one in the world could do this better than Briony Tallis who would be representing her country next year at the Berlin Olympics and was certain to win the gold" (ibid., 75). She becomes the glowing star of an athletic competition, implying that it is not only childhood she wants to leave behind, but a general feeling of insignificance. She wants all eyes on her, in full admiration.

Briony is aware that her escape is only temporary. Outside of her imagination, she is formed by banal reality.

> The cost of oblivious daydreaming was always this moment of return, the realignment with what had been before and now seemed a little worse. [...] now she was back in the world, not one she could make, but the one that had made her, and she felt herself *shrinking* under the early evening sky [emphasis added] (ibid., 76).

The fact that her own felt insignificance is described by the term 'shrinking' implies that in her imagination the reverse occurs; she 'grows,' becomes more self-assured, and thrilled by the stories she

invents around herself.[72] Her identity is defined by reality on the one hand, by which she feels restricted, keeping her 'small,' and on the other hand by imagination, with which she is infatuated, and which allows her to play a more important role in life. When her fantasies fade away and she finds herself in a field of nettles again, instead of in front of an audience that cheers her on, the narrator notes that "Briony had lost her godly power of creation" (ibid.). At this point, childlike imagination and godly creation are made equivalent. It is fitting that when Briony is described in this manner, she is located near a forgotten temple. Briony's chosen locations throughout the novel are indications of her character in general and her position in the novel.[73] Although the narrator's comment is articulated in a patronizing way that makes fun of her own self-involvement, Briony is, in fact, often compared to a god or framed in religious ways. Briony's room, for example, is described in a very suggestive manner: "Briony's [room] was a shrine to her controlling demon: the model farm spread across a deep window ledge consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way—towards their owner" (ibid.).[74] The quote points out that Briony not only likes to arrange and rule over worlds, but also that the created world is ordered in such a way that her power is bound to become visible—she is the person to whom all eyes are directed. In this passage, Cavalie argues, "it is clear to the observant reader that the young girl's relationship to order is problematic, and the use of the word 'demon' can even be

72 The passage also allows for Briony to be associated with Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*, the girl who falls through a rabbit hole and wakes up in a room where she has to drink several potions in order to become the right size to enter a magical world.

73 The characters in *Atonement* are often portrayed via their surroundings: "in the first section of the novel, the reader thus discovers a series of habited spaces (often bedrooms) conveying a sense of their owners' personalities. Then a second topography of the building, mapping the intimate space, may be detected. Indeed, one can see in each of the characters' bedrooms a relatively straightforward correspondence between their characterizations and the descriptions in the rooms" (Cavalié 123).

74 In the movie adaption of *Atonement,* the director Joe Wright has chosen a slightly rendered version of this scene for the beginning of the movie. The camera focuses on a dollhouse from which a train of small animal figures, grouped in pairs, emerges. When the train of animal pairs stops, the camera continues following an imaginary line that leads up to the back of Briony who is sitting at her desk, finishing up the last page of her play. This beginning is quite fitting, since by evoking the reference to Noah's ark, Briony's godly desire to order and structure the world is stressed before the viewer even meets Briony.

interpreted as a proleptic hint of her future 'crime'" (126). Briony's will to order is problematic because it positions her at the center of this order, which characterizes her actions as narcissistic and prone to manipulation.

Briony's limitations make her vulnerable to a series of misunderstandings; the first being the fountain scene, a central event in the novel. Briony witnesses an argument between her sister Cecilia and Robbie, the housekeeper's son, which takes place at a fountain located on the Tallis's estate. Briony observes the events from afar, from a window of the Tallis home. This heightened position leads to an ambivalent interpretation. On one hand, she is only a child looking out of a window—from a nursery, even—and excluded from the scene by distance. On the other hand, she occupies a sovereign space, as it allows her to look from above onto the scene and follow the sequence of events without being noticed. Wells notes that this is reminiscent of a strong authorial view:

> [f]rom the opening pages where Briony's childhood dramaturgical ambitions are inscribed, there is a pronounced sense of theatricality, such that all of the events seem staged and are watched through various framing devices—window frames, skylights, mirror and so on—and often from a height, as if from a director's or camera operator's point of view (102).

Briony's location is, however, more than a director's position. It is synchronized to her own situation in life: "Unseen, from two storeys up, with the benefit of unambiguous sunlight, she had privileged access across the years to adult behaviour, to rites and conventions she knew nothing about, as yet" (McEwan 39). She is an unnoticed observer, still excluded from the scene by the geographic distance, her youth, and limited knowledge.[75] This is made obvious in the following passage in which she mistakes the scene preceding the argument for a proposal:

75 How Briony, as a "watcher from windows" (Marcus 88), relates to the modernist tradition of storytelling is described by Marcus in detail (cf. Marcus 2009).

> standing by the basin's retaining wall was her sister, and right before her was Robbie Turner. There was something rather formal about the way he stood [...] A proposal of marriage. Briony would not have been surprised. She herself had written a tale in which a humble woodcutter saved a princess from drowning and ended by marrying her. [...] It made perfect sense. Such leaps across boundaries were the stuff of daily romance (ibid., 38).

Robbie's rather formal posture, which is caused by his nervousness and insecurity, insinuates a marriage proposal for Briony. O'Hara notes: "As with Don Quixote and his infamous windmills, Briony's vision of the scene is rendered comprehensible, it's simply a story she knows well, a tableau" (78). Although, the events that will follow do not seem to fit into this pattern: Cecilia undresses and plunges into the fountain. Briony, shocked, worries whether Cecilia might have been pressured by Robbie to do this. She can't explain to herself the motives for Cecilia's actions: "The sequence was quite illogical—the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal" (McEwan 39). In reality, Briony is witnessing a conversation between Robbie and Cecilia that turns into a defiant argument when Robbie accidently breaks the vase Cecilia was carrying to the fountain to get water. As a result, a piece of the vase falls into the fountain. Since Robbie doesn't take Cecilia's anger seriously, she undresses provocatively and gets into the fountain herself to retrieve the piece of vase, leaving Robbie puzzled. For Briony, the whole scene remains a complete mystery, yet she recognizes it as an inspiration for her work, making her "impatient to begin writing again" (ibid., 40), thus creating order out of what she has witnessed.

3.2.1.3 The Letter

Later in the day, frustrated by the slow progress of the performance of her play, Briony escapes to her island temple, where she beats down nettles, as mentioned earlier. Discontented by the realization that her interest in fiction stems from her dissatisfaction with her ordinary life, she wishes for something to happen. With this in mind, Briony walks over a bridge that serves as the connection between her home and the outside world. At the center of the bridge she makes a resolution:

> she decided she would stay there and wait until something significant happened to her. This was the challenge she was putting to existence—she would not stir, not for dinner, not even for her mother calling her in. She would simply wait on the bridge, calm and obstinate, until events, real events, not her own fantasies, rose to her challenge, and dispelled her insignificance (ibid., 77).

At that moment, Robbie arrives at the bridge and gives her a letter, asking her to pass it on to her sister Cecilia. With the letter Robbie wants to apologize for the argument at the fountain. Narrated from Robbie's perspective, the letter scene is enriched with a peculiar atmosphere:

> Ahead of him, about a hundred yards away, was the bridge, and on it, he thought [...] was a white shape [...] It was motionless and he assumed he was being watched. He tried for a second or two to entertain himself with the idea of a ghost, but he had no belief in the supernatural [...] It was a child, he saw now, and therefore it must be Briony [...] "It's me, Robbie," [Robbie shouts] but still she did not move (ibid., 93).

At first, Robbie does not recognize Briony, but only sees a white shape, a ghost who is watching. From the perspective of Robbie, a rational student who aspires to become a doctor, the idea of seeing a ghost is ridiculous, something which makes this passage significant. When Robbie meets Briony, the disturbing quality about her is evident, since she behaves in an odd way. She does not talk to Robbie when he asks her to deliver his letter. Instead she only nods and runs away. The haunted feeling Robbie experiences is of an ominous portent. In fact, Robbie notices only seconds too late that he has given Briony the wrong version of his letter. He has given her a sexually explicit letter describing Cecilia's female anatomy. For Briony, who secretly opens the letter, its contents are disturbing. She believes the letter must be from a deranged person.[76] Briony thinks this revelation about Robbie's 'true' nature serves a specific purpose: "Real life, her life now beginning, had sent her a villain in the form of an old family friend" (ibid., 158). The

76 Kerler argues that the letter is a physical attack in the eyes of Briony (cf. 169).

'real events' she was hoping for have finally arrived. The letter is nothing but a mistake, one that was not supposed to be read by Briony—or anyone else, for that matter. However, as Albers and Caeners point out, the misled and misleading letter will have an immense effect on Briony: "The letter-incident affects Briony's interpretive, aesthetic, and ethical judgments" (717). She believes somehow to have gained access to the adult world and to be summoned to become an author: "There was nothing she could not describe" (McEwan 156). Her calling provides her with an extreme accumulation of power, which is conveyed topologically: "Wasn't writing a kind of soaring, an achievable form of flight, of fancy, of the imagination?" (ibid., 157). In a figurative way, she is no longer bound to earth, to reality, but suddenly able to fly as an author, using the material of the real world to form her art, reshaping the world as a newly introduced subject.

3.2.1.4 The False Testimony

Briony becomes captivated by her own imaginative act, completely unaware of her misjudgment. The interpretation of the letter will inform Briony's attitude toward Robbie and will add to her impaired view of events. Briony is convinced that Robbie is a 'maniac' and a 'monster' (ibid., 119), or, as Jacobi sums up: "Briony thinks she learns that Robbie is a wicked person, and she knows—even if she has not read Aristotle—that wicked characters will continue to do wicked things" (60). She finds further 'evidence,' again by accident. She interrupts Robbie and Cecilia in the library making love, interpreting it falsely as an attack on Cecilia.[77] Briony has no time to recover from what she has witnessed in the library. Her cousins are suddenly missing, having left behind only a note that informs the family that they have decided to run away. The whole family is in an uproar and decides

77 Cavalié sums up the significance of this passage as follows: "The striking image of Robbie and Cecilia as projected figures on the spines of books is both proleptic and metafictional: it announces the discovery, at the end of the novel, of Briony's authorship, for the young couple is nothing but the projection of Briony's psyche throughout the novel. Thus, the reader is tricked into the 'optical illusion' as well: like Briony he thinks that he is observing two people in the library, when, in fact, he is only seeing avatars of Briony's literary conscience—creatures engendered by the chiaroscuro of memory" (129).

to scour the premises in the darkness of the approaching night. Briony also participates in the search, but decides to look for her cousins by herself. Similar to a few hours before, she finds herself crossing the bridge near the temple again. This time, she makes a curious observation:

> the bush that lay directly in her path—the one she thought should be closer to the shore—began to break up in front of her, or double itself, or waver, and then fork. It was changing its shape in a complicated way [...] She would have stopped immediately had she not still been so completely bound to the notion that this was a bush and that she was witnessing some trick of darkness and perspective. Another second or two, another couple of steps, and she saw that this was not so. Then she stopped. The vertical mass was a figure, a person who was now backing away from her and beginning to fade into the darker background of the trees. The remaining darker patch on the ground was also a person, changing shape again as it sat up and called her name (McEwan 164).

The passage describes an anamorphosis. A bush, whose position seems to be wrong from the start, transforms in an uncanny way, revealing that it cannot be a bush, but must be something else. For Briony, the bush remains at first a "shape" that changes in "complicated" ways, implying that what she sees is too much for her to grasp. She feels "bound to the notion that this was a bush," meaning that she is so convinced by her preconception that she cannot bring herself to consider that she is wrong. She eventually recognizes that what she sees is not a bush at all, and identifies part of the shape as a person who is moving away from her. The rest of the shape that stays behind when the other breaks away is revealed to be her cousin Lola, who is calling her name. Contrary to the incident at the fountain, where the reader was well aware of Briony's misinterpretation, here the reader only experiences Briony's limited understanding.

When Briony approaches, she learns that her cousin Lola has been raped. Although Briony was not able to see the perpetrator, she forms her own suspicions that are already influenced by what she has wit-

nessed that day: The argument between Cecilia and Robbie, Robbie's letter, and the 'attack' she has witnessed in the library. With this in mind, Briony assumes that Robbie carried out the rape on Lola. The fact that Briony does not know who has attacked Lola is hinted at, and even stated explicitly, at various times: "It was not simply her eyes that told her the truth. It was too dark for that" (ibid., 169). Nevertheless, she claims to have seen Robbie running away. Lola seems surprised by Briony's statement, repeating several times: "'You saw him'" (ibid., 167). Lola's surprise is so obvious that it questions Briony's perception, in particular when Lola adds one small word: "'You *actually* saw him'" [emphasis added] (ibid.). The interpretation from her limited point of view captivates Briony so much that she clings to it even when there is no real evidence for it. Briony is willing to turn her misinterpretation into truth and herself into the author of a crime. Thus, her limited status as a child hypnotized by fiction and fantasies ceases to restrict her; instead, it reveals a dangerous potentiality. Briony deals with the complexities of the adult world by turning towards fiction and fantasies. This turns her into a captivated subject—entranced by her own version of the truth.

3.2.1.5 Briony—The Bride to Be

Briony's statement to the police becomes a testament of her transformation to an author figure. When asked what she had seen that night, it is revealed that "she would have preferred to qualify, or complicate, her use of the word 'saw.' Less like seeing, more like knowing" (ibid., 170). But her will to please urges her to stick to her initial story without discussing her understanding of 'saw,' which the narrator explains:

> She became anxious to please, and learned quickly that the minor qualifications she might have added would disrupt the process that she herself had set train. She was like a bride-to-be who begins to feel her sickening qualms as the day approaches, and dares not speak her mind because so many preparations have been made on her behalf. The happiness and convenience of so many good people would be put at risk (ibid., 169).

The passage above focalizes through Briony's perspective and compares her to a "bride-to-be," which is a metaphor that proves to be rather inadequate overall: she is not part of a happy occasion, but is witness to the investigation of a crime. This shows that Briony is self-centered and more occupied with her own role than with Lola's fate. She feels delighted that she has stepped out of the "ill-defined transitional space" (ibid., 141), and is finally treated as an adult. However, this ill-fitting metaphor sums up her captivation perfectly. Ellam notes that this metaphor underlines her state of innocence (cf. 40). Her 'innocence' is nothing else than a lack of knowledge. It is because of this lack that she becomes part of a process she cannot stop anymore. The 'wedding' can only be halted if she intervenes. It is too late and the preparations are too far advanced, as this passage suggests. Briony has to follow through with her statement, since she now possesses an audience that ought not to be disappointed: "An imposing congregation had massed itself around her first certainties, and now it was waiting and she could not disappoint it at the altar" (McEwan 170). Here, captivation clearly has a forceful and constricting component against which a young child cannot defend herself. Ironically, only because of Briony's false testament can the later marriage between Lola and her rapist—who it turns out is Paul Marshall, a friend of her brother—take place. Thus, Briony is not only metaphorically unable to stop a wedding, but also cannot stop a real wedding, in fact, as a result of her testimony she even enabled this union.

When Briony attends Lola's wedding in order to stop it, she is compared to a bride yet again: "[Briony] advanced in her cape and headdress, like a bride of Christ, towards the altar" (ibid., 324).[78] Again, the image seems inappropriate, for the simple reason that at this event there is already a true bride, namely Lola. This suggests a rivalry between Lola and Briony which is also an important factor in Briony's false

78 Cavalié has observed that when Briony arrives at the wedding location there are allusions to the day in August on several levels: "The sense of anamorphosis is further heightened by the fact that Briony—expecting a 'Gothic cathedral' [McEwan 322] not unlike Tallis House—finds a church 'like a Greek temple' [ibid., 323]—ironically the place where Paul and Lola's union truly began" (131). Not only does Briony experience an anamorphosis again, but the wedding location looks like the crime scene.

testament. By protecting Lola, Briony also distracts attention from the actual victim. Although she struggles with this responsibility, there is nevertheless a sense of entitlement that she (as the narrator) suggestively hints at: "Her cousin's removal left Briony centre stage" (ibid., 173). In this respect, Briony's 'help' could be understood as motivated by rivalry, a reading that is supported by Müller-Wood: "Lola [...] soon appears as a powerful competitor potentially annihilating Briony, who ponders ominously that the 'advance of Lola's dominion' was 'merciless and made self-pity irrelevant' [McEwan 15]" (155). Briony challenges Lola's 'dominion' by changing the story: It is not the story of Lola's being raped, but Briony's story as the key witness to a crime.

Briony even turns into a prosecutor, when she decides to show Robbie's letter to her family as evidence of his supposed 'evil' nature. The emotions that accompany her decision convey that she is not aware of the repercussions of her actions:

> An idea of great clarity and persuasiveness came from nowhere [...] energized now by a sense of doing and being good [...] It was [...] like that Christmas morning sensation of being about to give a present that was bound to cause delight, a joyful feeling of blameless self-love (McEwan 176–177).

Briony believes that this is the moment she was waiting for. She is motivated by her will to do good, her actions inspired by the highest morality. However, she inadvertently manipulates what was supposed to be an expression of love—Robbie's love letter—and turns it into an unintentional confession of his sexual 'perversion.' The fact that she tries to be the focus of attention in such a situation makes her actions morally questionable. Even though the letter was meant for Cecilia and belongs to her, Briony takes possession of it in a physical and in a metaphorical sense, by imposing her interpretation upon it. Instead of making a present on Christmas morning, as the passage above describes, Briony is committing theft, not only stealing the letter, but actually 'stealing' lives, changing them irrevocably. It is her word that shapes reality now: "Her words *summoned* awful powers from the familiar

and picturesque local town" [emphasis added] (ibid., 169). Reality becomes ruled by her conceptions. Her captivation by her own misconception, thus, gives her access to almost god-like power; she arranges the world around her, similarly to the vigor directed at her room, that made the narrator refer to her as a "demon."

3.2.1.6 Captivating the Audience

The true extent of Briony's authorship and thus the consequences of her captivation, are, however, only revealed to the reader in the epilogue. Her power affects the implied reader, too; in fact, she has subjected him/her to her powers, without the readers noticing it. In the third section of the novel Briony, at nineteen, has understood how she had misjudged and mistreated Robbie, who shortens his prison sentence by joining the Army and serving in the First World War. Haunted by her misconduct as a child, she contacts her sister and asks for forgiveness from both Cecilia and Robbie. Although Briony is not forgiven, the reader is assured that Robbie's and Cecilia's love did not suffer from Briony's actions. Even though the crime committed by Briony has completely altered their lives and their relationship to the Tallis family, her victims have survived and have stayed committed to each other: "Their love. Neither Briony nor the war had destroyed it" (ibid., 349). The novel ends with a glimpse of hope, since Briony plans to exonerate Robbie: "She was calm as she considered what she had to do. [...] She knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin" (ibid.).

Yet, in the epilogue, the reader learns that what was described here—the apology to her sister and to Robbie—has never actually happened.[79] She also confesses that her statement against Robbie has destroyed both his and Cecilia's lives to a greater extent than she had let readers believe. In fact, Cecilia and Robbie were never able to see each other again after Robbie was arrested, since Cecilia was not allowed to visit Robbie in prison and both died during the war; Robbie as a soldier in

79 Finney has pointed out that the status of the coda is unclear, since it is not signed. It could be a diary, an extraneous commentary, or a confession (81).

France and Cecilia when London was bombed. By revealing this at the end, Briony proves how powerful she is as an author: In a matter of seconds, she turns Robbie and Cecilia into dust, disclosing their deaths. This manipulation is also commented on by Tönnis, who writes "[t]he novelist is not only 'God'-like in 'her absolute power of deciding outcomes' as Briony puts it [...], but also in her power to give (fictional) life to characters and situations" (71). Briony considers her manipulation of the truth to be a good deed: "a final act of kindness [...] to let my lovers live and unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me" (ibid., 372). However, this means in effect that she has never taken any real steps to atone for her sins, except for writing the novel.[80]

And even more, the narrator of the novel was not—as assumed—a non-diegetic and uninvolved narrator, but it was Briony herself who narrated the story: "In the epilogue, readers discover that McEwan has delegated the 'authorship' of his book to Briony, who has become a famous novelist" (Ingersoll 250). This is surprising, as Briony was the one who was judged and mocked the most by the novel's narrator, her own invention. She successfully veiled her identity as an author through her narrator. Albers and Caeners notes that this has a shocking effect on the reader: "Only by 'sealing off' the main plot [...] can the destructive potential of the last chapter come to its full effect" (719). As the witness to a crime, Briony gave her statement to the police and, thus, becomes the authorial narrator of the crime, determining the fates of her 'characters.' As an adult, she repeats her initial crime: Again becoming the guiding figure deciding about life and death, creating this time a deception for the implied reader. Her weakness, being unable to read reality, is the force that eventually transforms her (into an author), but it not only transforms her—it captivates her audience, too.

80 Puschmann-Nalenz writes that this has also been hinted at in the novel: "An 'unreal feeling' accompanies her steps toward Balham to visit her sister. This direction is marked in the text as 'the road not taken;' it remains fantasy inside fiction, with one part of her self, which the implied author calls 'the imagined or ghostly persona' [...], walking into the direction of Balham, the other self going back to the hospital. [...] Her 'unreal feeling' [...] becomes the reader's uneasy feeling about the 'reality' and veracity of this part of the story" (195).

In fact, this is what she demands of her audience: "looking up from the page for seconds at a time as she read in order to gaze into one face after the other, unapologetically demanding [...] total attention as she cast her narrative spell" (McEwan 6–7). The novel becomes the manifestation of her authorship and what *she* understands authorship to be—it features her at the center of the textual universe, holding the strings in her hand, not revealing how she operates them until the end, having the attention of the audience all to herself. Thus, her personality does not undergo any development or growth in this respect. This is insinuated on other levels, one example being that *Atonement* ends exactly where it started, with the staging of 'The Trials of Arabella,' which answers Wells question "Why does she end her account as she began it, in such a self-centered fashion with her triumphant career as a writer at center-stage?" (110). Wells goes on to note that "McEwan leaves his readers many clues that Briony's remorse may be only skin deep" (ibid.).[81]

How Briony's relationship to the reader and to her victims is affected by her captivation will be analyzed in detail in two different chapters, "The Captivated Reader" and "The Witness."

3.2.2 *The History of Love*—The Invisible Author[82]

3.2.2.1 Introduction

The core of Nicole Krauss's novel *The History of Love* (hereafter *THoL*) deals with the Holocaust and the effects it has on its survivors. The novel portrays representatives of the young American-Jewish generation and shows how they come into contact with the 'old' generation

81 McEwan, paradoxically, sees this quite differently. He has stated in an interview that he recognizes true redemption in Briony and in the way her life is centered on her crime: "what redeems Briony in *Atonement* is precisely the fact that she *has* led an examined life. Her great misdeed pursues her through the years. She will not let herself forget—and this is her atonement" (Jon Cook 129).

82 Part of this chapter has been used for an article. Nadine Feßler. "The impossible gift in Nicole Krauss's *The History of Love*." *Alles Mögliche. Sprechen, Denken und Schreiben des (Un)Möglichen*. Eds. Reinhard Babel, Nadine Feßler, Sandra Fluhrer et al. München: Königshausen and Neuman, 2014.

who emigrated from Europe. The different worldviews are reflected on a structural level, since the novel is narrated from multiple perspectives. One thing that turns out to be relevant to all narrative strands and that connects them is a manuscript called 'The History Love.' In fact, not only this particular novel, but fiction in general, is a phenomenon that links all of the characters to each other. Accordingly, Krauss's book is about the power of fiction, the virtue of imagination and the psychological needs that are connected to them: the ability to hope and to imagine a better world. Krauss's novel is thus in accordance with what Huber has observed in relation to contemporary fiction and its treatment of fantasy and metafiction. She writes:

> All the reconstructive texts I have discussed depict this immersion as both a threat and a potential but in either case as the greatest power of the fictive. Instead of alienation, disenchantment [...] we find a consideration of the merits and the dangers of a willing suspension of disbelief: that simultaneous loss of and return to the self which Iser identifies as the anthropological function of the fictive. (221)

Similar to Huber's examples, fiction in *THoL* is also considered from two perspectives. It is viewed as a delusion on the one hand, and as a reconstructive structure on the other hand. Throughout the novel, the main characters try to get a grip on reality and manage their overactive imaginations. In the end, the advantages of fiction and fantasy prevail and fiction is to be shown as the necessary element for constructing identity.

The novel is part of a specific genre, so-called 'Holocaust-fiction.' The book approaches the topic of the Holocaust mainly through the main character's feeling of disconnection and taps into what Jessica Lang has termed the 'third generation' of Holocaust-authors, which she defines as follows:

> these writers mark a second transition, or another remove from the eyewitness: the first transition from eyewitness to a recounting by the witness now becomes, as the Holocaust enters history, an *indirect* relation to the

> original eyewitness. [...] Their fiction regularly refers to and incorporates events from the Holocaust, but it also balances and counters these references with other narrative strategies or counterpoints. While for first- and second-generation Holocaust writers the historical experience "conveys" a sense of immediacy and impact, the third-generation writer views these events as an *indirect* part of the narrative, one balanced by other, also important, histories (46).

This analysis also applies to *THoL*. The novel deals with the Holocaust in an indirect manner; focusing on its survivors, but giving only a selective insight into the actual experiences of WW II. Life today, sixty to seventy years later, is more central to the novel, as is the question of how to live after the trauma and in what way. The focus on a life after the Holocaust is also evident in the choice of the other characters who are young children and thus intellectually more removed from the experiences the generations of their grandparents had. They are connected to each other, however, on the issues of trauma: all the figures have lost someone and are struggling to deal with their grief.

The indirect approach in regard to the Holocaust is also a general poetic principle in the novel. Indirectness determines the way the characters communicate with each other; it shows how they miss their chances to meet each other, and under what protracted circumstances they eventually meet up. Krauss's world is filled with lucky and unlucky accidents, all seemingly non-predictable and without cause.

3.2.2.2 The Invisibility of Leopold Gursky

The main character, Leopold Gursky, lives a lonely life in New York, with but one friend and no family except his cousin. His life is determined by a captive state that he calls 'invisibility,' which reflects his emotional condition. He feels effaced and not a part of the world. One can assume that this feeling of invisibility is a consequence of the experiences he had during WW II, when the Germans invaded Poland and his family was killed. In order to survive, it was necessary to make himself 'disappear:'

> In the years that followed, the boy became a man who became invisible. In this way, he escaped death. [...] He'd spent three and a half years hiding, mostly in trees, but also cracks, cellars, holes (ibid., 12).

The loss of his family, his flight and the fact that he had to remain hidden, constitute his entrance into adulthood. But instead of becoming an adult, he becomes an invisible man. When Gursky leaves Europe and emigrates to New York, he appears incapable of shaking off his invisibility, which he understands increasingly in a literal way. Gursky assumes that he has lost some part of himself, a part of his being: "I'd lost whatever the thing is that makes people indelible" (ibid., 81). The fact that Krauss has dedicated the novel to her grandparents with the note "For my grandparents who taught me the opposite of disappearing" indicates that the issues of visibility are connected to a particular generation—survivors of the Holocaust—rather than to individuals.[83] Invisibility is linked to incomprehensible and irreversible loss and is in this context highly significant, since it is connected to the Jewish fate during WW II.

The dedication also indicates that being visible must be preceded by an act, something that makes one visible. For Gursky this becomes the act of authorship. When Gursky's cousin tries to take a photo of him, he fails: "Three times he tried to take a picture of me with the pinhole camera, and three times I failed to appear. [...] I'd lost whatever the thing is that makes people indelible" (ibid., 81). However, Gursky finds a way to affirm his identity. He begins taking pictures of his cousin, arguing that the sheer existence of such an image is proof of his own existence, since he is the creator of the photography. This turn towards authorship as a means of becoming visible and affirming one's identity is significant and will become important later on in the book. Authorship is presented as a self-affirming gesture, a way of ensuring one's own existence. However, in Krauss's novel the way this gesture is carried out takes place in an indirect and mediated manner.

83 Krauss's grandparents were persecuted by the Nazi regime due to their Jewish heritage and had to emigrate to America.

3.2.2.3 Fantasies, Imagination and Authorship

Gursky becomes visible, but without his own active participation. He becomes an author, not by his own doing, but by giving in and almost giving up. He lets himself become sucked in by his own imaginary world, wishes and dreams, thus, he lets himself be captivated and held captive by his imagination. His imagination eventually guides him to the right place, where he can finally claim his authorship.

What Gursky is unaware of at this point is that he is a published author, even though he and the world are ignorant to this fact. An old friend of his has published a manuscript by him, being under the impression that Gursky had died during the war. One day, Gursky's manuscript finds its way back to him. The names of the characters in the manuscript have been changed from the original to Spanish ones. However, one name, Alma Mereminski, the name of his first love, has not been altered. Gursky's reaction to the package indicates his astonishment:

> The pages I'd written so long ago slipped from my hands and scattered on the floor. I thought: Who? And how? I thought: After all these – What? Years. I fell back into my memories. The night passed in a fog. I knelt down in the flour. I gathered the pages up one by one. Page ten gave me a paper cut. Page twenty-two a pang in the kidneys. Page four a blockage in the heart (ibid., 119).

His manuscript is an extension of himself. Each page causes him a different bodily reaction. At the same time, the manuscript possesses an otherworldly air which is indicated by his kneeling in front of it. He completely retreats into his thoughts and memories while time passes: "Night became day became night became day. I fell in and out of sleep" (ibid, 122). The package's arrival seems rather mysterious, since there is no apparent sender: "There was no note. [...] No return address" (ibid., 120). At this point in the novel the reader does not know how it has found its way into Gursky's mailbox, making the reader equally confused and unknowing about the sender of the gift. However, before this mystery can be resolved another appears. Gursky receives a letter which reads: "*Dear Leopold Gursky*, it said. *Please meet me at 4:00 on*

Saturday on the benches in front of the entrance to the Central Park zoo. I think you know who I am" (ibid., 212). He discovers that the letter is signed 'Alma,' his former lover's name—Alma Mereminski, who is long dead. He fears that he is losing his mind: "And then and there I knew my time had come. My hands shook so hard that the paper rattled. I felt my legs giving way. My head got light. So this is how they send the angel. With the name of the girl you always loved" (ibid., 212). Gursky begins questioning his own ability to distinguish reality from fiction. He had always been prone to fantasies and even preferred them to his own life. In them he can find support and solace, imagining most of the times to be simply recognized. Fiction means for Gursky to be able to believe in something (and in himself) against all odds: "I remember the first time I realized I could make myself see something that wasn't there. [...] A huge elephant, standing alone in the square. I knew I was imagining it. And yet. I wanted to believe. So I tried. And I found I could" (ibid., 228). Now, however, Gursky thinks he might have gone too far, that he might have lost himself completely in his imaginary world. The letter must be a product of his imagination, since his former love, Alma, is dead: "And now, at the end of my life, I can barely tell the difference between what is real and what I believe. For example, this letter in my hand—I can feel it between my fingers. [...] In my heart, I know my hand is empty" (ibid., 230). His creativity has turned into a mental health issue, turning his vivid imagination from a gift into a curse, into the symptoms of madness.

Although he questions the existence of the letter, he follows its invitation nevertheless. He allows himself to become completely captivated by immersing himself in his own imaginary products. What Gursky does not know at this point is that 'Alma' is real. She is, however, not his dead girlfriend, but a completely different Alma—namely, Alma Singer, whose parents have named her after the central character of Gursky's book. The meeting between Gursky and her is set up by her little brother, Bird, which will be explained in detail in the chapter "Captives of the Sacred." At this moment, it suffices to say that Alma does not have the slightest idea who Gursky is.

When Alma and Gursky finally meet, all the misunderstandings are eventually cleared up and Gursky is informed that he is a published author and that his book enjoys a loyal readership all over the world. The way this is revealed has anamorphotic characteristics, which is why I wish to give their meeting a closer reading and to describe the layout of these subchapters. The chapter titled "A + L" (ibid., 219) has a structure different from those of the previous ones. It consists of one-page subchapters that are dedicated to either Alma's or Gursky's thoughts right before their meeting. This antagonistic structure on a textual level later develops into a dialogue between Alma and Gursky, at times even producing only a single sentence per page. The pages, therefore, become a visualization of the dialogue between Gursky and Alma, and foreshadow the moment at which their separated voices (and lives) will eventually meet. Lang notes:

> Toward the novel's conclusion [...] very few lines cover each page. Instead, the rhythm of reading achieves a sense of urgency through movement: both the eye and the hand are flexed as the novel rapidly comes to a close. There is an inescapable sense of buildup to the climax, when Alma and Leo finally recognize each other, one that readers participate in actively (53).

At first, Gursky and Alma's conversation consists of single sentences only, each on a separate page. Gursky and Alma both mistake each other for someone else. Gursky believes he is encountering an angel (cf. Krauss 242), his dead girlfriend Alma Mereminski, while Alma believes that Gursky is just an ordinary man. She does not know that he is the author of 'THoL,' to which she has a special bond. Though they do not identify each other correctly and do not know what the other is talking about, each step they take nevertheless brings them closer. When Gursky recognizes that some of his answers confuse and even frighten Alma, he suddenly begins to understand:

> What if the things I believed were possible were really impossible, and the things I believed were impossible were really not? For example. What if the girl sitting next to me on this bench was real? What if she was named Alma, after my Alma? What if my book hadn't been lost in a flood at all? (ibid., 248).

In an instant, imagination turns into reality, and things that were lost reappear. He recognizes that Alma is not *his* Alma, but a girl who bears his former love's name. Thus, he is not mad and not a victim of his imagination, but completely sane. He also realizes that his manuscript has not only survived, but has even been published and read. This information he would never have received had he not submitted to his presumed madness and followed a supposedly imaginary invitation. From this point onward, the chapter is not divided into two voices, each of which inhabits a separate page. They merge again, returning to the traditional typographical layout. A conclusion has been reached.

In Alma, Gursky sees his love for Alma Mereminski manifested, since she was named after her: "I wanted to say her name aloud, it would have given me joy to call, because I knew that in some small way it was my love that named her" (ibid., 252). With this, Alma Singer becomes proof of his existence and his visibility. This indirect manner of giving proof to one's existence has been foreshadowed in the novel when Gursky took a photograph of his cousin, and though he was not in the picture itself, he was the active force behind the image, which provided him with the validation he was looking for: "Whenever I took it [the photograph] out of my wallet and looked at him, I knew I was really looking at me" (ibid., 82). Without him, there would not have been an image. And without his manuscript, Alma would not have been named as such. Thus, Alma becomes evidence of Gursky's authorship. Even more, his love (for Alma Mereminski) has transcended his authorship beyond its textual borders. On the brink of madness, Alma empowers Gursky with the recognition he thought he would never receive. His manuscript has become more than the words he had written as a young man. Alma, his literary heir and his singular audience, becomes the excessive component the manuscript brings along when it returns. Instead of dying as an invisible man, Gursky can die with the assurance that he has indeed left a mark on earth. His complete submission to his imagination, has opened up a new world to him, and has turned him from being an invisible man into one who is seen for the first time, in fact, around whom the whole novel centers.

3.2.2.4 Authorship, Fatherhood and the Holocaust

Authorship is also connected to fatherhood in this novel. Another thread in the narrative is the story of Gursky's son, Isaac, who is at first unaware that Gursky is his real father, since his mother has forbidden Gursky any contact with him. However, through the manuscript Isaac finds out about his father shortly before he dies. Again it is Alma who can provide Gursky with this information, since she knows about Isaac's story. Gursky is ecstatic about the news. The tender hope he had voiced before in the novel, "And now it dawned on me that it was possible there had been a brief window of time in which Isaac and I both lived, each aware of the other's existence" (ibid., 211–212), has now become reality. Thus, at the end of the novel Gursky is recognized in two instances: as a father and as an author. In both cases it is a manuscript that has enabled this discovery, making this the central element of the novel. Nicole Schröder underscores this positive view of fiction that the novel presents:

> their meeting [between Alma Singer and Gursky] does not only connect the stories and histories of different people, their life, love, and losses, it is also a very tangible symbol of the impact that literature and stories can have on us—the manuscript has changed both characters' lives in a very literal sense and has led to their meeting (168).

The fact that authorship and fatherhood are so closely intertwined is, of course, also a metafictional comment. The author is considered to be like a father whose 'child' is the text. Thus, it is meaningful that not only the 'child,' the manuscript, returns to Gursky like a loyal son who returns home, but that Gursky's manuscript also guides his actual son to him and accomplishes what he himself was unable to do—to become visible to his son.

Authorship, in *THoL*, has also an ethical and cultural meaning, since the issues of authorship are linked to the Holocaust. At the end of the novel Gursky reveals to Alma that his best friend, Bruno, to whom he constantly talks in his narrative, was a product of his imagination. Bruno could be simply read as Gursky's *alter ego*, as there are some

parallels in their lives that support this reading.[84] However, Philippe Codde has pointed out that Bruno could also allude to a specific historical figure, the Jewish artist and writer Bruno Schulz who died in WW II. In this context, the fact that Gursky's manuscript is recovered attains symbolic importance.[85] The novel seems to suggest that although Jewish lineages have been violently destroyed, elements of Jewish culture have nevertheless been sustained, a position Codde also assumes, noting that "Krauss uses fiction to reverse history and preserve Schulz's voice against all odds" (684). As Gursky's voice is preserved and validated by the return of his manuscript, Bruno Schulze's image, as a representative of a lost generation of Jewish writers, shimmers through the narrative as well. Thus, Krauss underlines the point that there are still links between the old and the new generations that bridge also the cultural divide created by the Holocaust.[86]

It became clear that authorship in *THoL* is linked to cultural and ethical issues such as questions of identity and subjectivity. In fact, in the way authorship is portrayed, it is excessive in its meaning. In light of how authorship is approached, the postmodern notion of the 'death of the author' appears ill-suited. Authorship has nothing to do with authority or ill-used power in this case. It does not imply any form of hierarchy. Instead, authorship is defined mainly as an instrument of communication: between the writer and his readers and between different generations, thus creating bonds against all odds.

3.2.2.5 Stumbling on Authorship

In both novels, *Atonement* and *The History of Love*, the characters experience a shift that transforms them into new subjects: they become authors. This transformation goes along with a shift of their position.

84 They are both writers, appear to be childhood friends, both in love with Alma Mereminski, and the artistic works of both have been taken advantage of.

85 An inspiration for the novel, Codde suggests, might have been the discovery of Bruno Schulz's wall paintings in 2001, which was documented by the German filmmaker Benjamin Geissler in *Bilder finden,* which shows the paintings Schulz was forced to make for the son of SS member Felix Landau.

86 For the relevance of the connectivity of generations in Jewish history, see also Jessica Lang (48), where she relates *The History of Love* to Ecclesiastes.

Briony is not a naïve child anymore, one who is sitting on the sidelines, but is positioned at the center of the stage, and Gursky is not an invisible man anymore, who has been robbed of everyone and everything; instead, he becomes overtly visible, not only as an author, but also as a father. In addition, he is read by every character in the novel, since his manuscript has travelled the world without him. In both cases, authorship is not connected to a divine overarching hierarchy in a traditional sense. Rather, each of the characters is revealed to be weak and human at their core. Their weakness stems from restrictive or even traumatic circumstances that limit their actions and abilities. It is this captivation that paves their way to authorship. Their weaknesses eventually turn to their advantage. Briony's impaired view—that of a child—becomes the truth to an audience, and Gursky's retreat into his imagination leads to meeting Alma.

Authorship is not a power acquired and mastered; rather, it takes control of its subjects, forcing them to become authors with no choice of refusing their fate. In *The History of Love*, Gursky's awareness of his authorship overwhelms him in a positive way. It becomes so much to him that he dies in the end as if overburdened with joy. In *Atonement*, Briony's authorship is a gift she cannot dispose of. To be an author becomes an obsession. She remains forever bound to tell a story in the way she wants it to be told, making her authorship a symptom of a compulsive disorder. The excess that accompanies these author figures suggests that this concept experiences rejuvenation and a stabilization. In fact, in both novels authorship is more than a simple function or abstract concept. In *The History of Love* authorship is of cultural and even ethical importance and also in *Atonement* fiction and its ethical dimensions play a central role. Briony distorts reality and creates a narcissistic kingdom where all eyes are on her, in complete horror about her powers. The reader shares that horror, when her revelation at the end of the novel supersedes the borders between reality and fiction, captivating and also engaging the reader. The way authorship operates here has definite consequences for the reader, in fact, it changes the reader's ethical stance. In the following chapter I will elaborate on this in a discussion of *Atonement* and David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*.

3.3 The Captivated Reader

> What matter who's speaking, someone said what matter who's speaking?
>
> Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*[87]

In this chapter, I will attempt to show how in two novels—David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*—the reader is used as an instrument to reveal events on the level of perception. This happens in both cases by captivating the reader, meaning that readers are maneuvered into a position in which their way of perceiving the novel is limited on purpose. However, it is precisely this limitation that enables the reader to experience the event that leads to a reevaluation of his/her reading process. Readers are forced to look back and to become, in a sense, an Orpheus-like figure: They cannot suppress the impulse to look back, trying to see what one has missed while reading the book the first time, thus making them realize that they have been previously hypnotized, captivated by the reading process.

3.3.1 *Ghostwritten*—Possessed by the Author

> Wer läutet die Glocken? Die Glöckner nicht. Die sind auf die Straße gelaufen wie alles Volk, da es so ungeheuerlich läutet. Überzeugt euch: die Glockenstuben sind leer.[...] Wird man sagen, daß *niemand* läutet? [...] Wer also läutet die Glocken Roms? – *Der Geist der Erzählung.* [...] Er ist luftig, körperlos, allgegenwärtig, nicht unterworfen dem Unterschied von hier und dort.
>
> Thomas Mann, *Der Erwählte*[88]

87 Beckett, Samuel. "Texts for Nothing." *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*. Ed. S.E. Gontarski, New York: Grove Press, 1995, 109.

88 Thomas Mann. *Der Erwählte*. 1951. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1956, 8.

3.3.1.1 Introduction

David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* begins with the description of a mysterious emotion that is felt multiple times in the novel by different characters: "Who was blowing on the nape of my neck?" (*Ghostwritten* 3). The question is never answered or even reflected upon further. It is a fleeting impression that is quickly forgotten. For the reader, however, it serves as a textual marker. The depicted impressions speak of an effect that cannot be traced back to a source. It hints at the fact that there are things occurring in the novel that happen above or beneath the level of perception.

At first, it appears as if the novel provides the reader with a variety of voices and subjective views, stories and fates collected from all over the world. In nine chapters and a coda, we follow the lives of very different characters—amongst others a terrorist, a saxophone player, a ghostwriter and a physicist—who are in most cases only loosely connected to each other and whose stories take place around the world, covering Europe, North America and Asia.[89] As readers, we are directed on an epistemological quest to find out how the stories relate to each other. The reader notices early on that the characters are influencing each other's lives more than they themselves know.[90] The stories' interconnections give the impression of a world that is not as vast as one might imagine. It appears to suggest that we are all connected, even though only through minor instances and events which seem to be motivated by chance. The novel, as Boulter contends, insists on the connectedness of the world:

89 Schoene writes on the function and status of the last chapter: "The conceptual compositeness of *Ghostwritten* is signaled by its subtitle, which introduces it as 'a novel in nine parts.' What this suggests immediately is that we are supposed to read the novel's concluding tenth section as a coda revisiting and complementing the novel as a whole rather than functioning as an independent part in its own right" (53).

90 For a study on the myriad connections between the stories, see Sarah Dillon "Chaotic Narrative: Complexity, Causality, Time, and Autopoiesis in David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten*." *Critique* 52 (2011): 135–162.

> It becomes quite clear [...] that the novel wishes to plot a sense of connection, suggesting ultimately that no action takes place in historical or geographic isolation: ultimately, the novel seems to imagine the human species within a kind of connected ecology (103).

This rather well-known and worn-out message does not, however, turn out to be the central 'message' of the novel. Instead, the variety and multiplicity of voices and fates are exposed as a fraud, at least partially. Behind many of these individual impressions, there is just one voice—a fact that has been hidden from the reader. The effect of a multi-perspective novel—in the sense that a variety of subjective views stand equally next to each other (comparable to William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)) is an illusion, since several characters have been infiltrated and dominated by a supernatural character who is guiding their actions and thoughts. A disembodied spirit inhabits several characters, steering their actions. It becomes obvious why the novel abandons each character after only one chapter and moves on to the next: There is no story-related reason for this; it was only the spirit, or 'noncorpum' as it is referred to, changing its host.

In my analysis, I intend to focus on one particular plot line—the spirit hiding behind other voices, and slowly becoming apparent—which is developed during the first five chapters of *Ghostwritten*.[91] In these sections, a presence confronts the reader, emerging out of narratives the reader is already familiar with, but suddenly appearing as completely different and giving the familiar the appearance of the unknown. What the reader witnesses does not originate from an external transcendent, but has always existed within the fictional world, lurking in the

91 I would argue that the other remaining chapters follow a different logic. I regard them as specters and remnants of what happened in the first five chapters. The remaining chapters deal with a myriad of intertextual and intratextual references, and even introduce a doppelganger figure to the spirit—a satellite—which is controlling earth. The satellite could be examined in terms of ethics, since he has to make a decision on the fate of the whole world. However, I believe I have stronger examples in my selection that illuminate the issue on ethics in a clearer way. For this reason, I decided to neglect the second part of *Ghostwritten* and to concentrate on authorship and subjectivity, since these issues are also examined in more depth in the novel.

mysteries and gaps of the novel. The reader becomes the witness of a subject's transformation from invisibility into visibility, and observes how fleeting impressions turn into a material being. As a result, readers are also required to identify their own perspective as being erroneous, as one deceived by the story's surface—in short, as captivation.

3.3.1.2 The Narrator in Hiding

The first five chapters of *Ghostwritten* are each told by a different first-person narrator. In each of these chapters, fragmented and mysterious comments arise, which cannot always be assigned to an individual character. From the third chapter onward, these comments acquire an increasingly personal touch and become distracting within the narrative. Eventually, it is revealed that these mysterious comments were made by a spirit.

Ghostwritten's third chapter, "Hong Kong," depicts one day in the life of Neal Brose, during which everything seems to go wrong. He wakes up late, misses transportation to his workplace, climbs a mountain for no reason, and dies of a heart attack at the end. The narrative is filled with flashbacks of Neal's life which reflect on his broken marriage, an affair, crimes he has committed, as well as a ghost of a female child that is living in his apartment. In hindsight, it is highly plausible that this ghost child is nothing other than the spirit itself 'hiding' behind the phenomenon. The ghost child becomes central to Neal, although its ontological status is never disclosed to the reader, who is left wondering if the ghost is a real phenomenon in the fictional world or a projection of Neal's inner struggles. Everything seems to point to the ghost being an expression of Neal's mental instability. Disturbed by peculiar events in their apartment, Neal and his wife ask for help from a friend, and learn that the apparition in their apartment is the ghost of an abandoned child. For Neal's wife, this information is unsettling, since she and Neal are trying to conceive. They have not been successful, which puts a strain on their marriage. To have a ghost child living in their apartment underlines and even mocks their lack of children. Thus, this paranormal phenomenon could be considered a projection of their frustrations.

As indicated, the ghost also seems to be connected to Neal's overall mental state. Neal is not sure what exactly the ghost child's capabilities are: "Was she here, amongst us? Holding my hand? Why had I always assumed she stayed in the apartment all day? It's more logical she roams around the place. She likes attention" (*Ghostwritten* 76). While Neal is making these assumptions, he is seconds away from missing his ferry to work, which is ironic, since it can be speculated that the spirit has caused this by governing his actions. Neal, however, is not aware of this, and simply cannot explain to himself why he didn't go on board. Curiously, Neal is adamant about claiming power over the ghost: "But this isn't a ghost story: the ghost is in the background, where she has to be. If she was in the foreground she'd be a person" (ibid., 96). This passage anticipates the fifth chapter, "Mongolia," where the true identity of the spirit is revealed—being a disembodied spirit that travels through multiple hosts—by stepping out of the background and crossing the line into the foreground of the story. Thus, Neal's statement is a metapoetic clue, pointing to the novel's hidden structure, the spirit in the background who is holding the strings in his hands.

When the ferry leaves, Neal feels unable to move. This is disturbing to him, and he begins questioning: "'Neal? Why aren't you getting on this ferry?'" (ibid., 77). He resists the thought that someone else is interfering: "No. It's nothing to do with her. I know when she's here, and she's not here now. And she can't make me do anything. I choose. I'm the master. That's one of the rules" (ibid.). After the ferry has departed, Neal does not know what to do. He strolls around and climbs a nearby mountain, at the top of which a Buddhist shrine is located. Why he decides to go up there is never explained, and remains an unanswered question, since he dies on reaching the top. While climbing the mountain, Neal's mind is flooded with ambivalent and contradictory thoughts and impressions: From "I felt fabulous. I felt immortal" (ibid., 102), he moves—just two pages later—to "My skin buzzed. My immortality was ebbing away. […] I think I had broken a toenail, I could feel something wet and warm in my shoe" (ibid., 104). In a matter of minutes, he experiences two completely different emotions: From a transcendent feeling of immortality to a regression to a

banal pain from a broken toenail. Neal's confused state is also assigned to the reader, who becomes increasingly confused by the nature of his observations, which seem to grow more ambivalent and unrelated to Neal himself. Yet, from the beginning, Neal is shown as addressing himself when he thinks as though he is talking to another person. This begins quite innocently: "Don't get too comfortable there, Neal. One, two, three, up! I said 'up!'" (ibid., 68), but his thoughts eventually turn toward bigger questions: "What led me here?" (ibid., 105) and "What life is this?" (ibid., 78). On first sight, these questions could be read as merely self-reflective, but they soon become more intense. They turn self-critical: "Who are you to tell anyone they are ill, Neal?" (ibid., 94) and "I don't understand you sometimes" (ibid., 79). Shortly afterward, other, less ambivalent thoughts are voiced. They have to be attributed to another voice, since an unidentified 'I' pops up: "I listened to Neal's heart. It sounded like a percussion grenade in a neighbouring valley" (ibid., 88). It is not quite clear who makes this observation. Until now, one has assumed that Neal is narrating the story, but perhaps this was a false assumption. The 'I' suggests that there is an additional narrator or character present. Thus, Neal's narrative displays a struggle for the authorial voice in this story.

The 'I' without a subject becomes a fully-fledged character in Chapter 5, "Mongolia." In this story, the mystery around Neal's inner chaos is solved when the reader witnesses a similar phenomenon. The reader meets Caspar, a 20-year-old Danish backpacker who is travelling on a train through Mongolia. The reader again notices that there is an unknown voice present. Yet, this time, the self-reflective comments turn into an autonomous voice. The person in the background finally steps into the foreground: "The large sky made Caspar think of the land where he had grown up, somewhere called Zetland. Caspar was feeling lonely and homesick. I felt no anticipation, just endlessness" (ibid., 155). Caspar is referred to by name, insinuating that he is not the one who is telling this part of the story. One page later Caspar is referred to as a 'host:' "Sherry's eyes turned towards my host" (ibid., 156). Finally a new subject enters the narrative: "Caspar was not a natural storyteller, so I stepped in" (ibid., 157) and "Caspar wondered

for a moment where his story had come from. I closed his mind and nudged it towards sleep" (ibid., 158). There appears to be another person who is both narrating the story and intervening. He has control over Caspar's bodily functions, making him fall asleep, and helping him out when it comes to telling stories to his friend Sherry.

Neal and Caspar, as well as the other 'hosts' in the previous chapters, can be viewed as captive figures. Their lives are subjected to a force that controls them, inhabiting them and taking possession of their thoughts and bodies. One starts questioning the characters' actions, wondering whether they were truly their own. Caspar's explanation to Sherry of why he decided to travel to Mongolia reinforces these doubts: "'I was on my way to Laos, when this impulse just came over me. I told myself there was nothing here, but I couldn't fight it. Mongolia! I've never even thought about the place. Maybe I smoked too much pot at Lake Dal'" (ibid., 156–157). Similar to Neal, who blames a ghost child, Caspar looks for an explanation for his ungrounded actions. The mentioned 'impulse' could have been the spirit forcing his will onto Caspar. Neal might have succumbed to a similar 'impulse' when he climbed up the mountain that led to his death.

3.3.1.3 Captivated by the Ghost of the Narrative

The spirit's existence reflects storytelling on a figurative level. Every character in a novel is, in some way, always 'manipulated' or narrated. They are formed and guided puppets of the plot. In this case, what should be the 'secret' doings of an author are transferred to a ghost, who guides 'his' characters from the inside. Thomas Mann's "Geist der Erzählung," which translates as both the 'ghost' and 'mind' of the narrative, is not an abstract concept here, but has become instead an actual character in Mitchell's novel.[92] Boulter notes:

92 Equally as fitting as Thomas Mann's quote would be Käte Friedemann's phrasing: "[Der Erzähler] symbolisiert die uns seit Kant geläufige erkenntnistheoretische Auffassung, daß wir die Welt nicht ergreifen, wie sie an sich ist, sondern wie sie durch das Medium eines betrachtenden Geistes hindurchgegangen" (26).

> This elaborate narrative neatly serves, of course, as a mise en abyme of Mitchell's larger narrative practice: what is an author but a sort of non-corpum inhabiting, directing, for a time, the mind of a character, only to move on to another? (109).

In *Ghostwritten* the readers can be considered 'prisoners' of the spirit, since they are being manipulated into a particular position: They are made to believe that they are the observers of many different stories linked to each other only by chance. They remain unaware that a different voice is hidden inside these chapters and have to think otherwise through the reading process. Thus, they draw the wrong conclusion, for example, by questioning Neal's sanity. Another example for this is the fourth chapter, "Holy Mountain." In this story, readers are led to believe, along with the female protagonist, that she is talking to a tree. However, the voice of the 'tree' has also been the ghost hiding inside the tree. This piece of information changes the way one sees the protagonist completely. Earlier, it was not entirely clear whether the woman was hallucinating when she heard the tree's voice. Her dependency on the tree suggests a mental instability for which there are multiple reasons, since she lives a rather difficult life. When it is revealed that she has spoken to a 'real' being (at least in the novel), the evaluation of her mental state changes.

Only in "Mongolia" does the reader belatedly recognize what has been there all the time—an additional voice underlying the narration. The spirit's voice breaks out of the expected; it breaks out of character, surpassing Caspar's mind, revealing itself as an independent 'I.' Neal provides a fitting metaphor for this process when he compares the arrival of the ghost child in his apartment with the increased humming noises of a fridge:

> Her coming was the hum of a fridge. A sound you grow accustomed to before you hear it. I didn't know how long cupboards had been left open, air-conditioners switched on, curtains twitched open, before I became conscious of her. [...] She didn't come in the dramatic way they do in the movies. Nothing was hurled across the room. Not ghosts in the machine,

> no silly messages typed on my computer or spelt out with the fridge magnet letters.[...] More like a medical condition, that, while terminal, grows in such small increments that it is impossible to diagnose until too late. Little things: hidden objects (ibid., 82).

This comment is highly self-reflexive, since it mirrors the novelist's own narrative technique. In the novel, the reader notices little inconsistencies that are disconcerting. These phenomena increase until they cannot be rationalized anymore, and are revealed to be the actions of a spirit. The increased noise of the humming fridge can be compared to the voice of the ghost that becomes more perceptible as the novel progresses, breaking through the common assumptions that the reader has already made. Readers experience the materialization of the author-ghost as a sudden event that restructures their previous assumptions. The spirit can only attain this surprising effect by the reader's lack of knowledge, by the fact the he or she has been captivated by the way the story has been presented so far. As in *Atonement* and *THoL*, the condition of experiencing an event is an utter restriction, such as misinformation or a lack of information. The later revelation motivates the reader to become more involved in the narrative, fascinated by its effects. Differently, then, from a postmodern conceptualized involvement, the reader does not construct meaning itself by linking intertextual clues and closing gaps, which is how, for example, the postmodern writer and theorist Raymond Federman describes the role of the reader:

> The writer [in postmodern fiction] will no longer be considered a prophet, a philosopher, or even a sociologist who predicts, teaches, or reveals absolute truths, nor will he be looked upon (admiringly and romantically) as the omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent creator, but he will stand on equal footing with the reader in their efforts *to make sense* out of the language common to both of them, *to give sense* to the fiction of life (14).

The contemporary readers, however, have to recognize themselves as not being on an equal footing with the omnipotent creator, but as being subjected to the narrative's force. Readers discover that they have been directed by the 'Geist der Erzählung,' and have become captivated readers.

3.3.2 *Atonement*—The Giant from the Mist

3.3.2.1 Introduction

As explained in the previous chapter, the protagonist Briony tells the story of the 'crime' she has committed in her youth, but only reveals at the end that she is actually the author of the story, hiding herself behind an impersonal narrator. Additionally, Briony has significantly changed her story. She neglects to tell her reader that because she has wrongly accused Robbie of rape, she has interrupted a love story that could never be resumed. Both her sister and Robbie die before they have a chance to meet again. As with *Ghostwritten*, the reader is also fooled in *Atonement* and restricted by his/her preconceptions. The reading process becomes a captivation. In comparison to *Ghostwritten*, however, the reader's deception is morally problematic in *Atonement*; the reader realizes that he has become the involuntary subject in a moral experiment. The implied reader's sympathies have been used against him/her, with ethical implications.

3.3.2.2 The Displaced Reader

The literary critic Peter Childs states that Briony's writing skill is both her gift and her curse (cf. 135). It is a curse because Briony cannot prevent repeating her crime over and over again, doing with the implied reader what she has done with the police and her family: Betraying the truth. However, Briony's manipulation captivates the reader, which makes the discovery of her authorship similar to a revelation—it becomes an event that changes the reader's view of the story that was just presented, and his/her own involvement.

An appropriate metaphor that captures Briony's position in the novel and the captivating effect she has on readers is "giant from the mist." This image stems from Briony's reflection, made on the evening of that fateful day on which the story takes place. After accusing Robbie of rape, Briony is sent to her room where she sums up the day, thinking to herself, that the day has moved "from the innocent rehearsal of her play to the emergence of the giant from the mist" (McEwan 183). The giant refers to two people. It alludes to another misreading involving Robbie, who arrives at the Tallis home (on the night of the rape) carrying one of the twins on his back, thereby accidentally creating an unnerving image:

> At first they saw nothing, though Briony thought she could make out the tread of shoes along the drive. Then everyone could hear it, and there was a collective murmur and shifting of weight as they caught sight of an indefinable shape, no more than a grayish smudge against the white, almost a hundred yards away (ibid., 182).

What the onlookers recognize is only a "smudge," too far away to be identified. Slowly the shape comes closer, but only to confuse them even more:

> As the shape took form the waiting group fell silent again. No one could quite believe what was emerging. [...] No one in this age of telephones and motor cars could believe that giants seven or eight feet high existed in crowded Surrey. But here it was, an apparition as inhuman as it was purposeful. The thing was impossible and undeniable, and heading their way (ibid., 182).

What the people in the Tallis home see is supposedly a giant, a figure from fairytales, nightmares, or fantasies. When the shape approaches, the mystery is resolved, since the police and the family recognize that it is Robbie, carrying a child on his back (cf. 182). The image of the giant stepping out of the mist also applies to Briony herself: Out of the "innocent rehearsal of her play," she emerges as a literary giant—a child who has no control over her talent, misuses her imagination, and

condemns an innocent man in the process. In this case, the giant refers to Briony's powers as an author figure and the mist refers to the confusion or deceit she invents. Using this line of argument, it is fitting that Cormack refers to Briony's imagination as a "fog, something that obscures facts and misleads the unwary" (82). Robbie is mistaken for a giant because of the natural environment (fog, distance). Briony is perceived as a giant because of a 'literary' fog: specifically, that of her narrative (that hides her true position in the novel), which one could also term a "narrative spell" (McEwan 7). Similarly, as Robbie's true shape is only revealed once the inspector steps closer—turning a giant into an ordinary man—Briony's true shape is revealed to the reader by turning her from a misled child into a powerful author figure.

The fog that Briony creates is meant for the reader. The implied reader is constantly put in the 'wrong' position guided by the narrative perspective. An omniscient narrator provides different perspectives focalized through Briony, Cecilia, their mother and Robbie. But each perspective is revealed to be lacking, denouncing the voice of the individual, most obviously in Briony's misreadings. Puschman-Nalenz notes that the implied reader appears to be in a privileged position compared to the characters, due to the fact that he or she has access to different perspectives:

> The shifting or "variable internal focalisations" in *Atonement*, which discards a homogeneous narrative perspective, results for the reader in an intricate process of constructing the imaginary world, a process in which he is frequently granted the advantages of being better informed than the respective reflector figure, because the reader also gets to know the inside of the "other minds" in the story (190–191).

The external omniscient narrator, who claims some sense of overview, highlights the failures of each perspective. He does not shy away from exposing Briony's naïve thoughts whenever possible and also imposes his own ideological perspective on to the narrative. This causes the reader to adapt a critical stance toward the young Briony, allowing him/herself to feel superior to her and the other characters.

The superior position felt by the reader is, however, an illusion. Readers are not superior to Briony (or other characters), but have, in fact, been held captive by the fog Briony created, since Briony is actually the author figure who installed this omniscient narrator. The different perspectives are all filtered through Briony's mind. Schwalm explains that "[h]er [Briony's] modernist choice is one that seeks to pretend the independent existence of individual minds by limiting the visibility of her authorial power" (178). Briony has indeed restricted her visibility as authorial power, as the reader is completely unaware of the narrator being so involved in the story itself. Thus, the novel can be viewed as the portrayal of one mind hiding and veiling itself with the minds of others, a technique similar to the one the reader has witnessed in *Ghostwritten*. The reader does not recognize Briony as an author figure for two reasons: Firstly, *Atonement*'s implied author has neglected to inform the implied reader that he or she is reading a book of a fictional author, and secondly, Briony employs a narrator that does not comment on her true identity, instead letting readers assume it is an impersonal instance. The reader's 'weakness' or even 'captivity' in this instance, is, thus, a somewhat harmless, yet consequential, restriction, which the reader remains unaware of till the end.

There is a dispute amongst literary critics about the exact moment at which the reader recognizes that Briony is not simply a character in the novel, but also the author of the narrative. Head writes: "The implication [referring to 'clues' the novel provides] can escape readers—or, indeed, reviewers—on a first reading" (165). Cormack has identified two moments in the novel that reveal Briony's secret authorship before Briony herself does. Both instances occur in Part Three of the novel. As a young adult, Briony works on a story that deals with the events of that fateful day in 1934, entitled 'Two Figures by a Fountain,' which revolves around Robbie and Celia's argument at the fountain. After finishing, Briony sends her story to a literary magazine. The editor of the magazine advises her to make some changes: "A young man and a woman by a fountain, who clearly have a great deal of unresolved feeling between them, tussle over a Ming vase and break it. (More than one of us thought Ming rather too priceless to take outdoors? Wouldn't

Sèvres or Nymphenburg suit your purpose?)" (McEwan 313). This detail is relevant, since the vase described in *Atonement* is, in fact, not a Ming vase, but a Meissen vase (cf. ibid., 23). This is the first clue that *Atonement* is a literary product; one could speculate that the editor's suggestions have already been implemented into the story, which would make the first section of the novel the creative product of Briony. At this point, the reader might realize that the story has been tampered with, as Cormack writes: "we now realize that we have been duped. We are forced to return to the scene at the fountain—indeed to the whole first section—and regard it as a pastiche" (75). The end of the third section points in the same direction, as it ends with the signature "BT London 1999," which implicates Briony Tallis as the author.

However, I argue, like Head and James, that these clues and others can only be fully absorbed when re-reading the novel. James makes the argument that during the first read, the reader is simply not 'prepared' to look: "*Atonement* and *The Blind Assassin* [the novel by Margaret Atwood] are rich with clues that can catch the reader's attention without his understanding their significance—as in a good mystery novel, but here the reader doesn't even know the book he's reading is a mystery" (138). Readers are simply in the wrong position. To be able to perceive those clues, readers would have to inhabit another position, one that is cut off from the guiding hand of the external omniscient narrator. When readers realize where they actually stand, their perception changes completely, but also their position toward the text. The readers' position is a different one from what they believed it to be, since they are one additional step removed from the narrative. Albers and Caeners comment on the damaging effect: "It [the epilogue] completely shatters the fictional world of the main narrative *by drastically shifting the reader's perspective*" [emphasis added] (711). Mathews notes how the relationship to the narrator changes: "Whereas Briony's narrative draws the reader into the lives of the characters through the omniscient perspective of a third-person narrator, the revelation of the story's partiality upsets this relation of intimacy" (157). The implied readers are in the 'right' position only when it is too late, when every clue has already passed them by, leaving them scrambling to catch up.

The reader is made into a doppelganger of Briony, they are forced to behave in the same way Briony does, to look back to the 'past,' to the first sections of the novel, trying to solve the question where she (or he) went wrong. D'Angelo even contends that "the reader must go back and 'reread' everything he or she has previously encountered" (100).

The readers' 'lateness' is carefully planned, because readership is significant to Briony's actual aim: A secular confession. D'Hoker remarks on the problems of a secular confession: "Not surprisingly, secular confession is a poor match to this powerful religious discourse. Even though secular confession has a reader or audience, it has no authorities empowered to absolve" (32). Briony deals with the same problem in the epilogue where she asks:

> How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to [...] There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms (McEwan 371).

Her (fictive) readership, thus, takes on the role of a father confessor. Yet, she does not adhere to the genre of confession, or mark the text as being a confession (she never asks for forgiveness, does not seek some kind of higher power or narrate the story from the first person). Thus, one can assume that she tries to hide the fact that she is even confessing. Moreover, the fact that she has changed the ending makes her confession a lie. Consequently, she deals with the notion of 'atonement' in a random manner. For the implied readers, the situation remains problematic yet. Since they were misled and discovered belatedly that Briony is responsible for the narrative, they had little chance of reading the novel as atonement. If the readers are to serve as the 'higher power' here, this status was imposed upon them, and not chosen. Their role was scripted, and they were only puppets in this script.

This also makes forgiveness difficult. Wells claims that the reader "can choose to believe that her act of atonement has been a genuine one" (110). For Wells, readers are able to judge for themselves, and thus,

able to forgive Briony. Müller-Wood makes a similar case, arguing that readers can choose to remain distanced toward the novel: "I suggest that McEwan urges the reader to actively reject the novel's overt story line to explore its more unsettling implications" (158, Fn 2). I disagree with these claims, since the implied readers are not uninvolved observers/listeners, like a father confessor, but have been drawn into the fictional universe that Briony created. Crucial information has been withheld from the readers, which betrays the trust between readers and the author figure Briony. Readers have been made into captivated subjects. Their actions have been laid out for them. They have been forced to make mistakes similar to Briony's. They have participated in a false reality, a misreading and, thus, have become equally guilty. Cormack writes how to mistake fiction for reality is a mistake the novel warns of:

> *Atonement*'s metafiction is not there to present the reader with the inevitable penetration of the real with the fictive. Instead the novel serves to show that the two worlds are entirely distinct: there is the world of the real and the world of literature, and woe betide those who confuse the two (82).

Yet, for the reader this warning comes too late, since he or she has been already aligned with Briony. Seaboyer even contends that one could argue that the reader is victimized:

> do we risk becoming 'victims' of the text? Of course not; since Robbie, and indeed Briony, are fictions, there can be no violation—and yet. The process of being drawn into Briony's/McEwan's doubled narrative is a little like the process of being seduced by the attractions of Milton's Satan, and thus, as Stanley Fish has argued, experiencing in small the seduction and fall of humanity (32).

This form of narrative authority that Briony represents does not reinstall a traditional author-concept; instead it makes the status of this particular author figure extremely problematic. Briony becomes an evil magician casting her spell on readers, who confuse what is real with delusions and who become part of her tricks without wanting to be.

3.3.3 Claimed by the Author

In contrast to Beckett's famous quote, used by Foucault in his well known essay *What is an Author?*, here, it turns out that it *does* matter who is speaking. Contemporary novels share the critique of authorship as an unshakable institution, but differently from the works of Auster, Rushdie, and others. Instead of destabilizing author figures completely, making them disappear or disintegrate, they are very present forces to deal with. However, each author figure is an inherently flawed being. The spirit in *Ghostwritten* appears almost like a god-like narrator: He is intervening and influencing, without readers even knowing it. However, it is only because we were deceived and the spirit hides itself that the spirit's role appears to be so omnipotent. In reality, the narrator is no god at all, but rather a limited being. He is unable to live independently without a host and so has to occupy others' minds. This bears similarities to the narrator in *Atonement*, also a 'hidden' narrator, who captivates the readers in her web in order to make them forgive her. At the bottom of this, however, we find a child, unable to deal with the complexities of reality, and later on unwilling to accept her own guilt. In addition, the author figures' power is ethically problematic. The reader feels 'betrayed' by what the novel has done with him or her. By revealing themselves as secret puppeteers, the author figures force the readers to recognize themselves as puppets on strings, making them question their own status as readers. In *Atonement* and *Ghostwritten,* author figures are powerful entities the reader is tasked to struggle or position themselves against. The captivation of the reader, who reacts to this, is what makes authorship visible in the first place. Thus, the reader's captivation is an active part of the creation of the novel and its author figures.

4 Captives of Ethics

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will examine the issue of responsibility in three novels *The Road*, *Oryx and Crake* and *The White Tiger*. In these novels subjects enter into relationships that steer them towards carrying out responsible actions. These actions cannot, however, be considered to be 'moral' actions in every case. Nevertheless, in all cases an event demands responsibility from the characters through which they either experience a new positioning, a shift of some kind or— more violently—a displacement.

In poststructuralism, responsibility and ethics in general constitute a topic that is to some extent limited in how it is treated. In poststructuralist thought, responsibility presupposes certain assumptions that are highly problematic. Ethical responsibility or moral rules imply a certain form of hierarchy and authority that poststructuralist thinkers renounce. Schwerdtfeger summarizes this with the term 'rule ethics' as follows:

> Rule ethics, by defining what is right and wrong, separates people into (good) insiders—those who follow the rules and conventions—and (bad) outsiders—those who do not know or follow these rules. In fact, rule ethics such as the biblical ten commandments were partly intended to distinguish one people from others. Toleration of otherness, therefore, was not an objective of this ethical concept. By not defining any rules, postmodern ethics does not permit the exclusion of others (22).

'Rule ethics' thus distinguishes between right and wrong and thus also between good and bad people, which is highly problematic in times of cultural diversion and a multifaceted life. Similar to Schwerdtfeger, Zygmunt Bauman explains why such an ethics is even impossible to come up with:

> The foolproof—universal and and unshakably founded—ethical code will never be found; having singed our fingers once too often, we know now what we did not know then, when we embarked on this journey of exploration: that a non-aporetic, non-ambivalent morality, an ethics that is universal and 'objectively founded,' is a practical impossibility; perhaps also an *oxymoron*, a contradiction in terms (10).

It is doubted that responsibility and ethics exist in a pure form, similar to the gift that was discussed previously in this dissertation. In the same manner, responsibility can be limited to economy and calculation. If I am responsible for my neighbor by helping him out, does he 'owe' me reciprocation the next time I ask? If so, then responsibility becomes reduced to a calculating or measuring logic that can no longer, therefore, be considered 'ethical,' since it represents an impoverished version of ethical behavior. This means that I give not because I choose to give, but because I respond to an obligation. Derrida explains this aporia in "Passions," in which he speaks about the nature of friendship and politeness in relation to duty:

> A gesture 'of friendship' or 'of politeness' would be neither friendly nor polite if it were purely and simply to obey a rule. But this duty to eschew the rule of ritualized decorum also demands that one goes beyond the very language of duty. One must not be friendly or polite out of duty ("Passions" 8).

Derrida cleverly chose politeness as an example, because politeness involves an arbitrary set of rules which are not necessarily bound by rational logic but are, rather, based on tradition and cultural codes. To simply follow a system of 'rules of politeness' paradoxically destroys the idea of 'politeness' or 'friendship,' in this cultural sense, since the principle structuring those areas is that everything has to be given freely without restriction or calculation. That is what constitutes the essence of politeness and friendship. As in the case of the gift, the moment calculation enters the stage, the ethical act is corrupted. In short, following the law out of duty towards the law would destroy what it should have created in the first place, and this makes one's behavior unethical:

> It is insufficient to say that the 'ought' [il faut] of friendship, like that of politeness, must not be the order of duty. It must not ever take the form of a rule, and certainly not of a ritual rule. As soon as it yields to the necessity of applying the generality of a prescription to a single case, the gesture of friendship or of politeness would itself be destroyed ("Passions" 9).

What Derrida strives for is singularity, saying in an interview that a judge "has to reinvent the law each time" ("The Villanova Roundtable" 17). Every ethical action has to be decided upon by itself, without being bound to any structure that would make this action an expected one that adheres to given rules. Derrida states that to take over responsibility or to be able to make a 'just' decision means to decide every time anew. By contrast, to apply general rules to a singular case inhibits moral behavior. A singular decision, however, is "in some sense 'impossible,' as it must involve a mad leap beyond any rational calculations" (Reynolds 50). Ethical phenomena in Derrida's writings all seem to face the same problem: they are destroyed if calculation comes into play. An ideal just decision as an ideal responsible act, would be located outside of rational logic and expectation.

> One can never know if one has been responsible or not, one cannot have a good conscience: "I made the right decision," "I fulfilled my responsibilities," "My debts are paid," "This is where my (or your) responsibility lies," and so on—all such statements are contrary to the essence of responsibility as well as to the essence of a decision. This is why responsibility is infinite. It is infinite because of the finitude of the one who "decides" or who "takes responsibility" ("Nietzsche and the Machine" 232).

Responsibility or ethics, as Derrida thinks of it is connected to the same kind of excess as the gift. He compares, for example, justice to the gift in "Force of Law": "a gift without exchange, without circulation, without recognition or gratitude, without economic circularity, without calculation and without rules, without reason and without theoretical rationality, in the sense of regulating mastery" (254). In "The Villanova Roundtable" he becomes even more explicit, describing why both gift and justice are impossible phenomena:

> That is the condition the gift shares with justice. A justice that could appear as such, that could be calculated, a calculation of what is just what is not just, saying what has to be given in order to be just—that is not justice. That is social security, economics. Justice and gift should go beyond calculation (19).

For Derrida, however, this 'beyond' remains impossible to attain, since justice is a sort of theoretical horizon: "Justice remains *to come*, it remains *by coming* [*la justice reste à venir*], it has to come [*elle a à venir*] it *is* to-come, the to-come [*elle* est *à-venir*], it deploys the very dimension of events irreducible to come" ("Force of Law" 256).

4.2 The Responsible Subject

In the novels I am discussing each character carries out a responsible act, often against his will or his intuition. In most cases the characters simply have no other choice. Responsibility in the novels discussed emerges through the interplay of two things: a captivation that is utterly restrictive—limiting the character—and an event that changes the position of the character, allowing him or her to go beyond their initial restrictions. The most positive example of an empowerment in this chapter is provided by *The Road*. Here, the father is a captive of his son who turns him from a suicidal killer into a hopeful being. Yet, the change or shift that turns a captive being into a subject is not always what one would consider a positive development. Often, the shift is revealed as being uncomfortable, either for the character himself or for the reader who might have identified with the captive character. Thus, the empowerment of a character can be problematic in a similar way, as has been observed in *Atonement*. Here, the empowerment of the author figure was based on the victimhood of others, among them the reader's. Similar to this are *Oryx and Crake* and *The White Tiger*. In both novels the society the characters live in sets strong boundaries and does not allow a breaking out of them. Thus, the characters' position in life is inevitably bound to political and societal factors. However, not only their captive state is informed by these circumstances, but also their becoming empowered subject is. In fact, the event that they

experience does not transport them completely beyond the borders of the situation they are in, but rather enables them to take on a new position *inside* the system. This also means that their becoming an *ethical* subject is determined by the societal and political circumstances they find themselves in. Because of this, the nature of their ethical actions is difficult to come to terms with at times. Their ethical actions can only be considered ethical when taking into account the circumstances and the system in which these characters are situated. Ethics as presented here cannot serve as exemplary forms of ethical behavior, but rather as very narrow definitions of it. Nevertheless, in the world of the characters their actions have an ethical foundation: the characters act a particular way, because they want to do good.

What all characters nevertheless share throughout the novels selected is that by experiencing a shift they become responsible and ethical beings in some way. The father in *The Road* invents ethical guidelines for his son who becomes an ethical being *par excellence*. Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake* takes an ethical stand and lives with the consequences of his decision. Even, Balram in *The White Tiger*, behaves in an ethical way in the end. Although he becomes a murderer, he keeps close to his nephew and takes care of him, providing eventually a better life for him.

4.2.1 *The Road*—The Responsibility of the Liar

4.2.1.1 Introduction

"Barren, silent, godless" (McCarthy 4), is how Cormac McCarthy describes a post-apocalyptic America in *The Road*. Nearly every critic who has approached *The Road* has written about its ethical dimension. Lydia Cooper states that, in respect to McCarthy's earlier works:

> *The Road* depicts a world even bleaker (if possible) than the world of *Blood Meridian* [1985], but the novel nevertheless privileges the haunting obligation of ethical behavior, indicating that the darkest possible world might not be entirely bereft of people able to believe in human goodness (133).

The novel takes place several years after some sort of catastrophe that marked the end of life and society as we know it. It follows a father and son, who remain nameless, as they travel across the country, searching for food, shelter, and—if it can even be hoped for—some semblance of safety and stability. Establishing a specific timeline is difficult for most things in the book. The mother traveled with the man and son for a time, but committed suicide prior to the beginning of the narration. In addition, given that the boy was born soon after the cataclysm, and assuming that he is somewhere between eight and ten years old, one can gather that the story takes place about a decade after the catastrophe. What exactly has lead to the world becoming an uninhabitable place is not explained in the novel, but can be insinuated from the descriptions the novel provides: "The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (McCarthy 52). Most critics interpret this scene as indicating a nuclear, rather than natural, disaster, such as a meteor strike. Many descriptions support this assumption: The sun is clouded by soot; the word 'ash' is often referred to: "soft ash blowing" (ibid., 4), "ashen daylight" (ibid., 5), "[d]ust and ash everywhere" (ibid., 7); the days are short and the nights dark and cold: "Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before"(ibid., 3); there is no animal life, nor is there any sign of vegetation. Machat has suggested that the novel provides little information about the catastrophe on purpose, in order to frame the event as ambivalent (cf. 145). Salván identifies this ambivalence as a psychosomatic symptom. Considering the father as responsible in giving information about the catastrophe (to the son), she points out that the father's inability to give an appropriate account of the event speaks for his traumatic state as a witness. As the "traumatic experience par excellence, the apocalypse around which *The Road* is narrated must necessarily remain a blind spot in the story, never to be fully apprehended by characters or by readers" (149).[93]

93 Here, Salván also draws on Laub who speaks of a "collapse of witnessing" that goes along with traumatic experiences (1995: 65).

The remaining survivors in *The Road* live in a "hyper-pragmatic world" (Graulund 66) that does not possess any cultural meaning, nor is there any transcendent sphere to speak of.[94] The human community has been shattered and only a few family clans remain. These families, due to a dearth of other options, have apparently succumbed to cannibalism and barbarism: "The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes" (McCarthy 181). This is implied when they find the remains of an embryo in the fire: "What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit" (ibid., 198). In a world where women choose to become pregnant in order to provide human food, a rebuilding of community seems unimaginable. Their lost state of belonging nowhere is exemplified by their namelessness: they are only referred to as 'the man' and 'the boy,' not even 'father' and 'son.' This has also been observed by Gwinner:

> In general, the sense that basic identities are uncoupled from referents is established when they see evidence or interact with others. When they see the first person they encounter in the novel, an apparent victim of a lightening strike, the boy wonders, "Who is it?" [McCarthy 49]. The man replies, "I don't know. Who is anybody?" [ibid., 49]. [...] When a hostile 'roadcat' asks if the man is a doctor, the man asserts that he is "not anything" [ibid., 64]. Later, when another man, Ely, asks "What are you?" they are at a loss to tender self-identification: "They'd no way to answer the question" [ibid., 162] (142).

That the protagonists are in a state of limbo is underscored by the specific way language is used: "Significant is the refusal to use verbs and the preference of participles [...] McCarthy presents situations, not the

94 Warde points out that the loss of order can be recognized in their constant occupation with telephone books and maps, noting that "the protagonists of *The Road* look to maps and phone books (abstracted images and printed texts) as emblems of a moral and spatial order that is indiscernible in the anarchic post-apocalyptic world through which they travel" (127).

actions that led to them. With this technique the author underlines how the characters find themselves powerless and unable to act confronted with a nature out of balance" (Gaile 291).[95]

4.2.1.2 The Captivation by the Son

The 'end of the world' was, ironically, for the father (and mother), marked by the birth of their son. This is central to the novel, even though it happens before the novel starts. The son exemplifies unprotected and vulnerable life *par excellence*. When the father comments on his physical appearance, he notes: "He looked like something out of a deathcamp. Starved, exhausted, sick with fear" (ibid., 117). From the start it is made clear that the father's life depends on the son's existence. Without the son the father would not be alive, "the boy was all that stood between him and death" (ibid., 29). Schaub remarks: "The father's foundation, from the beginning of the novel, is the son, and there is perhaps in this coupling of his own existence to that of his son's a degree of selfishness, an unnatural reliance of the father upon the son" (158). They are "each the other's world entire" (McCarthy 6), reconstructing a world together. This dependence on the son I identify as evidence of the father's captivation by his son. This captivation has rather paradoxical effects for the father which will be elaborated in the following.

Juge has pointed out that the topic of fatherhood and how it is portrayed in *The Road* is one of the aspects that makes this novel different from McCarthy's other novels:

> There are several answers to the question why *The Road* is a very peculiar novel in McCarthy's corpus. Some of those answers have to do with the geographical and historical setting of the novel which stands out in McCarthy almost perfectly divided Appalachian and Western novels. [...]

95 The original quote reads: "Besonders augenfällig ist bei der Lektüre des Romans aber der verbreitete Verzicht auf Verben zugunsten von Partizipien [...] McCarthy stellt Situationen dar, nicht die Handlungen, die dazu führten. Mit dieser Technik unterstreicht der Autor, dass seine Romanfiguren der aus den Fugen geratenen Welt ohnmächtig gegenüberstehen und aktiven Handeln nicht mehr befähigt sind" (291; transl. mine).

> I would argue that, with regards to Plato's theory and McCarthy's past novels, the theme that sets this book as a work apart is guidance, as well as the narrative bond between father and son that McCarthy has created. Many previous novels depicted father/son relations as being inexistent or unsatisfactory. Fathers in McCarthy fail at providing worthy examples [...] Fathers of male protagonists in McCarthy's novels stand out by their absence or incapacity to be educators which causes most of the young heroes to set out on journeys without a father and worse, without a guide (24).

The father in the *The Road* is a very strong guide and he takes his job seriously. For him, protecting his son is a holy mission: "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (McCarthy 77). The father is even willing to use violence to protect his son. But violence must also be applied *against* his son if the situation demands for it: "Can you do it? When the time comes? [...] Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be?" (ibid., 114). In order to save his son from rape and being eaten alive, the father would have to kill him in a situation where they would have no chance of escape. His responsibility to kill both of them, however, is limited by the means and makes his plan even more brutal: "A single round left in the revolver. You will not face the truth. You will not" (ibid., 68). He would not be able to kill both the boy and himself with the gun; in such an emergency the father would be forced to kill his son by his own hand. The father's captivation which is basically an unbreakable devotion to his son, makes it easy for him to ignore all kinds of moral pitfalls, and turns him also into a potential killer.

However, the father's captivation shows in other forms, too. Against his own will, he also provides the son with a metaphysical shelter, since the son demands this from him. The father has lost all hope: "He knew that he was placing hopes where he'd no reason to. He hoped it would be brighter where for all he knew the world grew darker daily" (ibid., 213). However, he cannot act according to his

true beliefs, since his son's morality would degenerate. When he hints to the boy that there might not be many humans left on earth the following happens:

> The boy looked away. [...] He shook his head. I dont know what we're doing, he said. The man started to answer. But he didnt. After a while he said: There are people. There are people and we'll find them. You'll see (ibid., 244).[96]

The father tries to calm the son by reassuring him they are the 'good guys.' Thus, the son is the driving force behind the father's endeavors to come up with some sort of ethical belief and trust. This is most evident when it comes to the expression both use extensively throughout the novel: 'to carry the fire.' To 'carry the fire' means something along the lines of 'doing good,' 'staying true' and 'keeping on going.' Throughout the novel the phrase, "carrying the fire," is employed almost like a prayer or nursery rhyme, and its repetitive nature seems to calm the boy down. One example occurs in the following passage. In this passage, the boy voices one of his greatest fears, namely that he and his father would be forced to resort to cannibalism, because of hunger and thirst:

> We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?
> No. Of course not.
> Even if we were starving?
> [...] No matter what.
> No. No matter what.
> Because we're the good guys.
> Yes.
> And we're carrying the fire.
> And we're carrying the fire. Yes (ibid., 128–129).

96 McCarthy shortens negations such as "wouldn't", "can't" or "won't." Since this is the way he employs language throughout his work, I refrain in the following from commenting on this with '[sic].'

Wielenberg notes that fire is not only important on a metaphorical level, its physical counterpart is needed every day by father and son: "Fire sustains them; it keeps them warm and cooks their food. It allows them to play cards and allows the man to read to the child at night. Fire is the foundation of civilization" (3). In *The Road* fire is the foundation of the civilization, not only because it allows them to survive, but because it guides them in an ethical way, too. Yet, being 'good' is not an ethical principle that the father chooses to believe in. Most of the things the father tells the son lack any real foundation; they are simply rituals without basis: "Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (McCarthy 74). His actions are often contrary to his own convictions, and he is therefore referred to as an "old world thespian" (ibid., 10), who recognizes his life as untrue: "[e]very day is a lie" (ibid., 238). Cooper supports the father's characterization as an actor: "[t]he father, poised between two disparate possible realities, chooses to *act* as though the more hopeful possibility is the true reality" (143). The father's lies are a means of protecting the son and keeping him in good spirits. Thus, the father's ethical principles are part of a "strategy rather than a belief, a recourse to religious language and forms in the absence of any foundation for them in the world" (Schaub 161). The father's actions are the result of his captivation, his boundless love for his son. He carries the fire, because it is his obligation, not because it is his conviction.

To be credible the father has to keep his promises, adhere to his own provisionary rules. One example is provided early in the novel: the boy notices that the father gives him more food than he allows himself to have. Apparently they have talked about this before, and the father has agreed at that time on sharing equally with the boy. The boy reminds his father to keep his promise:

> I have to watch you all the time, the boy said.
> I know.
> If you break little promises you'll break big ones. That's what you said.
> I know. But I wont (McCarthy 34).

The father has to live by what he teaches and is bound to his own "ceremonies out of the air," becoming the breath that is supposed to fill them with life (ibid., 74). But the son finds himself also in a restricted position. He feels forced to actually believe what the father tells him, even though he is suspicious of his father and the way he deals with truth:

> There are other good guys. You said so.
> Yes.
> So where are they?
> They're hiding.
> [...] Is that true?
> Yes. That's true.
> But it might not be true.
> I think it's true.
> Okay.
> You don't believe me.
> I believe you.
> Okay.
> I always believe you.
> I dont think so.
> Yes I do. I have to (ibid., 184–185).

They are mutually dependent. The son believes the father as long as the father adheres to his own rules. Thus, the father has to provide the basis for the son's belief by acting in an ethical way, he has to "[e]voke the forms" (ibid., 74). The son captivates his father: he motivates the father to behave in a certain way, which is shown throughout the novel on the simplest level—communication: "Getting the father to talk is like pulling teeth, again his answers are monosyllabic and as short as possible" (Machat 175). The son pulls 'ethical' teeth from his father: that is, makes him produce answers that guide the son in an ethical way.

These demands, however, do not simply 'transform' the father into a good person. Gwinner points out that the father's understanding of 'goodness' is very much provisional and pragmatic, and therefore flawed: "Wherever they can be found, usable commodities are 'good'

because they support the good of survival" (144) and later he states that "the narrative makes explicit that the protagonists do perceive their very survival as partaking of ethical and 'civilized' goodness" (145). An example that points to the father's moral ambivalence is provided by a dramatic passage in the novel. When father and son come across a house where humans are held as livestock in a cellar, the limits of the father's ethical principles become obvious. They flee when they discover the human victims and close the trap door behind them, not allowing them to escape so that their own intrusion is not discovered. For Gwinner this scene raises doubt about their morality: "The ways in which both principal characters respond, implicitly and explicitly, to this episode raise questions about their identities, their goodness" (150). In reference to the lighter that the father drops in the cellar Gwinner adds: "the father's response casts a slight ethical shadow, especially since the symbolic fire he carries, the lighter, is left behind with the damned men and women in the larder" (ibid.). I would agree with this, and dissent from optimistic readings proposed for instance by Hume who disregards the ethical ambivalence of the characters: "McCarthy's father and son stay well within the law and do nothing that forces rethinking the rights or obligations of the individual" (121). Staying within the law could only apply to the fact that they make their own laws and that they adapt these laws to the current situation. Nevertheless, the father's priority is clearly their own survival. Everything else is only secondary. His ethics is limited because it is restricted to his son, the center of his life and its captivating force.

4.2.1.3 The Son: Embodiment of the Fire

For the son, however, the "ceremonies of the air" are real. This is evident whenever they meet other people. The son yearns for their company and treats them well even when they don't appreciate this. When they meet a blind old man with whom they share their sparse meal, the son gives him some tinned food as a parting gift. When the man does not thank the son the following dialogue between the father and the blind man ensues:

> You should thank him you know, the man [the father] said. I wouldnt have given you anything.
> Maybe I should and maybe I shouldnt.
> Why wouldnt you?
> I wouldnt have given him mine.
> You dont care if it hurts his feelings?
> Will it hurt his feelings?
> No. That's not why he did it.
> Why did he do it?
> [...] You wouldnt understand, he said. I'm not sure I do.
> Maybe he believes in God.
> I dont know what he believes in (McCarthy 173–174).

The father, rendered brutally pragmatic by the circumstances, has against all odds guided his son down an ethical path. Even though the son will not profit from giving food to the old man; even though they don't really have food to spare; and even though the realities of this world leave no room for empathy, he still behaves in a caring way. Thus, he has become the opposite of his father: his ethics is unlimited and absolute; he has broadened the father's concept.

The father does not remain unaffected by this. The son becomes an event to him. When the father is dying he begins seeing the son in a different way, experiencing how his own principles falter. To protect his son always included the possibility and the necessity of killing him, but the father cannot bear the thought anymore: "I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant" (ibid., 279). The father decides against killing his son in favor of what he had never shown before, namely, unfounded hope: "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (ibid., 281). Gwinner writes: "The man accepts that there is no basis for belief; he believes anyway" (146). This is a character trait the father never displayed before, only the son was hopeful against all odds. When the son wants to join his father in death, the father denies him this wish. Instead he employs his son's favorite expression. He orders his son to continue "carrying the fire" (ibid., 278):

> I dont know how to.
> Yes you do.
> Is it real? The fire?
> Yes it is.
> Where is it? I dont know where it is.
> Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it (ibid., 278–279).

The fire is not an empty saying anymore, but a certainty. An abstract concept attains excessive meaning and is filled with meaning without grounds: "the 'fire' (goodness) seems able to generate heat even when no fuel is present" (Graulund 74). There *is* a fire, there *is* hope, even though nothing in the world indicates this. This line of argument has been followed by Wielenberg, who points out that the boy can be considered the personification of the metaphorical fire: "The man carries the fire only in a secondary sense: he carries the child" (9). The father's words are not so much an excuse for his son, they have become a crutch for himself. He needs to believe in the son being the ethical fire as much as the son needs to believe this himself. Their positions have switched; it is not the son who *has* to believe his father, it is the father who has to believe in his son. The father's former responsibility, the demands his son made, turn to the father's advantage. If he chooses to believe in the boy, he can step away from his brutal principles and die with his living son as the last image, instead of his dead body. Lutrull sees the father's motivation for not killing his son in a different light. He claims that the father has recognized the significance of the son for the world:

> The man, who formerly loved only the boy and would not hazard the boy's safety for anything, now embraces a broader charity, one that he seems to have learned from the boy. The man plans on leaving his son in the world [...] because he knows that the world needs his son to continue carrying the fire (24).

This implies that the father has gone through some sort of transformation. I, however, would not regard the father's actions as a charitable act towards humanity, but rather as a selfish act; it saves him and allows

him a way out of his former responsibility, that of killing his son. His actions are the outcome of the 'event' that his son has become to him. They are not the result of a transformation triggered by an epistemological insight, but the result of the father's captivation that he was unable to shake off. The son constantly demands of the father to be good and to do good, even though the world hinders this. By agreeing to these false acts, agreeing to follow what for him are only white lies, the father becomes captivated by his own provisionary attempts. For the father, the lie about the 'good guys' has become reality, his son is not only a good guy, but the "best guy" (McCarthy 279). Thus, the father becomes the ethical being his son wishes him to be, experiencing at the end even transcendence by recognizing in his son a phenomenon that he thought had been lost to the world: goodness.

4.2.2 *Oryx and Crake*—The Responsibility of the Unknowing

4.2.2.1 Introduction

Margaret Atwood is a revered Canadian author whose most well-known novel is *The Handmaids Tale* (1985), which is, similar to *Oryx and Crake*, a dystopian novel that raises questions about the cultural and scientific practices of our contemporary world. It deals in particular with feminist issues, a topic that pervades Atwood's oeuvre and that has made her a familiar figure in literary feminist circles. *Oryx and Crake*, the first part of a trilogy, is set in a highly advanced technological society in the near future. Although the exact time frame of the novel is rather vague, most critics have come to the conclusion that the novel takes place around 2025 (cf. Sheckles 144). The novel portrays a world in which ethical concerns for human life have been mostly discarded, making room for various genetic experiments. This careless treatment of human lives determines the ethical code of this society and has great influence on how the individual interacts with its surroundings. In the present time of the novel, a biological catastrophe has wiped out humanity and has made the protagonist, Jimmy, the sole

human survivor in a post-apocalyptic world.[97] Jimmy's story is narrated retrospectively and tells of how he became an unwitting participant in the annihilation of humanity. This chapter deals mostly with the world before the catastrophe, whereas the chapter "Captives of the Sacred" concentrates more on the aftermath.

4.2.2.2 The Inside and the Outside: The Compounds and the 'Pleeblands'

The fictional world of *Oryx and Crake* bears a strong structural resemblance to Agamben's description of the sovereign state. There is an inside and an outside and this division is politically as well as socially significant. In fact, the people on the inside base their power on the 'inferior' beings on the outside. This division pervades every aspect of life and determines the life of the main protagonist, too, whose moral stance towards the world is shaped by this organizing structure.

Before the catastrophe the world consists of two realms. The inside is comprised of the 'compounds,' small, gated communities with highly advanced genetic engineering that have been created by large pharmaceutical companies. These communities function like miniature villages for their employees, furnished with schools and hospitals. They are shut off from the outside, which is referred to as 'pleeblands,' appearing to reference 'plebs' as Sutherland and Swan suggested (cf. 225). The pleeblands are rife with disease and illness, and are often depicted as chaotic and primitive. It is striking that in Atwood's novel the world is portrayed only from the perspective of the people who live inside the compounds. The others, the ones living outside, have simply no voice in the novel, and no possibility of conveying their own perspective on the situation.[98] This insular perspective mirrors Jimmy's, the protagonist's, experiences, as for the most part he is unaware of the

97 At the end of the novel it is suggested that Jimmy's presumption of being the only survivor is wrong. As a matter of fact, Atwood's following novels, *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *Madd Addam* (2013) that are part of the trilogy and take place in the same world, depict multiple survivors.

98 The complimentary view is provided by Atwood's successive novel *The Year of the Flood* which deals with the people living in the pleeblands, and in general with people who live outside the privileged society.

world outside the gates. However, it also indicates the general ignorance of the people 'inside,' who simply do not reflect on the outside, because this would question their own way of living.

The pleeblands and the compounds appear to be solely antagonistic worlds, but in fact, the inside bases its power on the outside. The outside, Jimmy is told, is dangerous because it is a breeding ground for diseases, perversion and terrorists. However, the pleeblands appear to be quite close to a contemporary experience: "endless billboards and neon signs and stretches of buildings, tall and short; endless dingy-looking streets, countless vehicles of all kinds, some of them with clouds of smoke coming out the back" (ibid., 33). The description engenders a certain alienation from the exterior world, with automobiles referred to as "vehicles" that have "clouds of smoke coming out the back." Considered to be inferior, the inhabitants of the pleeblands are deliberately exposed to danger, vulgarity, obscenity and death. Their sphere is used as a waste dump for everything that deviates from the norm. Sheckels writes that the "pleeblands, in fact, represent the pleasures (good and bad) that have been suppressed in the compounds but that are still longed for" (145). The pleeblands provide a flourishing sex industry and function in secret as an experimental ground for new medications: "'Pay them a few dollars, they don't even know what they're taking. Sex clinics, of course—they're happy to help. Whorehouses. Prisons. And from the ranks of the desperate, as usual'" (Atwood 357). Later, it is even speculated that viruses are spread on purpose throughout the pleeblands so that the firms located safely in the compounds can sell them their expensive antidotes (cf. ibid., 256).[99] The sick and the weak are the people that the compounds feed on. They profit from them economically by using them as their human guinea pigs and by creating a market for medicine against diseases they themselves spread.

99 Schmeink regards the pharmaceutical firms the target of Atwood's critique: "Ich denke jedoch, dass Atwoods Kritik sich nicht gegen die Wissenschaft verkörpert in Crake richtet, sondern vielmehr gegen die Konzerne, die die Wissenschaft lenken. Sie sind es, die den Schulunterricht bestimmen, der Genetik keine Ethik als Gegengewicht liefern und so durch biopolitische Macht Einfluss auf das soziale Gefüge der Welt nehmen" (289).

This disregard for human life also exists inside the compounds. In fact, one could say that the destruction of the sanctity of human life starts there. Jimmy's father works as a geneticist for the company, 'Organ-Inc.' He and other scientists are creating animals that can grow human organs, to be used for organ transplants. Not only do they succeed in merging animal and human DNA, they have gone even further and developed animals whose organs are designed to re-grow. This means these animals can be 'reaped' of their organs like plants are reaped of their fruit. In addition, there is the option of implanting these animals with human cell material from the particular donors who would then have access to 'customized' organs. These grotesque animal hybrids, referred to as "pigoons" (ibid., 31) (a mixture of pig and raccoon), live a reduced life. Their lives are solely dedicated to experimentation then death—and not a conventional death in accordance with some natural order: either they die because they are still unstable experimental creations, or they die when they have fulfilled their purpose, being harvested for organs. That these creations are ethically abhorrent is reflected in a dark joke the employees make. Since the pigoons are still in their testing phase and therefore unstable creatures, countless bodies have to be disposed of after they die. This, the joke goes, coincides with the fact that the cafeteria occasionally features a glut of mystery meat. These cannibalistic undertones reflect a worrisome aspect of this particular form of genetic manipulation. The process of protecting and prolonging life inadvertently leads to a human breeding process, which reduces human cell material to mere meat, free from any metaphysical concept or degree of sacredness. The animal-human hybrids result in human life becoming a part of the experimental structure. Human life is therefore made equal to animal life, which is to say life that can be killed, life which carries no capacity for transcendence.

Jimmy's father, a fervent believer in the compound system, chooses a telling metaphor when describing the relation between the compounds and the pleeblands. This metaphor relates to the biopolitical structures existing between in- and outside:

> Long ago, in the days of knights and dragons, the kings and dukes had lived in castles, with high walls and drawbridges and slots on the ramparts so you could pour hot pitch on your enemies [...] and the Compounds were the same idea. Castles were for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside (ibid., 34).

This image referring to the Middle Ages evokes a specific view of society, namely a desire for reclusion that is coupled with a regressive yearning for the past. However, whereas the father seems to yearn for a 'simpler' time, the compounds in *Oryx and Crake* both fulfill and negate this yearning. On the surface, the compound is similar to a recent past: a world similar to that in which "Jimmy's father was a kid" (ibid., 34); and a more distant past, reminiscent of the medieval period described above. What is actually going on behind the façade, however, is not a simplification, a return to the past, but the development of futuristic procedures which demonstrate an increasing disregard for ethical concerns. The image of the kings and dukes is both appropriate and inappropriate: Jimmy and his family inhabit a privileged space that closes them off from the 'plebs,' but their privilege does not stem from their being members of an aristocratic family or royal blood line. In fact, it is their bio-political power—their ability to turn sacred life into expendable life without question, qualm or consideration of consequence—that ensures them their spot on the safe inside. It is therefore not their own blood, but the blood of others (that they shed) that makes them into the kings and dukes of their world. Their power is firmly grounded on the bodies of others.

That the compound system is ethically problematic is shown through Jimmy's mother. She was once employed by OrganInc, one of the firms inside the compounds, but she quit for ethical reasons. She presents another view on the compounds, choosing words like "artificial" and "theme park" (ibid., 34) to describe them. In the mother's opinion, the compounds' security not only protects them from the outside, but also keeps them locked inside (cf. 67). She is concerned about the experiments with human genetic material that have been made in the compounds, telling her husband, a geneticist, "'[y]ou're interfering with

the building blocks of life. It's immoral. It's…sacrilegious'" (ibid., 67). She eventually flees from the compounds. After her escape, the governmental structure of the compounds is exposed to Jimmy: he and his father are questioned by the compounds' security guards. Their house is searched and they are monitored for the rest of their lives, which proves that the mother was right when she described the compounds as prisons (cf. ibid., 63). It shows that to be on the inside does not protect one from being excluded. If rules are not obeyed, or lines are crossed, the people inside are expendable, too.

Jimmy seems to be acceptant of society's logic. When his mother is later on denounced as a traitor and terrorist, he simply complies. He is scared to become an outsider and submits himself to his circumstances. In fact, Jimmy's earliest memory is linked to the fear of becoming an outsider. The event he recalls is innocently referred to as "bonfire" and denotes the incineration of animals that have fallen sick because of a virus that has found its way into the community. The virus (supposedly smuggled inside by a terrorist group) is representative of the dangerous outside, and anything that has made contact with it must be destroyed. When Jimmy's father explains to him that the animals had to be burnt because they were sick, the young Jimmy fears he himself could be killed soon, since he recently had a cold. The fear of being seen as an irregularity and turned into a captive is evident early on: "He could see his hair on fire, not just a strand or two on a saucer, but all of it, still attached to his head. He didn't want to be put in a heap with the cows and pigs. He began to cry" (ibid., 24). The division between in-and outside creates captive figures automatically and on both sides. The situation of these individuals, test subjects in different forms, comes very close to that of Agamben's *homo sacer*: they are of less value than others, their lives can be played with, and the powerful base their power on these captives.

4.2.2.3 Jimmy's Captivation by Oryx and Crake

An event changes Jimmy's attitude towards the supposedly 'natural' division between in-and outside. As teenagers, while browsing through the internet, Jimmy and his best friend Crake come across

a pornographic site that features children performing sexual acts for older men. A girl, later named Oryx, is one of the children, with whom Jimmy feels an instant connection. From the beginning, Oryx appears different to him: "She was just another little girl on a porno site. None of those little girls had ever seemed real to Jimmy—they'd always struck him as digital clones—but for some reason Oryx was three-dimensional from the start" (ibid., 108). He feels entranced by her and enters into a virtual meeting of gazes:

> Oryx paused in her activities. [...] Then she looked over her shoulder and right into the eyes of the viewer—right into Jimmy's eyes, into the secret person inside him. *I see you*, that look said. *I see you watching. I know you. I know what you want*. [...] Jimmy felt burned by this look—eating into, as if by acid. [...] for the first time he'd felt that what they'd been doing was wrong. Before, it had always been entertainment, or else far beyond his control, but now he felt culpable (ibid., 109–110).

In this passage, Oryx has her back turned to the viewer at first, then suddenly turns around and locks eyes with whoever is watching her. She focuses on the viewer, as if she has discovered a familiar face and appears to engage in a direct contact. The passage insinuates that a private message has been delivered to Jimmy via this contact, a message that can only be received by Jimmy who feels exposed, claiming she has recognized his "secret person," his innermost being. Her gaze effects pain and also triggers a moral response in Jimmy, resulting in him questioning his ethical principles. For the first time, he questions his own irresponsible behavior (vis-à-vis the pornographic and violent websites). Jimmy feels called to responsibility by Oryx and is made self-aware, for the first time, of his own participation in the exploitation of others.[100] The encounter with Oryx, similar to the bonfire, reveals

100 Lévinas writes on the gaze of the Other in *Totality and Infinity* (1969): "This gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving (as one 'puts the things in question in giving')—this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master, to the lord, to him whom one approaches as 'You' [Vous] in a dimension of height" (75).

something that is new to him, namely a different view of the outsiders and 'inferior' beings in his world. Oryx's life is completely alien to Jimmy, since her life is defined by constant observation by strangers, depriving her totally of a private sphere. By contrast, Jimmy has always been safely locked inside the gates of the community, a place where most people can't even see inside, let alone enter. Instead of dismissing Oryx as inferior, as his community would, Jimmy feels responsible for her—a feeling he is unfamiliar with. From then on, he carries a screenshot of her gaze with him (cf. ibid., 110).

As an adult Jimmy comes across the real Oryx unexpectedly when he starts working for his friend Crake, who has become a successful scientist in the meantime. Meeting Oryx for the first time after so many years is a shocking moment for Jimmy: "Gazing into those eyes, Jimmy had a moment of pure bliss, pure terror [...] How could a person be caught that way, in an instant, by a glance, the lift of an eyebrow, the curve of an arm? But he was" (ibid., 370–371). Although she is Crake's girlfriend, Jimmy and Oryx also get involved with each other and begin an affair. Jimmy suspects early on that Oryx means danger to him: "He wanted to touch Oryx, worship her, open her up like a beautifully wrapped package, even though he suspected that there was something—some harmful snake or homemade bomb or lethal powder—concealed within" (ibid., 374–375). Oryx is depicted as a Trojan horse, a gift that seems too good to be true and could be dangerous when opened. Ultimately, Jimmy's suspicions prove well-founded. Oryx is a pawn in a game of chess that Crake has devised in order to fulfill his mad plans for a new world. Crake has 'activated' Jimmy's role in these plans by bringing Oryx into the game—he uses Jimmy's feelings for her, forcing Jimmy to become his accomplice.

Crake is an exemplary character in the novel. He appears to be able to ignore the boundaries of the system, or rather, he is the only one who is located both in-and outside as Grayson Cooke notes:

> Crake is a kind of bioterrorist of the inside, a *pharmakeus* who leads all who follow him into opposition with themselves. He works within the system of the corporates, but maintains an unpredictable streak of calculating anarchy that allows him to be both inside and outside, poison and cure at the same time (114–115).

Crake works in an elite compound where he is one of the leading scientists. The experiments Crake deals with go even further than those in OrganInc. Crake and his employees have created new species of animals that are able to reproduce naturally, which turns these scientists by definition into creators, leading Korte to designate Crake "a self-appointed lord of creation" (*Fundamentalism at the End* 161). Crake has also developed a new species of man, an ameliorated version, so to speak, of humans, later called 'Crakers.' The Crakers' abilities go beyond human ones, with their character traits completely manipulated so that they have become peace-loving, even 'innocent' beings.

> What had been altered was nothing less than the ancient primate brain. Gone were its destructive features, the features responsible for the world's current illnesses. For instance, racism [...] had been eliminated in the model group, merely by switching the bonding mechanism: the Paradice people [the Crakers] simply did not register skin colour. Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it. Since they were neither hunters nor agriculturalists hungry for land, there was no territoriality: the king-of-the-castle hard-wiring that had plagued humanity had, in them, been unwired. They ate nothing but leaves and grass and roots and a berry or two [...] their sexuality was not a constant torment to them, not a cloud of turbulent hormones: they came into heat at regular intervals, as did most mammals other than man. [...] They would have no need to invent any harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money (ibid., 366–367).

The Crakers, although supposedly superior beings, are purely biopolitical beings: strongly controlled, both from the inside and the outside, by genetic manipulation and by the way they are educated and raised. Crake's project has led literary critics to recognize him as "a mad

scientist who plays god" (Korte, *Fundamentalism and the End* 161), see him as a character reminiscent of Shelley's Frankenstein (Korte *Women's Views of Last Men* 158), or H.G. Well's Dr. Moreau (Howells 2006: 164). DiMarco remarks on this issue: "Once thought to be a quality of the divine—to create a person outside of natural birth—it now becomes known and measured by man" (2005: 184).[101] This new species is developed in order to sell them to childless couples who can 'order' special features for their children. This is coupled with the production of a supposed sexual stimulant, "BlyssPluss" (Atwood 354), which, however, unknown to the future buyers, will lead to sterility if taken. This is a ploy, since it makes artificial reproduction necessary and, thus, creates a demand for the Crakers. Jimmy has been hired by Crake to develop marketing strategies for "BlyssPluss." In secret, however, Crake wants to replace all of humanity with the Crakers, whom he thinks are 'better' than the original human beings and less flawed. This is why the BlyssPluss pills contain a virus that kills everyone on the planet, except Jimmy, who is supposed to become a guardian to the Crakers. Jimmy is not aware of Crake's plan for him and remains so until it is too late.

4.2.2.4 Enforced Guardianship

One day Jimmy is asked to come to the Paradice complex since Crake is absent and Jimmy has been named second in command by him. It appears a virus has broken out and is spreading throughout the world. Readers will learn later that the virus was developed by Crake and then distributed through the BlyssPluss pills. Besides Crake, only Oryx and Jimmy have been immunized (without their knowledge) to the virus.

101 Only one critic, Schmeink, considers Crake's actions as a rebellious and even ethical act against the current capitalistic regime: "In seinem mildtätigen Akt unterläuft Crake die Vision des Konzerns und verhindert so das kapitalistische Utopia, in dem jede menschliche Reproduktion zum vermarkteten Produkt mutiert ist. Er verweigert Empire die Kontrolle des Biopolitischen und löst damit die Biomasse—inklusive des Menschen—aus dem festem Griff der Konzernmacht. Sein kreativer Akt wird zur Neuschreibung der Zukunft, sein Gegenentwurf zur Herausforderung des hegemonialen status quo und seine Schöpfung zum Hoffnungsträger für eine bessere Welt, die das fehlerhafte Modell—uns—ausschließt" (290). I would not read Crake's action in such a positive way. Since Jimmy is our main figure of identification, I believe the outrageousness of Crake's plan is rather underscored by showing how negatively it affects Jimmy.

When Crake returns, Jimmy has locked everyone else out of the secure dome and has changed the code. Crake is carrying Oryx in his arms and, after admitting his crimes to Jimmy, demands to be let in. When Jimmy agrees and allows him to come inside

> Jimmy took out his spraygun. Then he punched in the code. He stood back and to the side. All the hairs on his arms were standing up. *We understand more than we know.* The door swung open. [...] As Jimmy watched, frozen with disbelief, Crake let Oryx fall backwards, over his left arm. He looked at Jimmy, a direct look, unsmiling. "I'm counting on you," he said. Then he slit her throat. Jimmy shot him (ibid., 393–394).

The way this passage is written frames this incident in a practical logic that suggests that every action is a simple reaction to what has happened before. There is no reflective tone inserted. The action, "[t]hen he slit her throat," occurs without any description of Jimmy's thoughts or his reaction to it. It is followed by another succinctly described action, "Jimmy shot him." There is no screaming, no exclamation of horror; only action and reaction. Reality for Jimmy in this moment is pared down to an elementary mode: there is no time to think, reflect, or temporize. He simply acts. Crake's last words, that Crake is "counting" on Jimmy, could refer to two things: one is that Crakes counts on Jimmy to take care of the Crakers as Jimmy once promised him. The other is that Crake counted on Jimmy to kill him all along, helping Crake with his suicide. This would mean that Crake has manipulated Jimmy by taking advantage of his feelings for Oryx. What Jimmy might label later on as a passionate act of love is thus actually a calculated event. Jimmy "recognizes that he is enacting a script Crake has written for him" (Snyder 481) therefore, he turns into a human lab rat whose actions have been calculated in advance. Nevertheless, this does not discount this event as being eventful—even if only in the eyes of Jimmy.

Crake's plan has been successful: humanity is erased, he has been killed and only one human is left to take care of the Crakers until they have adapted to their new circumstances. Because Jimmy has turned from privileged prince into the last surviving human being, he has no other choice than to take care of the Crakers. They are all that is left to him.

> I could leave them behind, he thought. Just leave them. Let them fend for themselves. They aren't my business. But he couldn't do that, because although the Crakers weren't his business, they were now his responsibility. Who else did they have? Who else did he have, for that matter? (ibid., 416).

Wolter claims at that point that "[o]nly through human agency and a sense of responsibility is Crake's greatest experiment, in effect, saved. Individual action and personal and social responsibility ultimately play the decisive role" (269). However, Wolter appears to assume that Jimmy acted this way on his own accord, whereas I would argue that Crake's manipulation denies every choice on Jimmy's part. Jimmy is rather, as Wisker puts it, "cornered into responsibility" (150). He becomes an unwilling supporter of Crake's mad plan for a new way of life on earth. Although he is against everything that Crake has done, he acts out his role in this game. Forced to by the circumstances he becomes the Crakers' "reluctant rescuer" (Howells 2005: 179). The murder becomes the event that changes Jimmy. He is forced from then on to take care of the Crakers and to become their guardian.

However, the event also revealed his captivation by Crake for the first time. It reveals that the relationship between the two friends is actually one between scientist and guinea pig. Thus, their relationship mirrors the power dynamic that is so central to the novel and the portrayed society. Crake is a mad scientist who has turned the world into an experiment and everyone inside into captive test subjects locked in a new state of nature. The plan that Crake has clandestinely concocted unfolds in an eerily deterministic fashion that allows the 'pair of dice' (Sutherland and Swan 233) in 'Paradice' (the name of the Crakers' habitat and the name of the scientific project) to be read in relation to

one of the most notable quotes in 20th century science: Albert Einstein's "Gott würfelt nicht."[102] This was Einstein's way of rebutting the hypothesis that the universe might be ruled by pure chance. Crake's role in the novel is similar to that of a god who introduces a design that likewise seems to exclude chance. Although this God doesn't throw dice either, he *does* play chess. At their regular chess games Crake talks about his beliefs:

> "All it takes," said Crake, "is the elimination of one generation. One generation of anything. Beetles, trees, microbes, scientists, speakers of French, whatever. Break the link in time between one generation and the next, and it's game over forever." "Speaking of games," said Jimmy, "it's your move" (Atwood 270).

It is crucial that Crake's matter-of-fact comment is framed by a game of chess. DiMarco states that one has to understand "game theory as integral to deciphering a deeper understanding of the plot" (2005: 185). The irony here is that Jimmy's life is part of a game of chess that Crake has created behind his back. Therefore, this passage becomes a meta-comment on Jimmy and Crake's relationship. Whereas Crake outlines his ideas to Jimmy, Jimmy shows no interest in them and does not take them very seriously. Instead, he urges Crake to make his next move in their game. Whereas Jimmy is focused on what is in front of him, Crake sees beyond this game and aims for the greater play.[103] Crake is obviously intellectually superior to Jimmy and can be compared to Agamben's sovereign in this matter, in particular because he

102 See Albert Einstein's letter to Max Born dated December 4th 1926 in Albert Einstein und Max Born: *Briefwechsel, 1916–1955*. 1969. München: Langenmüller, 2005.

103 Crake understands early on how to become a strong player in the world. In *The Year of the Flood* Crake appears a few times as a child. One of the main protagonists, Ren, tells of her conversations with him: "He'd talk about other things too. One day, he said that what you had to do in any adversarial situation was to kill the king, as in chess. I said people didn't have kings any more. He said he meant the centre of power, but today it wouldn't be a single person, it would be the technological connections. I said, you mean like coding and splicing, and he said, "Something like that" (228).

plays with lives and decides who lives and who dies.[104] However, the sovereign cannot build his empire on his own, he needs an antagonistic figure like the *homo sacer*. I would argue that Jimmy takes on this role, here. Crake can only become (as Machat puts it) the "executioner of the human race" (92) because Jimmy is made to be an "unwitting accomplice," according to Synder (481). However, Jimmy is not Agamben's *homo sacer* to the letter, because he actually experiences a shift in his status as a subject: after killing Crake and being left with the Crakers he is not the same as before. He has become a responsible subject, even though his actions have hurt himself the most, he continues taking care of others.

It appears that a subject's empowerment and thus its ethical choices are severely limited by the society and the political structure they are part of. Jimmy is only allowed to become 'ethical' inside the parameters of Crake's plan. So, even though he kills Crake and in a way defends Oryx emotionally, this is an expected outcome for Crake. Becoming an ethical being means becoming a captive being at the same time. Thus, this novel demonstrates most effectively how empowerment and captivation are unavoidably linked to each other. Atwood's book points to the fact that the captive state can never really be left behind altogether, but informs the empowerment of the subject. In a way, one has seen this also in previous examples. Briony in *Atonement* is admittedly a powerful author figure, however, she remains forever bound to the flaws that make up her authorship.

104 Agamben, in fact, sees the modern scientist as sovereign figure. For this argument Agamben draws on the role of physicians during the Holocaust who violated the Hippocratic oath: "The fact is that the National Socialist Reich marks the point at which the integration of medicine and politics, which is one of the essential characteristics of modern biopolitics, began to assume its final form. This implies that the sovereign decision on bare life comes to be displaced from strictly political motivations and areas to a more ambiguous terrain in which the physician and the sovereign seem to exchange roles" (*HS* 143).

Eventually, Jimmy is able to go beyond what is expected of him on other levels. In the chapter "Captives of the Sacred" I will take a closer look at his guardianship. Although it appears at first that Crake's plan has worked, there are also side-effects to his plan that make more out of Jimmy than Crake ever envisioned him to be, namely a sacred figure.

4.2.3 *The White Tiger* —The Responsibility of the Murderer

4.2.3.1 Introduction

Aravind Adiga is an Indian-Australian author whose first novel *The White Tiger* won the Booker Prize in 2008. Adiga's novel offers a general critique of the capitalistic system in the Third World, drawing attention in particular to its labor conditions. The tone of the novel, however, is very humorous, ironic and light, and borrows elements from the picaresque novel, which indicates that the novel is not meant to be taken too seriously, or even to be treated as a first-hand witness account of the situation in India today.

The White Tiger is an epistolary novel consisting of seven letters that the main protagonist Balram Halwai writes to the Chinese Prime Minister. In these letters Balram tells of his life and his success as an "entrepreneur" (4), which is a euphemism for killing his boss and stealing a large sum of money from him. Adiga's picaresque novel clearly mocks and satirizes the traditional *Bildungsroman*. Balram is not an individual who evolves and progresses in life, learning about his environment until he decides to become an active part in society. Rather, Balram is a morally ambivalent servant who has only two choices in life: to remain a poor servant or to climb up the ladder by turning into a corrupt criminal like everyone else. Balram's turning point, his change from a captive into an enabled subject, is of a criminal nature. He becomes an authorial figure, turning others into his captives, which presents a rather simple change in status that defines change only in terms of power. The powerless being turns into the same corrupt powerful type that Balram has encountered all through his life. This is in line with the 'rules' of the picaresque novel, in which the protagonist develops

from "a relative innocent [...] into a picaro because the world he meets is roguish" (Miller 56). Because of this inspiration by the picaresque tradition, *The White Tiger* is the one example in this dissertation in which the protagonist comes close to Agamben's 'empowered' figure, that of the sovereign. For this reason the novel possesses a rather singular position in this chapter on ethics, since even though its character becomes somewhat ethical in his behavior, this is mostly fueled by power-hunger. Nevertheless, since his power is based on structures that have an ethical *grounding*, I argue that this novel is worth looking at, even if it points out the limitations of how a subject can be enabled in ethical terms.

4.2.3.2 Consumers and Consumed

The life of the main protagonist, Balram Halwai, is predetermined by assuming responsibility early on. As a youth he is pulled out of school in order to work for the people from whom his family has lent money: "the Storck [a powerful person in Balram's district] has called in his loan. [...] So they had to hand me [Balram] over too" (Adiga 36). He painfully experiences the impact economic demands have on his young life and how they intrude upon him personally. Balram occupies a paradoxical position in his family: although he is a crucial member in his family as one of its providers, his life is treated carelessly: he must ensure his family's economic security, even though this might harm his education and physical health. Multani writes critically about this situation: "The family, in Adiga's representation of contemporary India is shown as grasping, greedy, and functioning on motives of profit rather than by bonds of love or fidelity" (1042).

The power structures in *The White Tiger* are simple: the weak are associated with meat and exist to be consumed, whereas the powerful are the consumers. Routinely, the men in Balram's family leave for a couple of months in order to work in the cities. Their return to their families is not celebrated as one might expect, but depicted like a feeding scene:

> A month before the rains, the men came back from Dhanbad and Delhi and Calcutta, leaner, darker, angrier, but with money in their pockets. The women were waiting for them. They hid behind the door, and as soon as the men walked in, they pounced like wildcats on a slab of flesh. There was fighting and wailing and shrieking (Adiga 26).

The men's bodies are compared to "slab[s] of flesh," whereas the women have become like wild animals fighting for food, ripping the money out of the men's hands. The return of the men is insignificant, except for the money they bring with them. They are welcomed neither by their wives nor their children; they are attacked and consumed instead. Fittingly, the matriarch of Balram's family is named 'Kusum' which phonetically comes very close to the word 'consume.' Located at the centre of the family, she eats up the fruits of other people's work and makes sure she is well provided for. That this economic frame must be considered an imprisonment which slowly devours its inhabitants is conveyed by showing how the bodies of the poor are victimized by this logic. Balram's father is described as follows:

> My father's spine was a knotted rope, the kind women use in villages to pull water from wells; the clavicle curved around his neck in high relief, like a dog's collar; cuts and nicks and scars, like little whip marks in his flesh, ran down his chest and waist, reaching down below his hipbones into his buttocks (ibid., 26–27).

The description of the father's body employs economic terms and comparisons. His spine is compared to the rope of a water well and his clavicles are said to be reminiscent of a dog's collar. These images and comparisons highlight his body's purely functional use, like a beast of burden for economic gain. The canine comparison degrades the father even further: he is more or less an animal working for the family rather than being a part of it. When Balram, who has started working as a chauffeur, returns to his home village, he learns that his brother Kishan has taken on the role of the family's provider. Yet, Kishan has not only taken on his father's role, his body has also turned into that of his father: "Kishan had changed. He was thinner, and darker—his neck

tendons were sticking out in high relief above the deep clavicles. He had become, all of a sudden, my father" (ibid., 85). The family dinner becomes a cannibalistic offering to Balram who knows that the food is provided by his brother's hard work: "There was red, curried bone and flesh in front of me—and it seemed to me that they had served me flesh from Kishan's own body on that plate" (ibid.). This image disturbs Balram, who refuses to eat what is on his plate and to join the consumption of the weak. Balram recognizes what happens to all the men in his family: under the pressure of the responsibility for their family they are diminished, emaciated, devoured in body and in spirit—wasted.

The structure of the Indian family is only a reflection of Indian society as portrayed in the novel. The central underlying semi-political structure in India is identified by Balram as the 'Rooster Coop,' which is also divided between consumer and consumed: "Here in India we have no dictatorship. No secret police. That's because we have the coop" (ibid., 175). In general, the social class Balram belongs to is considered livestock. The coop keeps the servants in place:

> The greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop. Go to Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench—the stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop (ibid., 173).

There is only one fate for anyone who leaves the coop—death. As a consequence every rooster stays calmly inside the coop, immobilized by fear. The passage above works to a great extent with visual imagery

and olfactory impressions, bringing the Rooster Coop to life. The descriptions evoke other images and associations that characterize the space of the rooster as a death-zone. The "feathered flesh" that refers to the roosters is reminiscent of a punishment in the Middle Ages, when people were literally feathered in order to mark them as outsiders. The image of the servants being packed as "tightly as worms in a belly" recalls rotten cadavers, infected and overtaken by worms that slowly eat away the flesh. In these crammed circumstances even cannibalism is possible, implied by the disclosure that the roosters peck each other. In fact, the Rooster Coop's inhabitants turn on their own: "The Rooster Coop was doing its work. Servants have to keep other servants from becoming innovators, experimenters, or entrepreneurs. [...] The coop is guarded from the inside" (ibid., 193–194). Thus, from the outside *and* the inside this state of immobility and fear is created. Above these gruesome conditions is only the butcher, who is depicted as being young, grinning and arrogant. He even seems to enjoy scaring the roosters by pulling their insides out and spreading the organs throughout the coop. In this very blunt image, the butcher is the only alternative to the Rooster Coop.

Balram belongs clearly to those in society who are consumed, and limited to live inside the Rooster Coop. He moves to the city and starts working as a chauffeur for a rich Indian family. Yet, he remains bound by his family and their expectations and demands. He is never allowed to keep his earnings for himself, but is pressured to send money home to his family, which he at some point stops doing. The grandmother begins sending her letters directly to Balram's masters in order to gain control. Balram sees himself trapped: "I did not want to obey Kusum [his grandmother]. She was blackmailing me" (ibid., 192). His economic debt also merges into a juridical obligation. While working for his master Ashok, Balram succeeds in becoming his confidant and is even considered part of his family. But Balram's slow and tentative inclusion into his master's family brings with it uncomfortable consequences. One night, he drives his master and his master's girlfriend home, both intoxicated and in a rather careless mood. On an impulse Pinky Madam, Ashok's girlfriend, decides to switch seats with Bal-

ram and drive the car by herself. The switch is not consensual and Balram feels that his wishes have been disregarded. Shortly after the switch, Pinky Madam causes an accident by running over something lying on the street. Not sure what exactly they have hit—a dog or a beggar child—and in complete shock, Ashok asks Balram to drive them back home. The next day Balram is called from his servant's quarters. Ashok's brother, called the 'Mongoose,' an unexpected visitor to Ashok's home, welcomes him with the following words: "Sit, sit, make yourself comfortable, Balram. You are part of the family" (ibid., 165). This phrase is repeated several times. It will be shown that to belong to the family means to take on yet another burden. In the presence of the family lawyer Balram is given a typed-up confession that implicates Balram in the accident. It is explained to him that he should, as a precaution, take the blame for the accident. Balram is shocked by this development. Even his grandmother, the matriarch of the family, has already given her consent: "'She says she's so proud of you for doing this. She's agreed to be a witness to the confession as well. That's her thumbprint on the page, Balram. Just below the spot where you're going to sign'" (ibid., 168). The grandmother convicts him in the name of his family, and leaves him no way out of this situation. Her body—via the thumb—has spoken against Balram and has obligated his body. He has no other choice but to be the "perfect servant" (ibid., 169). If he rebels against his master's decision, the safety of his family is in danger; they would be harmed or even killed (cf. 176). Later, in his quarters, he reflects on his situation:

> For a whole day I was down there in my dingy room, my legs pulled up to my chest, sitting inside that mosquito net, too frightened to leave the room. No one asked me to drive the car. No one came down to see me. My life had been written away. I was to go to jail for a killing I had not done. I was in terror, and yet not once did the thought of running away cross my mind. Not once did the thought, *I'll tell the judge the truth*, cross my mind. I was trapped (ibid., 177).

Retreating into the position of an embryo—mimicking the physique of the smallest possible member in a family—Balram realizes his own inability to act freely, to make his own choices. Even the law operates with a capitalistic logic, condemning him to be of less value than the truly guilty. His general debt to his family has become a debt before the law. In the end, Balram is spared from going to jail, since there are no witnesses to the accident and the police have been bribed. But the events have left their imprint on Balram. He feels increasingly ill-treated by his master and his family and recognizes his hopeless state. He feels trapped in a state of constant obligation; being a captive to his circumstances, his family and his master. Thus, his captivation is a social reality, the hard facts of his life.

4.2.3.3 Under Attack by Events

Balram's captivation—carrying his family on his back and owing a debt he can never pay off—reaches its most extreme form, when another burden to carry appears, personified by his nephew. On this arrival, the nephew intrudes into Balram's last refuge, his private sphere. Balram lives in a room apart from the main dormitories. Although this room is infested by insects, it nevertheless has one small advantage: it is located outside the reach of the electric bell that summons the servants: "One disadvantage was that the electric bell did not penetrate this room—but that was a kind of advantage, too, I discovered in time" (ibid., 132). This means, he lives not only apart from his fellow servants, but also removed, to some extent, from the 'call' of his master, which implies that Balram yearns for more control over his life. He makes the best of his room and furnishes it with a mosquito net that allows him to exert control over unwanted houseguests:

> Some of the cockroaches landed on top of the net; from inside, I could see their dark bodies against its white weave. I folded in the fibre of the net and crushed one of them. The other cockroaches took no notice of this; they kept landing on the net—and getting crushed (ibid., 131).

His room is clearly the only place where Balram is in control, since it offers him a setting which is a miniature version of the Rooster Coop, only in this case Balram takes on the role of the butcher. When Balram returns to his room one day, a stranger is waiting who introduces himself as his nephew Dharam. The fact that his nephew is already waiting for him in his personal space reveals that Balram possesses no real privacy, anyone can intrude into his home.[105] The nephew's arrival is framed as a disruptive event that is structured by unwillingly performed actions on both sides. When Balram meets his nephew, both react in utter shock:

> A boy was waiting for me near my bed, holding a letter between his teeth as he adjusted the buttons of his pants. He turned around when he heard me; the letter flew out of his mouth and to the ground. The wrench fell out of my hand at the same time (ibid., 261).

Balram lets go of the wrench, the instrument with which he was planning to kill Ashok. That his nephew comes in between his murder plans underlines the nephew's control function. The nephew, surprised by the sound, turns around quickly, causing the letter to fall out of his mouth, implying both the inability to speak out of shock, but also the inadvertent confession/slip of words. Balram and his nephew have become subject to their own instinctual behavior, unable to control their reactions. The handover has failed: the boy has turned his back to his uncle and instead of delivering the letter by hand, he loses it. The message he is supposed to deliver visually and literally tumbles out of his mouth. The boy then explains to Balram that he was sent to him by his grandmother to be taken care of. In addition to this, in the letter, the grandmother threatens to report Balram to his master if he does not start to send money back home again. She also announces that she has found a suitable woman for Balram and is preparing his marriage. This would bind Balram further to his family and the village there. The

105 Agamben refers to this as leading the life of an "absolute private person" (*Means without end* 122), namely one whose private affairs are completely determined by their ability to be open to exposure at all times. Agamben refers here to the Jewish people during WWII whose life and fate had been reduced to being Jewish alone.

nephew is a constant reminder of his duty to his family: not only is Balram supposed to take Dharam everywhere he goes and to take care of him, the nephew also brings letters of future obligations with him. In this light it is only fitting that the nephew's name 'Dharam' alludes to 'Dharma.' In Hinduism this describes a duty or obligation. Thannippara summarizes the meaning of the term as follows: "Sitte, Recht und Gesetz, die Wahrheit, die ethischen und religiösen Verpflichtungen, Moral und Religion" (*Lexikon der Religionen* 122).

For Balram the news the nephew brings him is the last straw, overwhelmed by how his captivation is increasingly intensified, he starts hitting his nephew, unable to control himself. This is evidence of Balram's helpless state; he has only violence to retreat to, acting as if he is experiencing a seizure. Balram reacts differently from before to his intensified imprisonment: instead of curling up like an embryo, he hits back, even though he misses the real target (his family, his master). This change of attitude makes the meeting between Balram and Dharam an event, since Balram's reaction to his nephew's arriving is surprising and out of character. Even though Balram's reaction is primitive and only mimics the power relations he grew up with it marks a significant point in his life.

It appears as if Balram has been broken down finally and has accepted his unconditional servitude. To show his submission to the new circumstances and appreciation for his new apprentice in front of his master, Balram takes his nephew to the zoo. In this context, it is significant that the zoo is a home for captives and that it exposes animals *as* captives, the artificial habitat only underscoring their out-of-placeness. Berger writes how the zoo in its original form is considered to be part of the sovereign's realm:

> When they were founded—the London Zoo in 1828, the Jardin de Plantes in 1793, the Berlin Zoo in 1844, they brought considerable prestige to the national capitals. The prestige was not so different from that which had accrued to the private royal menageries. These menageries, along with gold plate, architecture, orchestras, players, furnishings, dwarfs, acrobats,

> uniforms, horses, art and food, had been demonstrations of the emperor's or king's power and wealth. Likewise in the 19th century, public zoos were an endorsement of modern colonial power. The capturing of the animals was a symbolic representation of the conquest of all distant and exotic lands. "Explorers" proved their patriotism by sending home a tiger or an elephant. The gift of an exotic animal to the metropolitan zoo became a token in subservient diplomatic relations (19).

Even, today, without the aristocratic background, power is still demonstrated in a zoo simply by keeping the animals in cages and turning natural predators into pets that can be looked at. The zoo is thus still a space that exhibits power relations and shows how abilities can be forcefully limited by spatial delineations. This division of power is transferred to the level of perception. The zoo implies a certain hierarchy between the one who looks and the one who is looked at. The animals are turned into objects by the onlookers, as Berger notes:

> A zoo is a place where as many species and varieties of animal as possible are collected in order that they can be seen, observed, studied. In principle, each cage is a frame round the animal inside it. Visitors visit the zoo to look at animals. They proceed from cage to cage, not unlike visitors in an art gallery who stop in front of one painting, and then move on to the next or the one after next (21).

The zoo is compared to an art gallery, in which the cages serve as frames. This reduces the animals to images with no independent life of their own, to mere objects. Balram likewise uses the zoo to present his own thoughts, employing the animals as stand-ins or examples, rather than seeing them for what they are. To him, the animals illustrate the social structure in India: "The lion and the lioness were apart from each other and not talking, like a true city couple" (Adiga 276) and he bases his philosophy on the zoo's structure: "Let animals live like animals; let humans live like humans" (ibid., 276). However, as Berger points out, if one sees animals merely as objects, as art works in frames, this is because the visitor's view is distorted:

> Yet in the zoo the view is always wrong. Like an image out of focus. One is so accustomed to this that one scarcely notices it any more; or, rather, the apology habitually anticipates the disappointment, so that the latter is not felt. And the apology runs like this: What do you expect? It's not a dead object you have to come to look at, it's alive. It's leading its own life. Why should this coincide with its being properly visible? Yet the reasoning of this apology is inadequate. The truth is more startling. However you look at these animals, even if the animal is up against the bars, less than a foot from you, looking outwards in the public direction, you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal; and all the concentration you can muster will never be enough to centralise it (21–22).

Berger's intention in this passage is to point out the marginalization of the animals that is produced by the zoo's arrangement. The viewer himself turns into a colonist, denying the animals the status of equivalent subjects by staring at them uninhibitedly. I would like to focus here on the way Berger describes perception. He says the "view is always wrong," meaning that there is no accurate perspective directed at the animal that would preclude its marginalization. The image is necessarily "out of focus," because it is not an image at all, but a living being, not frozen in time, but breathing and changeable. Thus, for Balram the image will come 'into focus,' when suddenly, one animal in the zoo, a white tiger, looks back at Balram. This experience overwhelms him completely, causing him to faint:

> The tiger's eyes met my eyes, like my master's eyes have met mine so often in the mirror of the car. All at once, the tiger vanished. A tingling went from the base of my spine into my groin. My knees began to shake; I felt light [...] The ground beneath me was shaking. Something was digging its way towards me; and then claws tore out of mud and dug into my flesh and pulled me down into the dark earth (Adiga 277).

This scene appears to be a mystical experience, an impression that is intensified by Balram's never explaining what, exactly, has happened to him during this moment. It is only suggested that some sort of connection has been made through the exchange of glances and that Balram

can only react to this by surrendering his body. The scene shows how a view that is out of focus comes into focus suddenly when Balram's gaze is returned, resulting in Balram being captivated by the hypnotic spell of the tiger. Since the novel's title refers to a white tiger, this event is of central meaning in the novel. Balram's nickname as a child had been 'white tiger,' but it was used quite humorously, since the nickname was rather unsuitable. He is everything but a white tiger, which implicates power, being instead prey to the predators who determine his life. The fact that Balram is now hypnotized by a white tiger signals to the reader that a change must be at hand. Furthermore, the scene implies a specific reading of Balram's own situation, one that is supported throughout the novel, namely that Balram's situation in life, and in particular at this boss's house, can be understood as an inhuman imprisonment, since the gaze that he shares with the locked up animal in the zoo indicates a companionship between the two. The scene hints to the reader that a break-out is at hand and, as I would argue, even legitimizes such an action, since it identifies Balram's situation as comparable to the imprisonment of an animal. Thus, the scene makes the reader accept a particular ethical standpoint towards Balram's captivity: the reader condemns Balram's captivity and feels empathy for his plan to break out.

As a consequence of this experience Balram cuts all ties with his family. He orders his nephew to start writing a letter home, chronicling everything that happened at the zoo that day. But soon he takes over his nephew's letter by dictating its content, making the letter a message from him rather than his nephew. He describes how he fainted under the firm eyes of the tiger and how he, while recovering, was heard by the other people around him, mumbling: "'I'm sorry [...] I can't live the rest of my life in a cage, Granny. I'm so sorry'" (ibid., 278; emphasis omitted). He then advises his nephew to send the letter at a specific time and not earlier. The letter resembles an issue of a decree, a statement of sovereignty, declaring one's freedom from the dominant power. Balram essentially severs contact with his family through the letter, and by issuing it at a specific time, he makes sure that they will be unable to warn his master and to suffer the consequences thereof. It

is clear at this point that a change has occurred. Not one, but actually two events, shortly following each other, determine Balram anew.[106] Both times he is physically affected by what happens to him in either becoming violent or fainting out of exasperation.

4.2.3.4 The Consumption of the Master

The nephew plays an important role in Balram's grasp for power. His submission enables Balram's empowerment, in a similar manner as the *homo sacer* constitutes the power of the sovereign. After dictating the letter, he forces his nephew to kneel in front of him, with his head facing the other direction:

> I put my hands on his shoulders; slowly I turned him around so he faced away from me. I dropped a rupee coin on the ground. "Bend down and pick that up." He did so, and I watched. Dharam combed his hair just like Mr Ashok did—with a parting down the middle; when you stood up over him, there was clear white line down his scalp, leading up to the spot on the crown where the strands of a man's hairline radiate from (ibid., 279).

With a fatherly gesture he turns his nephew's body away from him and orders his nephew to pick up a coin, an action he makes him repeat several times. The scene is highly charged with aristocratic semantics. Not only does he invoke regal associations by forcing his nephew to kneel (yet, facing the 'wrong' direction), he also uses a significant object for his nephew to pick up, namely, a coin. The coin is of great symbolic importance in *The White Tiger*. A similar passage to the kneeling scene

106 The short sequence of events is a typical picaresque element: "A picaresque device closely related to the episodic plot is the piling of event on event in strikingly short compass. Such rapid action secquences are very frequent in the picaresque novel and have the effect of dazzling both reader and picaro with the accumulated chaos of life's action" (Miller 21). However, even though *The White Tiger* might seem at times like a typical picaresque novel there are many differences that make the novel more a combination of *Bildungsroman* and picaresque novel. The plot is not episodic, the rhythm of the novel is not chaotic, the character does not experience ups-and-downs of fortune. Instead, the plot is linear, tells of a young boy who travels from the village to the city, who is mentored, learns about love and who is increasingly in charge of his actions, making his own fortune. I argue that only in the end of the novel does the pattern turn from a *Bildungsroman* into a picaro novel.

has been narrated before. In the previous example, it was the 'Mongoose,' Ashok's brother, who ordered Balram to pick up a supposedly lost rupee in the car: "'Get down on your knees. Look for it on the floor of the car'" (ibid., 139). Because Balram cannot retrieve it and doubts the Mongoose has even lost a coin in the car, he substitutes it with one of his own coins to satisfy the Mongoose: "There was a childish delight on his dark master's face. He put the rupee coin in his hand and sucked his teeth, as if it were the best thing that had happened to him all day" (ibid., 139). A highly abusive act—forcing his chauffeur to go down on his knees and search for a coin that might not even be there—is turned into an act of invention by the victim. Balram's act pleases the Mongoose, yet the Mongoose is unaware that *he* is being paid to leave Balram alone. The coin symbol—the lowest payment possible—is of importance for the book and often linked to power throughout the novel. Preceding the scene of the lost rupee is a scene in which Balram is giving out alms to a beggar when their car, referred to as 'egg,' stops at a red light:

> One beggar was carrying another on this shoulders and going from car to car. [...] Without thinking much about it, I [Balram] cracked open the egg. Rolling down the glass, I held out a rupee—the fellow with the deformed legs took it and saluted me; I rolled the window up and resealed the egg (ibid., 241).

His masters' reaction indicates that the act is considered rebellious: "The talking in the backseat stopped at once. 'Who the hell told you to do that?'" (ibid.). Balram, by giving the beggar the rupee coin, has assumed a position that he's not entitled to. Although the donation might be seen as a self-less act, it is also an arrogant act, since he takes on the role of a gratuitous giver in front of his wealthy masters. In the passage above that describes Balram and his nephew kneeling before him, Balram has elevated himself above his nephew, forcing him to "make money" for him, thus, turning himself into his nephew's superior. The significance of this act is revealed later on when Balram kills Ashok by making Ashok kneel in front of him. To the knowing reader,

then, the scene with the nephew predicts his later act of murder. He uses his nephew as an effigy of his master, employing him as a sort of sparring partner.

The murder scene shows that Balram has used his nephew as a stand-in for his boss, connecting the most powerful man in his life with the weakest by maneuvering them into the same position of submission. On a street crossing in the middle of nowhere, he lures his boss out of the car under the pretense of a flat tire. Looking for the damage, Ashok bends down and Balram encounters a familiar view:

> Down below me, his head was just a black ball—and in the blackness, I saw a thin white line of scalp between the neatly parted hair, leading like a painted line on a highway to the spot on the crown of his skull—the spot from which a man's hair radiates out (ibid., 283–284).

As if to demonstrate his altered state he takes on a pose that makes him the master and forces his boss into a kneeling servant. By threatening his life his boss becomes an inferior being to Balram. His victimhood is familiar to Balram:

> Putting my foot on the back of the crawling thing [Ashok], I flatten it to the ground [...] I undid the collar button and rubbed my hand over its clavicles to mark out the spot. When I was a boy [...] I used to play with my father's body, the junction of the neck and the chest, the place where all the tendons and veins stick out in high relief, was my favourite spot. When I touched this pot, the pit of my father's neck, I controlled him—I could make him stop breathing with the pressure of a finger (ibid., 285).

The 'thing' exhibits bodily similarities to that of the ultimate sufferer in Balram's life—his father, who he has seen disassembled in front of his eyes, slowly being picked apart by his family, wasted away by hard physical work, and left in a hospital hallway to die. Now his boss displays the same bodily characteristics. Goh views this as proof of death being the "proverbial great leveler" (349), and sees this scene as underscoring the portrayed closeness between master and servant:

> Strangely enough, he [Ashok] also takes on the marked bodily characteristic of the Indian servant: just before Balram issues the *coup de grace*, he runs his fingers over Ashok's "clavicles to make out the spot," and in that instant is reminded of his father's TB-consumed body, "the junction of the neck and the chest, the place where all the tendons and veins stick out in high relief" [Adiga 245]. Death, the proverbial great leveler, also reinforces the essential link between master and servant in the Indian economy, the bodies similarly marked by the socio-economic system in India, underneath the inequalities of wealth (349).

I, however, interpret the display of Ashok's body differently. Balram is imposing an authorial view onto his subject, making him the inferior being of the two. He does not seek for equality, but puts himself above Ashok. When killing his master, Balram refers to him as "thing," then later as the "Storck's son," both of which question his master's authority. By replacing Ashok's name with substitutes, Balram anticipates a change of power commensurate with the change of names. In fact, Ashok's name has been taken from him and will be transferred—as a symbol of power—to Balram who will later change his own name to 'Ashok' (cf. Adiga 302).

The way Ashok is killed is significant, since it seems to insinuate an animalistic and thus 'rightful' killing, as is common in nature. Having coerced his master into a vulnerable position Balram uses a broken glass bottle to smash his head. Curiously, Balram's weapon of choice appears to be "[l]ong and cruel and clawlike" (ibid., 273), which indicates that Balram considers himself an animal at this moment. The depiction of the event supports this reading: "I rammed the bottle down. The glass ate his bone" (ibid., 284). His weapon metamorphoses into an animal. However, in light of Balram's own captivation, which he explains with the image of the Rooster Coop, it is more productive to look at the killing in the context of the act of consumption alone. It is noteworthy that Balram turns from a consumed and captive being into a consumer himself. In fact, when describing his master's last moments, his actions are compared to that of a butcher, one of the symbols of consumption in the novel: "[t]he blood was draining from the

neck quite fast—I believe that is the way Muslims kill their chickens" (ibid., 285). Comparing his master to a chicken is highly relevant for someone who sees himself trapped and limited by the Rooster Coop. Balram has obviously changed positions: Instead of being eviscerated, his own organs strewn over his fellow roosters, he stands outside and above, holding the knife, gladly doing the work of the butcher. Yet, he becomes even more than a butcher, more even than a simple consumer, in fact, almost a god devouring a sacrifice. When he kills his master it is said: "The Storck's son [Ashok] opened his eyes—just as I pierced his neck—and his lifeblood spurted into my eyes. I was blind. I was a free man" (ibid., 285). Ashok's power is symbolically transferred to Balram. In a comic reversal, this passage serves not only as a metaphoric description of a power surge, but is also, in fact, a literal description: the blood has actually touched Balram's face as the following sentence shows: "*When I got the blood out of my eyes*, it was all over for Mr Ashok" [emphasis added] (ibid., 285). Balram has, indeed, been momentarily blinded by Ashok's blood. This passage echoes the oft-exchanged glances between Balram and Ashok through the rear-view mirror during Balram's employment. When killing his master, the gaze takes on a material, almost banal dimension. The blood spurting into his eyes makes Balram literally *consume* Ashok.

This killing scene sheds light on Balram's former nickname, which is 'the white tiger.' The nickname is not simply a reference to a predator. The name refers to a being that "is the rarest of animals—the creature that comes along only once in a generation" (ibid., 35). This description of the white tiger is interesting, because of its ethical implications. Since this nickname stems from Balram's childhood and is mentioned at a point in the novel when its genre could be still categorized as a modern *Bildungsroman*, the nickname could be understood as a promise or foreshadowing. Exceptionality is thus meant in a positive way. In this reading one could hope for a better life for Balram that will be different from his family's. It is thus fairly surprising to see how exceptionality actually refers later on to violence. Exceptionality becomes an inhuman and immoral character trait and Balram's nickname a cynical description of a murderer.

In the end, Balram and Ashok's roles have been reversed. This is rather shocking to the reader, since Balram has portrayed himself as a victim fighting for his right to freedom and equality. However, this is a typical development for a picaresque novel:

> If the world is tricky, peopled by tricksters, the picaro must either give up his personality to join the trickery or else perish. The picaro always joins. But, and this must be underscored, the pattern of education into roguery by the world reflects on the world more than on the picaro. It is the world that is picaresque; the picaro only typifies that world in his dramatic change from innocent to trickster (Miller 56).

Balram claims early on that he has become a better man through this experience and speaks throughout the novel of his 'enlightenment': "I am in the Light now" (ibid., 313). Yet, he seems to have misunderstood the main premise of enlightenment, namely that it is a metaphor. He takes it literally by buying multiple chandeliers that he hangs in every room of his house (cf. 117f). Thus, his 'enlightenment' is comically expressed and shows that it has not resulted in any significant mental development. Mendes writes that "[j]udging from the title of the novel, the reader might reasonably expect to encounter a tale about a rare and exotic character" (276), but the reader meets a banal character, greedy and only looking for his own profit, being exceptional only in the measures that he will take in order to guarantee his success in life.

4.2.3.5 The New Master

The novel highlights a rather unconventional understanding of responsibility. One cannot deny that Balram takes care of his nephew—he does not leave him behind when he flees after the murder, he sends him to school and provides for him financially—however, to take on responsibility is here clearly associated with biopolitical actions. When Balram takes care of Dharam he essentially takes possession of Dharam's life and makes it subject to his realm. When Balram flees from prosecution he reflects on what would happen to his nephew if he leaves him behind: "If I left him [Dharam] there now, the police would certainly arrest him as an accomplice. They would throw him into jail

with a bunch of wild men—and you know what happens to little boys when they get put into dens like that, sir" (ibid. 286). As a result he decides to take his nephew with him. This is a completely unnecessary and even an ethical act that surprises the reader. There is no 'need' to save his nephew, he could leave him to the wolves as he has done with the rest of his family. Does this mean that Balram is showing signs of responsibility here? I argue that his responsible actions are based on selfish reasons in the same manner that the father in *The Road* allowed his son to survive for selfish reasons. Balram rescues his nephew and provides for him, because without him he would not be able to ensure his own position as a captor. As long as he can hold someone else captive, he remains in a position of power. As long as Dharam submits to his role as a captive to his uncle, he is safe. This describes the symmetrical power-relations one also finds in Agamben's concept of the *homo sacer* and the sovereign. They keep each other in check and it is strongly implied that they are basically the same person, since they share the same spatial characteristics of being doubly excluded, the only difference being that they are situated at different sides of the spectrum. The following quotation in *The White Tiger* reflects this dependency between inferior and superior:

> One day, I know, Dharam, this boy who is drinking my milk and eating my ice cream in big bowls, will ask me, *Couldn't you have spared my mother? Couldn't you have written to her telling her to escape in time?* And then I'll have to come up with an answer—or kill him, I suppose (ibid., 316).

Balram acts responsible as long as his nephew adheres to his rules, should he cease to do so, Balram will be ready to destroy his life. This essentially describes Balram's former situation. As long as he would have agreed to go to prison for his master, he and his family would have been 'taken care of' and as long as he would have sent his pay checks home to his family they would refrain from making trouble for him by calling up his master. The structures remain the same; he treats Dharam as he was treated himself by his masters. He recreates his own imprisonment and subjects his nephew to the same constraints he had to experience. Thus, Balram's empowerment lies in the ability to

put shackles onto others. In this way Balram's status as an empowered and changed subject is closely related to Agamben's sovereign. Balram needs someone else as a counterpart to establish his own power and this need for someone else results in quasi-responsible actions. The fact that Balram reproduces his relationship with his boss implies the possibility of a theoretically endless repetition. If the nephew kills Balram, he could find himself in the same situation as Balram, having the ability to create inferiors, but also being endangered by their existence. The mindless repetition of a flawed system relates *The White Tiger* to Agamben's thoughts on the western political system. In both texts, power stems from creating inferiors and the existence of these is both the constitution for power and the mistake one cannot get rid of. The white tiger, as nature's anomaly, becomes then the exception that has ceased to be one.

The White Tiger supposedly lends its ear to the weak and the excluded and gives a voice to a character living at the bottom of society. This responds clearly to a postmodern ethics later adapted by postcolonial writing. Yet, contrary to one's expectations, the ensuing story of attaining freedom becomes a horrifying description of a murder. By taking on the name of his former master, Balram insinuates that he has not found a new and individual position in society, but simply taken over another's. Thus, he aims for the center of power instead of remaining at the peripheries. This goes against every conception of postmodern subjectivity and suggests that after the year 2000, the postcolonial subject does not come to terms with the space of the in-between that the marginalized inhabit and that Homi Bhabha famously outlined. Bhabha argues in *Locations of Culture* (1994) for a 'hybrid' subject (cf. 4) that is located in between and cannot be categorized as belonging to a certain group or nation, but that is positioned on a threshold. To illustrate this he chose an artwork by Renée Green, *Sites of Genealogy* (Out of Site, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Long Island City, New York) in which she draws attention to the spaces in a museum other than the gallery space, for example the boiler room or the stairwell. Bhabha highlights these liminal spaces, writing that

> [t]he stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. [...] This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy (*Locations of Culture* 4).

Balram yearns to break out, but he does not search for another realm in which he can live an independent life. Instead, he desires to conquer the spaces that are inhabited by the powerful, thereby confirming and endorsing a hierarchical structure rather than subverting it. This underlines the argument of my whole thesis, namely that the subjectivity presented in contemporary literature, although representing an experience of stabilization and empowerment, should not be mistaken for making a naïve argument for human improvement. The novels discussed here do not proclaim the general betterment of the human being, but rather permit a momentary and limited repositioning that create newly strengthened individual beings. In accordance with this, the change in power in *The White Tiger*, although disruptive, never breaks with the logic of the portrayed Indian society. Balram never leaves his captive state, the event only rearranges his own position inside the prison he is in. Thus, even though he might not be a rooster anymore and threatened with being butchered, the white tiger is kept in a cage, held captive by societal power structures, unable to break free. Thus, in this case the transcendence that the subject experiences is more limited than in my other examples, reflecting the gruesome political world of Agamben where there is simply no true 'outside' that is not in some way connected and even subjected to a powerful source located on the inside.

4.2.4 Conclusion: Prisoners of Responsibility

It is noteworthy that in the novels discussed the event is in each case a person. To the father his son becomes an event, to Jimmy the girl Oryx is an event, and to Balram his nephew is the event that eventually changes his life. At a first glance one might assume that it is because the characters feel a special bond to these persons and thus develop a sense

of responsibility towards these people. Yet, a closer look reveals that it is not so much love, friendship or loyalty that sparks their responsibility, but far more banal motives. The father in *The Road* needs his son, because his company keeps him from committing suicide. Thus, the father's actions are also a means to an end. In *Oryx and Crake* Jimmy's murder is—although a confession of love to Oryx—also an impulsive and instinctual act. He is simply not able to free himself from Oryx's spell, even if that makes him a murderer. In *The White Tiger* Balram takes care of his nephew only as long as he profits from this. He has no qualms about murdering him if the time were to come when his nephew endangers his position of power. Thus, the characters become responsible beings not so much in a reflective way and because they have made a careful decision, they become responsible instead in a very literal way—they are forced to respond in whichever form they can.

The White Tiger and *Oryx and Crake* also revealed a strong political or even ideological component of both captivation and empowerment. In the two novels the characters are strongly determined by the inherent system. Any kind of shift can only take place inside this system. Thus, empowerment in ethical terms is dependent on the rules of the system, which makes a general description of the 'ethics' of a responsible subject extremely difficult. The characters' ethics are strongly determined by the laws of the system they belong to and might seem counterintuitive to anyone outside the system. Both novels also strongly suggest that responsibility for another person is automatically linked to issues of power and politics. In particular, *The White Tiger* demonstrates that responsibility means also to have power over someone, even if that power is never played out. In doing this, the novel indicates that an ethical subject is not necessarily selfless, but can be extremely powerful and violent, *because* it has responsibility for others.

4.3 The Witness

4.3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I examine another aspect of ethics that is also closely related to responsibility, namely the figure of the witness. In the two novels discussed here, *Atonement* and *The Gathering*, characters witness victims of crimes and injustices. However, these witnesses inhabit a difficult moral position towards their subjects. *Atonement*'s Briony attempts to become a witness on behalf of her own victim, namely a man that she imprisoned. *The Gathering*'s Veronica becomes a witness on behalf of her brother who is mistreated by his family, including herself, and also abused, which she fails to recognize. Even though, these characters appear rather inadequate for their tasks they succeed in their efforts. In the end the witnesses do more than merely give accounts of what has happened, they give accounts of themselves. They reveal their own involvement, their own guilt and their own failings. As captives of their duty, they reveal their true relation to their subjects. Thus, it is also their testimonies that become events, since they fashion not only their victims, but themselves.

4.3.2 *Atonement*—The Selfish Witness

4.3.2.1 Introduction

As explained in the chapter on authorship *Atonement*'s protagonist Briony, who is also a fictional author, writes a novel called 'Atonement,' that is meant as a apology to her sister and Robbie Turner. Her actions as a child—mistaking fiction for reality—have destroyed both her sister's and Robbie's life irreparably. However, in writing the novel Briony tampers with the truth yet again by inventing an alternative ending in which her sister and Robbie are unharmed by Briony's mistakes. She also neglects to inform the reader that she—and not an impersonal narrator—is telling the story, attempting to influence the reader's perception of her. This alone makes her endeavor ethically difficult.

In this chapter I will be looking more closely at Briony's role as a witness and analyzing the ethical consequences of her actions. The underlying assumption here is that in writing the novel Briony gives more of an account of her captivation than of her atonement for her sins. Her novel underscores that she still, even after all that has happened, remains captivated by the power of fiction and acts accordingly, defending fiction to her last breath regardless of her victims.

4.3.2.2 Atoning through Fiction

The main difficulty is that Briony's atonement through writing a novel is an ethical problem in itself. She achieved her authorship by victimizing Robbie, how can she then apologize by using that same power? Ellam summarizes this dilemma as follows: "Without the tension caused by accusing Robbie, there would be no sin to atone for and, in turn, no novel" (37). Writing a novel to atone is rather inadequate in light of the fact that fiction helped cause Briony's mistake and led to Robbie's imprisonment. Briony tries to counter this argument by making a case for the ethical value of fiction. From all the characters at her service, she chooses Robbie to make her argument. As Briony's literary figure, Robbie is coerced into portraying fiction as an ethical instrument:

> For this was the point, surely: he would be a better doctor for having read literature. What deep readings his modified sensibility might make of human suffering, of the self-destructive folly or sheer bad luck that drive men towards ill-health! Birth, death, and frailty in between. Rise and fall—this was the doctor's business, and it was literature's too (McEwan 93).

It is suggested that Robbie's abilities as a medical doctor improve through fiction. He is made familiar with the emotional processes of a human being and thus more sensible to his patients' needs. According to this logic, Briony also should have been more attentive and knowledgeable about the world, having read fiction from a young age. That this is not the case at all is clear from the start of the novel, making the passage above exhibit Briony's blindness and even ignorance to

her own weaknesses. This argument can be interpreted as a cynical commentary, since reading fiction has lead to Briony's making very unethical and uninformed decisions that, in fact, rather underscore how misguiding fiction can be to the naïve reader.

Briony continues to utilize her version of Robbie to fight her battles. She makes the reader believe that Robbie's life is only made bearable through fiction, which also generates a point of connection with Briony who, too, finds relief in fiction. When Briony depicts Robbie's daily life during the war, literary elements creep into his daily routine: "He walked / across / the land / until / he came / to the sea. A hexameter. Five iambs and an anapaest was the beat they tramped to now" (ibid., 219). The importance of poetry is unquestionable here, since it is suggested that a lyrical rhythm becomes the only familiar element in this unfamiliar country and the only thing Robbie has to lean upon. Even Robbie's relationship with Cecilia falls prey to Briony's obvious agenda. It is insinuated that maintaining the relationship with Cecilia is only possible by virtue of fiction. The letters Robbie received from Cecilia when he was in prison were written in code to prevent their being confiscated: "So they wrote about literature, and used characters as codes" (ibid., 204). Drawing from fiction upheld their love and without this reassurance Robbie would have completely faltered under the pressure: "When he wrote back, he pretended to be his old self, he lied his way into sanity" (ibid.). Thus, instead of reflecting on the tempting and misleading nature of fiction, Briony prefers to point out the importance and relevance of fiction for Robbie, the first victim of her own imaginative acts. These passages explicitly link Robbie to Briony, implying that they might experience the world in a similar way, namely saturated with fiction, day dreams and wishes. In fact, McEwan has pointed himself to the close relationship between Robbie and Briony: "It's a novel full of other writers—not only Briony of course [...] but Robbie too has a relationship, a deep relationship with writing and storytelling" (Reynolds and Noakes 19). Nevertheless, for Briony, to suggest this kind of innate kinship between Robbie and herself is rather obscene, since it was exactly Briony's faulty perception, fueled by her love for the imagined and the fictionalized, that has put Rob-

bie into prison. Briony treats her victim the same way she has in reality—she assigns him a place in her poetic design. This poetic design was also a contributing factor in causing Robbie's imprisonment. She incriminates Robbie, since he is the necessary 'bad guy' set in opposition to her own characterization as the 'good guy.' Head supports this argument, writing that "[t]he young Briony's wish for a harmonious, organized world is a mark of her immature inability to accept contingency and the randomness of experience. This is also the source of her 'crime'" (168).

Despite Briony's attempts, fiction's use as an instrument of atonement remains questionable. In fact, by trying to make a case for fiction Briony rather reveals the inadequateness of her actions and underscores her distorted view of the world. Obviously, Briony attempts to clear her own name, using Robbie as her accomplice. This is discussed by Schwalm in more general terms:

> Briony's fictional transparent minds acquire the status of overt fabrication; however, in the pragmatic context of seeking impossible atonement, they are particularly suspicious in suggesting a hidden agenda behind the authorial concealment and a kind of usurpation of the other for Briony's own purposes (178).

The high point of this strategy is reached when Briony begins questioning even, again through Robbie's mouth, the definition of guilt:

> But what was guilt these days? It was cheap. Everyone was guilty, and no one was. No one could be redeemed by a change of evidence, for there weren't enough people, enough paper and pens [...] The witnesses were guilty too. All day we've witnessed each other's crimes. You killed no one today? But how many did you leave to die? (ibid., 261).

This passage suggests that guilt is relative and more common than expected. If everyone is guilty, then how guilty can Briony be? Does she even have to be punished, if no one can be considered truly innocent? Robbie's thoughts are directly fed by Briony's own opinion

which makes her characterization of Robbie extremely problematic and even selfish. In fact, some of Robbie's thoughts—or rather the thoughts of his fictionalized version—as well as the detailed account of the war seem to be superfluous to the novel as a whole, indicating that they serve another purpose. Schwalm writes that they have only one function:

> the fictional author possibly generates a certain relativity of her own guilt by juxtaposing it with ubiquitous guilt, individual and collective, and by projecting the consciousness of this onto her character, freeing herself from any suspicion of self-interest (178–179).

Briony fleshes out Robbie's life not primarily to give more context, but to provide more excuses for her crime. Head agrees with this when he writes: "the novelist Briony's rhetorical trick [...] appropriates the episode of Robbie's death for the larger theme, and [...] simultaneously allows Briony's crime to be subsumed in—and overshadowed by—the larger movements of twentieth-century history" (171). Her novel proves that her attitude towards Robbie has not changed at all—she is still using him for her own agenda that is informed by her quest for power, in particular the power of interpretation.

Once the reader has realized that it was Briony's voice behind Robbie's character, it is no longer possible to read the passages that chronicle Robbie's life and emotions as unbiased. Seaboyer writes: "Her moving identification with the man who was her victim is an atoning act of love and respect. But is it also a violation, a colonization" (32). Her novel is not an apology, but rather a manifestation of her power as an author. By subjecting Robbie to her web of imagination she bears witness only to herself, to her own status as a failed witness. She is foremost a powerful author who cannot resist structuring the world to please herself by casting "her narrative spell" (McEwan 7). When the fictional Robbie hopes that "Briony would change her evidence, she would rewrite the past so that the guilty became the innocent" (McEwan 261), the reader cannot yet fathom how obscene this quote will become in light of Briony's own attempts to cover up her guilt. She will indeed change

the evidence, not to clear Robbie's slate, but her own by turning herself into the innocent by-stander. Thus, she does not use her authorial prowess to investigate or repay her debt to Robbie so much as to manifest and consolidate her power. This renders her aim of atoning rather questionable. Müller-Wood maintains that "*Atonement* is essentially a novel about the narrator's protracted non-atonement" (148); her atonement never takes place. Briony is still captivated by fiction's promise and she is unable to break free, this is made overtly clear by her unethical behavior that favors fiction and displays a disregard for the victim. Ellam argues that Briony is, in fact, unable to act in any different way and her novel is evidence of this:

> It [Atonement] becomes, then, a fiction that always remembers the child's ambition and tells the reader how she never relinquishes it. Her dangerous imagination, which has led to the vilification of Robbie, becomes the necessary drama of the plot. In this light, the role of the imagination is central to the writing and, consequently, places doubts over the claim that this is a work of atonement (34).

Entranced by fiction, Briony becomes fiction's advocate while Robbie becomes the sacrificial lamb. Thus, her novel is a repetition of her initial crime. As the only witness to her cousin's rape, she provided a damaging testimony on Robbie. Since this testimony was not completely truthful, she could be considered the author of his fate. When writing down the novel as an actual author, again she becomes the author of this fate, this time however making him an unwilling accomplice. In both cases it is her allowance to let herself be captivated by fiction that motivates and determines her questionable actions, paving the way for her horrid transformation into an author-demon.

That her status as a witness possesses a rather savage component is ironically implicated by Briony herself when she describes how she surprised Robbie and Cecilia making love in the library: "Briony moved slowly into their view, stopped by the desk and saw them. She stood there stupidly, staring at them, her arms hanging loose at her sides, like a gunslinger in a Western showdown" (ibid., 139). The witness' power

is not to give an adequate account of what has happened, but to draw first and to defend oneself. Instead of being the witness of the injustice that Robbie experienced, she exhibits her power over Robbie. Her testimony reveals her captivation—her weakness for fiction—and exposes her as the perpetrator who still has not learned her lesson, which makes her act of literary atonement ignorant and selfish.

4.3.3 *The Gathering*—The Blind Witness

4.3.3.1 Introduction

Anne Enright is a well-known Irish writer whose novel *The Gathering* has gained international success by being awarded the Booker Prize in 2007. Enright had had success previously, having collected awards for her other novels and being short-listed numerous times for the Whitebread Novel Award. *The Gathering* deals with the issues of sexual abuse, which is in particular relevant in Catholic Ireland where the systematic mistreatment within Irish-Catholic institutions made headlines in the 1990s.[107] The novel chronicles how the main protagonist, Veronica Hegarty, comes to terms with her brother's having been abused and tries to find ways of giving an adequate account of his life. Meany points out how the testimonial nature of the book makes it distinctively not postmodern: "The need to bear witness and the uncertainty of the event have a renewed urgency in the twenty-first century as anxiety replaces *ennui* as the postmodern condition. Enright's novel takes a story that has become a cliché, 'yet another miserable Irish childhood,' and makes it unbearable" (124). Meany's observation indicates that the novel is not satisfied with stating the inaccessibility of an event, as

107 Liam Harte has written a more detailed analysis of the topic of sexual abuse in Ireland in reference to *The Gathering*: "The most damning evidence to date of the Irish state facilitating the cover-up of clerical sexual abuse is contained in the Report into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, also known as the Murphy Report, published in November 2009. The Report exposed the Irish Catholic hierarchy's sustained suppression of scandal and protection of paedophile priests at the expense of innocent children from 1975 to 2004. It also laid bare the failure of state agencies to fulfill their responsibilities by investigating complaints and prosecuting the perpetrators" (202–203, Fn 1).

many postmodern novels have done. The epistemological questions are pushed into the background in favor of the emotional needs that go along with dealing with traumatic events.

Enright's novel, like McEwan's *Atonement*, portrays the relationship between a faulty witness and a victim. Veronica, a member of a big Irish family clan, consisting of nine brothers and sisters, begins her narrative by stating that she feels obliged to "bear witness to an uncertain event" (Enright 1). Her obligation is triggered by the suicide of her older brother Liam who was sexually abused as a child. She appears to be completely unaware of his having been mistreated at first, revealing herself as an inadequate witness who is blind to the obvious. This limitation probably derives from a psychological mechanism, since she discovers later on that she was also sexually abused as a child. Her ignorance about this trauma is her state of captivation of which she is only released when an event changes her view, making her into an exemplary witness on behalf of her brother. She not only provides testimony of his victimhood, but becomes his doppelganger, beginning to share his view on the world and his emotional unrest. In doing so she becomes an incomparable witness, since she limits her testimonial not only to what she has seen, but also to what her brother has *felt*.[108] The fact that Veronica's own guilt is rooted in her limited perception also points to a larger guilt, namely that of a nation struggling to look at its problematic past and the way it dealt with its victims.[109]

108 In Veronica's role of honoring the memory of her brother she can also be seen as an Antigone-figure (cf. Meaney "Walking the Dead: Antigone, Ismene and Anne Enright's Narrators in Mourning").

109 Anne Enright herself has stated: "You kind of think of history as what happens after people are dead, it is the story that is told when there is no one left who remembers, no one there to contradict it. And yet history is something that has to be broken open again and again and retold, even though officially it's something that has stopped. But as we continue, history shifts and changes all the time. We see different things. [...] child abuse fits in with all of these problems and concerns" (Bracken/Cahill 31).

4.3.3.2 The Inadequate Witness

Veronica seems to be the worst person to count on as a witness. Even though her state as a witness is inscribed to her via her name; Veronica, which refers to Saint Veronica, is unable to recognize this. Saint Veronica accompanied Jesus Christ on his way to his execution, carrying his cross. She takes care of Jesus' wounds with her veil and produces, as a side effect, a relic, since the veil later displays the imprint of Jesus' face.[110] The veil becomes proof of Jesus' existence and his sufferings, and Veronica becomes the one witness who can actually produce physical proof about Jesus. This makes her rather exemplary. The contemporary Veronica is, however, not even aware of her connection with this holy witness at first, since she misidentifies the origin of her name. She mistakes Saint Veronica for 'the bleeding woman': "I confused Veronica with the bleeding woman of the gospels, the one of whom Christ said, 'Someone has touched me'" (ibid., 129). Then she confuses her "with the woman to whom He said, '*Noli me tangere,*' which happened after the resurrection" (ibid., 129). The last story refers to Mary Magdalene who is the first person to meet Jesus after he is resurrected from the dead and who is ironically a deficient witness herself, since she mistakes Jesus for the gardener.[111] When Veronica finally discovers the true origin of her name, she denies that the meaning can be applied to herself: "I am not Veronica" (ibid., 129). However, she immediately contradicts herself right away: "it is true that I am attracted to people who suffer, or men who suffer, my suffering husband, my suffering brother, the suffering figure of Mr Nugent" (ibid., 129). With this claim she unwittingly allows herself to be connected to both, Saint Veronica *and* Mary Magdalene. She is not unlike Saint Veronica, since she feels attracted to suffering individuals. Yet, she also shares qualities with Mary Magdalene in terms of her inability to give accurate testimony: she describes the man who is later revealed to be her brother's abuser, Mr Nugent, as a "suffering figure." It is ironic that her supposed misidentification—mistaking St. Veronica for Mary Magdalene—is absolutely fitting: Similar to Mary Magdalene who mistakes Jesus for

110 This story is not part of the Bible, but is apocryphal content. The only reference in the Bible is the bleeding woman (cf. Mark 5:25; Matthew 9:20).

111 See Jhn 20:11–18.

a gardener, she mistakes the abuser for a victim. Her proneness to misidentification is what constitutes her captivation. In a way she is blind to the most obvious things going on around her. Because of this she draws false conclusions, limited by her restricted (in)sight.

Her captive state—being a deficient witness—is made most evident by Veronica's misinterpretation of her grandmother Ada's and Nugent's relationship. The setting of the story that Veronica constructs around the first meeting between Ada and Nugent is a hotel foyer in 1920s Dublin. It is never explained what Ada and Nugent, who don't know each other at this point, were doing at the hotel. Veronica creates a mysterious, almost cinematic scene which is, it seems, a natural backdrop for the kind of romance she imagines. In Veronica's scenario Nugent is the unfortunate lover whose love for Ada remains unrequited: "And Nugent's eyes swell with the unfairness of it, and with the force of love denied" (ibid., 20). But Veronica learns that contrary to her fantasy, the relationship between Nugent and her grandmother was not based on a failed romantic relationship, but had a distinct economic foundation: "She was a poor girl, who turned her face to the wall as the coins clinked on the bedside table, and the dark shape of a man left the room" (ibid., 92). There is no romantic relationship between Ada and Nugent, only a distinctly practical and banal one: Nugent is Ada's landlord. The image above, however, insinuates not only a deal between Ada and Nugent, but even depicts Veronica's grandmother as a prostitute. Thus, their economic relationship is sexually charged. Yet, what is even more significant about the scene is the fact that in it she is turning "her face to the wall," implying that she was looking the other way from whatever was happening in the room. Since Veronica identifies Nugent later as her brother's abuser this phrasing implicates Ada as an accomplice in Nugent's crimes. The following passage underscores this assumption. Veronica, her brother and maybe even their little sister Kitty (about this Veronica's memory remains unclear) are visiting their grandmother's house on Nugent's property one fateful summer. The children's position, on Nugent's turf, is recounted in a very specific way, suggesting that the children are part of a deal:

> But there is a sense of thrall to it, too; of Nugent working in the garage, that he owned, at the back of the house and then walking round to the door, that he owned, at the front, and knocking. [...] He had the house, and he had the woman, more or less, and he did what he liked with the children passing through. [...] We three Hegartys were manifestly *of little account* (ibid., 235–236).

The fact that the children are referred to in economic terms, being "of little account," suggests that they have been swallowed by the economic logic which prevails at Ada's house. Since this logic has been indicated to be of a sexual nature, this all points to the fact that Ada has either agreed to the children's sexual abuse or has at least condoned it. In hindsight, Veronica realizes how false her own naïve assumptions were. Ada and Nugent were not lovers at all and Veronica fails to recognize the truth, even during most of her adult life:

> Over the next twenty years, the world around us changed and I remembered Mr Nugent. But I never would have made the shift on my own—if I hadn't been listening to the radio, and reading the paper, and hearing about what went on in schools and churches and in people's homes. It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it (ibid., 172–173).

4.3.3.3 The Victim: Liam Hegarty

Liam Hegarty is clearly portrayed as a victim. There are several markers that point to this fact which will be elaborated in the following. They include his close association with death, his being in contact with cancerous growths, being compared to a cancer himself, the general exclusion he has to experience in his own family and finally the lack of self-respect that results from this.

Liam's character is shaped by his closeness to elements typically associated with death: "My brother Liam loved birds and, like all boys, he loved the bones of dead animals" (ibid., 1). His morbid fascination never leaves him; as an adult he chooses a job that associates him with his old passion:

> Liam, my brother, spent most of his working life as a hospital porter in the Hampstead Royal Free. He pushed beds down corridors and put cancerous lumps into bags and carried severed limbs down to the incinerator, and he enjoyed it, he said. He liked the company (ibid., 39).

It is his job to dispose of organic material, excessive growths that endanger one's life and that have to be surgically removed. While describing his passion for his job, it is said that he "enjoys the company." At first one might assume that this relates to the colleagues at the hospital, but they are not mentioned in the passage above. The passage indicates an unusual company, namely that of the severed limbs. This depicts Liam as a person removed from society, identifying with body parts that are thrown away, considered to be worthless and toxic. This penchant can be linked to Liam's character, since at times Liam himself appears to take the position of an excessive and toxic growth in his own family. His family considers him a black sheep: "We looked at the likes of Liam and had [...] a different set of words. *Pup, gurrier, monkey, thug, hopeless, useless, mad, messer*" (ibid., 162–163). About this Harte writes: "Here, Veronica zones in on one of the cruxes of child sexual abuse, the way in which victims are simultaneously robbed of their subjectivity and condemned to a life of indelible social stigmatization" (197). In terming him "monkey," Liam is being animalized; "thug" and "useless" marks him as an outsider who does not support a functioning society, but undermines it. This negative impression is further stressed by the fact that he is perceived as radiating danger. He is able to pick up on things and expose them: "This was Liam's great talent—exposing the lie" (ibid., 125), "he just picked it up. Liam could be a completely shocking human being, but it was hard to say what exactly he had done to make you feel off-key" (ibid.), and finally "the way Liam worked best was under your skin" (ibid.). His ability to look behind the facade is what frightens Liam's family who are used to looking down on him. His ability to expose what is hidden, makes it somewhat necessary for the family to ignore him, in order to gain control over him. The way the family deals with Liam's alcoholism supports this reading. Nobody intervenes or tries to stop him from feeding his addiction. Instead, his addiction serves as the determinate proof of his inferior status and

makes it only easier to ignore him: "A drinker does not exist. Whatever they say, it is just the drink talking" (ibid., 55). His alcoholism is not a disappointment, but an expected occurrence. In fact, his weakness is almost a necessity, proof of an unspoken rule: "There is always a drunk. There is always someone who has been interfered with, as a child" (ibid., 185). This description limits Liam's fate to a structural abnormality in which he is subjected to an invisible rule. In this case the rule of family life, where, as the novel suggests, there is always one cancerous growth.

The cancer image becomes a theme exclusively linked to Liam. Veronica uses the image when explaining her brother's suicide to her daughters:

> For a week, I compose a great and poetic speech for my children about how there are little thoughts in your head that can grow until they eat your entire mind. Just tiny little thoughts—they are like a cancer, there is no telling what triggers the spread, or who will be struck, and why some get it and others are spared (ibid., 175).

Liam's reasons for his suicide are described as cancerous thoughts which have taken over Liam's mind like a tumor. (This passage also alludes to the sexual abuse in veiled terms.) Linking Liam to cancer, considering his job, implies an inner paradox. The one who disposes of tumors seems to be a tumor himself and must be, in some way opposed to his own nature. That he is, is conveyed in Liam's family life. Once, during an argument, Liam aims a knife at his mother. His family responds immediately: "the whole family piled into him, and kicked him around the back garden. [...] And there was a great satisfaction to it, as I recall. Like a scab that needed to be picked. *He had it coming to him*" (ibid., 169). Nobody supports him, he is immediately shunned and treated like an outsider. But Liam appears not to care, he does not even feel offended or betrayed as one might expect him to be. On the contrary: "And my lost brother, Liam, laughed: the knife thrower, the one who was being kicked, he laughed too" (ibid., 6). He supports his own exclusion, he mistreats himself, the cancerous element in the family.

This lack of self-respect is what surprises Veronica most, and it is in this that she recognizes her own failure: "If I believed in such a thing as confession I would go there and say that, not only did I laugh at my brother, but I let my brother laugh at himself, all his life" (ibid., 167). Veronica has failed to see her brother's vulnerability and has simply watched while he slowly succumbs to his fate. That he supports his own status as an outsider is for Veronica the most evident sign of their failure as a family. She, like all the other family members, has witnessed and approved of her brother turning against himself. She has not intervened but has left him to suffer in his miserable situation. There seems to be no real sympathy between them as a conversation with her young daughter indicates: "'I didn't even like him [Liam],' she [Veronica's daughter] says, in a final, terrible whimper, and this makes me [Veronica] laugh so much she stops crying to look up at me. 'Neither did I, sweetheart. Neither did I'" (ibid., 200). Liam's abandoned status becomes unquestionable in the moment of his death. Veronica, informing her siblings about Liam's death, receives strange and bored reactions like that of her brother Jem: "'Well, at least that's done'" (ibid., 24) as if Liam's life was always waiting for its annihilation. And later Veronica herself capitulates and writes: "We will look around and say, One less. One less" (ibid., 44). Liam's death appears to be of no relevance and in some way expected. Thus, Liam's status as a victim is completely overlooked not only by the captive Veronica who is unable to make connections and to identify the obvious, but also by the whole family.

4.3.3.4 Turning into an Involuntary Witness

However, after Liam dies Veronica cannot continue her marginalizing of Liam and making fun of his suffering and his status as the black sheep in the family. In fact, when Veronica encounters her brother's corpse, she is overwhelmed by an unfamiliar impression: she recognizes Liam as a victim for the first time. This event in her life changes everything that succeeds it. It imposes a visual impression on her. She compares Liam's corpse to Andrea Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ* (1480). This painting was groundbreaking in its time, since it forced the spectator to observe Jesus' dead body in a singular sudden move-

ment. In the scene that the painting presents, Jesus has been already taken down from the cross and is laid out on a stone table. The view of the spectator is at first fixed on Jesus' pierced feet, then the gaze travels upwards and leads straight to the face of the obviously dead and very human man. The painting deals with Jesus' death in a more dramatized way than previous representations, since it forces the spectator to experience the sudden shock of seeing a corpse in front of one's eyes before realizing that this is supposed to be God's son, namely Jesus Christ.[112] The lamentation turns into an enforced public viewing, pushing the mourning crowd—in this case two women whose faces cannot be seen completely—to the edges of the painting, giving privilege to the view on the corpse. This view characterizes Veronica's experience: it gives an account of the shock she experienced when she saw Liam's corpse, it reflects her inability to look elsewhere and it also communicates her absolute and unshakable certainty about her brother's status as a victim.

Veronica decides that "[i]t is time to put an end to the shifting stories and the waking dreams. It is time to call an end to romance and just say what happened in Ada's house, the year that I was eight and Liam was barely nine" (ibid., 142). She breaks off with her previous narrative style that was characterized by poetic and atmospheric descriptions, replete with vague hints about the abuse. Instead, Veronica, similar to Mantegna, presents the reader with an abrupt change of pace by losing the vague context. She lists three facts of her brother's death: "The first is that Liam was wearing a short fluorescent yellow jacket when he died [...] The second is that he had stones in his pockets. The third is that he had no underpants on under his jeans, and no socks in his leather shoes" (ibid., 141). This information—the 'veil' that Liam leaves behind—haunts Veronica who recognizes a carefully planned suicidal act: Liam wanted his body to be found, therefore he was wear-

112 Other painters that dealt with the topic of lamentation before Mantegna stuck to certain attributes that marked the portrayed scene as a lamentation. Often there is the cross in the background, the mourners are grouped around Jesus' body, and transcendence is suggested by halos or angels, i.e. in Giotto di Bondone's lamentation (1304–1306) and Fra Angelico's lamentation (1436–1441).

ing an eye-catching jacket, and he put stones in his pockets in order to drown himself. The missing underwear is to Veronica a sign of Liam's lost and deteriorating state. Liam's 'veil' becomes proof of his suffering, imposing itself upon Veronica like Mantegna's painting, clearly representing Liam as a victim.

As a result her narrative becomes disturbing, invasive and challenging. Without any introductory remarks she narrates a shocking scene, pressuring the reader into experiencing a revolting anamorphosis and placing the reader under a similar visual captivation to that which she experienced while looking at her brother's corpse. She tells of a faint memory of the time when she and her brother were living for a summer in their grandmother's home, where Veronica made a confusing discovery:

> What struck me was the strangeness of what I saw, when I opened the door. It was as if Mr Nugent's penis, which was sticking out of his flies, had grown strangely, and flowered at the tip to produce the large and unwieldy shape of a boy, that boy being my brother Liam, who, I finally saw, was not an extension of the man's member, set down mysteriously on the ground in front of him, but a shocked [...] boy of nine, and the member not even that, but the boy's forearm, that made a bridge of flesh between himself and Mr Nugent. His hand was buried in the cloth, his fist clutched around something hidden there. They were not one thing, joined from open groin to shoulder, they were two people that I knew, Mr Nugent and Liam (ibid., 143–144).

Veronica introduces Nugent in this scene at the same time as she mentions his sexual organ. Thus, instead of beginning this passage with informing or even warning readers that they will encounter a scene of abuse, Veronica provides impressionistic images that situate them *in medias res*. The readers are confronted with the image of an overlarge penis onto which Veronica's brother appears to be attached, a grotesque and shocking image, particularly for an eight year old girl. When the young Veronica takes a closer look and realizes that she has mistaken the forearm of her brother for a penis, the image remains revolting,

since the implication of the scene is the same: Veronica has become a witness of her brother's sexual abuse. As in *Atonement*, the event is presented as a strange picture that undergoes a shocking transformation. Veronica's perception is faulty yet nevertheless correct. The sex scene captures the essence of an inappropriate relationship. Consequently, everything seems wrong, distorted, too large, too close, and produces a traumatic image that the reader experiences up close. 'Truth' is an image, here, that overwhelms and that provides a certainty that remains unexpressed in language.

Veronica also becomes a witness on another level. Her status as a witness is not merely constituted by telling her brother's story, but by *becoming* her brother. With this she tries to "make her brother come alive as the dead man he was in life" (Harte 189). She becomes a ghostly being as Harte argues: "At its dark extremities, Veronica's aversion to human fleshiness mutates into a desire to transcend her own body entirely and become as ghostly as her brother" (196–197). When the narration starts Veronica has discovered herself to be in a position not unlike Liam's. Veronica, similarly to Liam, seems to be affected by body parts, namely bones: "sometimes we find, on the beach, a cuttlefish bone so pure that I have to slip it in my pocket, and I comfort my hand with the secret white arc of it" (ibid., 1). In fact, Veronica associates her writing process with gathering and laying out bones: "I write it down, I lay them out in nice sentences, all my clean, white bones" (ibid., 2). That her narrative consists of *her* bones points already to the fact that she shows the same affinity to death as Liam. In fact, she feels removed from the rest of the world: "There's something wonderful about a death, how everything shuts down, and all the ways you thought you were vital are not even vaguely important" (ibid., 27). She adapts her brother's world view, removed from the world and seeing in life only the promise of death. Veronica's dark take on life even infects her memories. Everyone who is part of her past is marked by his or her own death. About her grandmother she says: "She moves towards her grave, at her own speed" (ibid., 231). And also Liam is already a dying man in her memories: "Liam's hand on my forearm, already livid with decay" (ibid., 65). Both her grandmother and her brother are dead

and one might argue that this affects her perception. But even her own children, who are very much alive, embody only loss, death and aimless procreation to her:

> I look at my hands on the railings, and they are old, and my child-battered body, that I was proud of, in a way, for the new people that came out of it, just feeding the grave, *just feeding the grave!* I want to shout it at these strangers, as they pass (ibid., 79).

To Veronica, her children do not signify new life, but instead life that will end irrevocably. Every hint of transcendence—like love—is brushed aside. She perceives such phenomena as a "waste of energy," a figure in a calculation that makes no sense in respect to life, whatsoever:

> And what amazes me as I hit the motorway is not the fact that everyone loses someone, but that everyone loves someone. It seems like such a massive waste of energy—and we all do it, all the people beetling along between the white lines, merging, converging, overtaking. We each love someone, even though they will die. And we keep loving them, even when they are not there to love any more. And there is no logic or use to any of this, that I can see (ibid., 28).

In her stance towards sexuality her aversion towards life becomes most visible: "I love my husband, but I lay there with one leg on either side of his dancing, country-boy hips and *I did not feel alive*. I felt like a chicken when it is quartered [emphasis added]" (ibid., 40). Even in an act that is supposed to be an expression of life, she only recognizes yet another death scene, the dismemberment of a dead chicken.

By identifying with her brother she becomes more perceptive to the supernatural realm. She constantly sees Liam's ghost hovering around her house. Once, she even thinks she sees Ada, her dead grandmother.

> I lift the book and turn to show it to Liam, and I see Ada watching us from the doorway. There she is. I see her not as I 'saw' the ghosts on the stairs. I see her as I might see an actual woman standing in the light of the hall (ibid., 217).

But quickly the scene is rationalized: "It was Ita [her sister] at the door, of course, I should have known. It was not Ada" (ibid., 221). The supposedly transcendent moment has a factual basis in reality. Veronica is drawn back into reality, but cannot shake this trick of the eyes and the case of mistaken identity. Her mistake jars something loose in Veronica's memory:

> This is what I remembered, when I saw her. I remembered a picture, I don't know what else to call it. It is a picture in my head of Ada standing at the door of the good room in Broadstone. I am eight. Ada's eyes are crawling down my shoulder and my back. Her gaze is livid down one side of me; it is like a light: my skin hardens under it and crinkles like a burn. And on the other side of me is the welcoming darkness of Lambert Nugent. I am facing into that darkness and falling. I am holding his old penis in my hand (ibid., 221).

The description of her memory bears several similarities to revelations in the Old Testament.[113] In the Book of Daniel, a revelation is characterized by its relationship to light and darkness: "He revealeth the deep and secret things: he knoweth what is in the darkness, and the light dwelleth with him" (Daniel 2: 22). Ada takes in this constellation the place of God who sheds light onto the world. Veronica is spellbound and Ada's eyes become living creatures that have injurious effects. Under the bright gaze of her grandmother Veronica's skin changes and deteriorates. The receiver of this revelation is not merely enlightened, but set on fire. Moving away from this violent gaze, Veronica is welcomed and relieved by Nugent who provides her with cooling darkness. Yet darkness is the precise element that a revelation should dispose of, since darkness is associated with the unknown. Thus, Nugent's darkness offers no real relief. Instead, it exposes a sexual act, and, considering the young age of Veronica in this scene, also a taboo, distorting the revelation pattern completely. The event has not revealed God's face, but a sexual predator. It also reveals that Veronica

113 Ewin notes how religious allusions help structure the novel overall: "[f]or all its secular, even blasphemous demonstrations, the novel is shot through with resounding religious metaphors" (132–133).

has not only failed to recognize her brother's abuse, but also her own. This opens the door for more detailed and explicit visions, even though they are somewhat disfigured by memory:

> But it is a very strange picture. It is made up of the words that say it. I think of the 'eye' of his penis, and it is pressing against my own eye. I 'pull' him and he keels towards me. I 'suck' him and from this mouth there protrudes a narrow, lemon sweet. This comes from a place in my head where words and actions are mangled. It comes from the very beginning of things, and I can not tell if it is true. Or I can not, tell if it is real (ibid., 221–222).

The statement of being fed a substance of "narrow, lemon sweet" relates to the description of a sexual encounter filtered through the eyes of an innocent child. It is also noteworthy that the word 'eye' is central to the image; the organ of perception is related to Nugent's sexual organ which blocks Veronica's sight. Thus, it is indicated that it might be her own abuse and the ensuing trauma that has prevented her from seeing what happened to her and her brother.

In fact, this has been hinted at earlier, when Veronica describes how her grief for her brother influences her sexual encounters with her husband. The event becomes an 'er-äugnis' (in reference to Martin Heidegger)—it is not only experienced through the act of perception, her eye is literally 'touched,' that is, it has come in physical contact with Nugent's 'eye,' his sexual organ.[114] In a way Veronica is the perfect witness of Liam, since what she has witnessed happened in a similar way to herself. Her alliance with her brother is more than an act of solidarity, but expression of a shared trauma. By her brother's death she becomes a witness of herself and takes responsibility for what happens. As a result of this experience, she leaves her family, retreats into a hotel room, and awakes after a long sleep with a new sense of purpose: "I wake again,

114 The connection between perception and eventfulness has been established by Martin Heidegger who writes: "Ereignen heißt ursprünglich: eräugen, d.h. erblicken, im Blicken zu sich rufen, an-eignen" (28–29).

and shower. I put on new pants and leave the old ones in the bin. I discard this other life, and leave the hotel behind" (ibid., 257). Like Saint Paul she begins a new life and spreads the word:

> I know what I have to do—even though it is too late for the truth, I will tell the truth. I will get hold of Ernest and tell him what happened to Liam in Broadstone, and I will ask him to break this very old news to the rest of the family (ibid., 259).

Matthew Ryan points out that it is noteworthy—in light of Veronica's attempts to *write* down what happened to her brother—that "[s]ignificantly, this is to be a *spoken* truth rather than a *written* one" (180). Veronica realizes that she might be unable to pinpoint exactly her brother's history, to give a detailed account of how the crime first started and how it affected Liam. By speaking the truth rather than writing it down, she seems to underscore that the truth has to come out, even if the details can no longer be recounted. From a captive being, a limited and even failing witness, she turns into an exemplary witness, not only by embodying her brother and thereby accounting for his victimhood, but by passing on the message to her family. Even though she still has doubts about the adequacy of her memories, Liam's victimhood is more important than the details of his abuse.

4.3.4 Conclusion: Seized Witnesses

The witness is an ethically problematic figure, since he/she is requested to speak on someone else's behalf. This involves issues of power and can even hurt the person who one is speaking for, as seen in *Atonement*, in which the witness clearly takes advantage of the person she should only report on. In the presented cases, responsible acts are not carried out by responsible people, they are seized from people, they are forced out. Briony, in *Atonement*, is trying to prove her supposed innocence, but fails miserably, only proving that she is easy prey when it comes to fiction. In bearing witness she repeats her initial crime, judging her victim by her own standards, not allowing for anyone to interfere with her interpretation. Thus, she gives testimony of her own guilt and shows

not only how Robbie could become a victim in this, but even how the reader can be captivated by her false report. Her testimony is not an atonement, but rather evidence of her own guilt. In that way, she is a perfect witness, incriminating herself, she reveals the truth about her flawed character unwillingly. In *The Gathering* the witness Veronica is overwhelmed by images that demand a reaction from her, forcing her to recognize her brother as a victim and herself as not only a witness to his abuse, but also a victim of this abuse. From a blind and failing witness she develops into an exceptional witness, not only presenting the long hidden ugly truths without compromise, but also by living through her brother's trauma by becoming his *doppelganger*. The fact that she brings him to life by this can be considered a dedication to his memory and to the pain he felt, which had never been truly recognized before.

None of the figures actively chooses to become responsible for others; each one of them is a captive, cornered into this position by their own limitations. In both cases, to become a witness means giving testimony to oneself, turning the testimonial act into an event of self-manifestation. When manifesting, they are revealed as deeply inadequate as witnesses—they cannot give true accounts of the crimes or injustices nor of the victims. This chapter shows most obviously how captivation—a fundamental weakness and limitation of the character—is absolutely necessary to trigger their later becoming subjects. The witnesses in this chapter could only become witnesses *because* of their failings and inadequacies.

The subjects in this chapter bear strong similarities to Marion's conception of the subject. He considers them foremost 'witnesses' to an event and sees their role as secondary to the event, being there mainly to give shape to that event. Only by this task can they become subjects in the first place. Thus, their role is to serve as vessels and to give form to something else that in turn shapes them. Being a witness to an event is, thus, in Marion's understanding the central step to becoming a subject in the first place. In my examples, the subjects turn necessarily into ethical ones and what makes this even more interesting, these ethical

subjects have only a limited control over their own actions. Their ethical 'shape' then is also given to them by the event, since they are not really able to reflect or interfere with their ethical impulses or motivations. Thus, both Briony and Veronica manifest their own true 'ethical shape' by testifying on behalf of the victims, though unlike Marion's subjects they are involved in their victim's fates. They both helped in victimizing their victims, making them immoral, yet, ethical witnesses, which renders this conception of ethical beings extremely paradoxical.

5 Captives of the Sacred

5.1 Introduction

In Friedrich Nietzsche's *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, "der tolle Mensch" explains to his audience:

> "Wohin ist Gott? rief er, ich will es euch sagen! Wir haben ihn getödtet [sic], —ihr und ich! Wir Alle sind seine Mörder! Aber wie haben wir diess [sic] gemacht? Wie vermochten wir das Meer auszutrinken? Wer gab uns den Schwamm, um den ganzen Horizont wegzuwischen? Was thaten [sic] wir, als wir diese Erde von ihrer Sonne losketteten? Wohin bewegt sie sich nun? Wohin bewegen wir uns? Fort von allen Sonnen? Stürzen wir nicht fortwährend? Und rückwärts und seitwärts, vorwärts, nach allen Seiten? Giebt [sic] es noch ein Oben und ein Unten? Irren wir nicht wie durch ein unendliches Nichts? Haucht uns nicht der leere Raum an? Ist es nicht kälter geworden?" (§ 125).

The "tolle Mensch" has discovered that God is gone and the world as we know it is an illusion. Without a God the individual has lost his guidance, does not know where to look or where to go. The death of God forces individuals to reevaluate their position in the universe. Whereas in Nietzsche's story the announcer of the death of God realizes that his message has been spread too early and that humanity is not capable of receiving this news yet, in postmodernism, with the two world wars in the rearview mirror, the claim that God is dead seems rather dated. Whereas Estragon in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is "giving up again" (9) at the beginning of the play; the postmodern subject has long given up hope that someone named 'Godot' or God is about to show himself. The postmodern subject knows that God has died and, thus, does not wait in vain. In light of this, it is not surprising that the disbelief in a higher sphere or a God is expressed in a different and more indirect way in postmodernism compared to its modernist representation.

In postmodernism the critique against God becomes a critique of hierarchical structures that demand centers of authority. The theological argument is transferred to the realm of language and linguistics. The transcendent in the realm of language refers to three elements: the subject who 'sends out' messages to a receiver; the idea of a 'message' as the starting point of communication; and some form of 'original' or 'first' word that does not need other words in order to be understood. All these aspects are closely related to each other. As Derrida has brilliantly argued throughout his early work, to believe in the idea of an original word—a transcendental signifier—is a fundamental misunderstanding of how language operates. He states that "no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present" ("Semiology and Grammatology" 26) and "each allegedly 'simple term' is marked by the trace of another term" (ibid., 33). Language, to Derrida, is a system of referents that denote each other and thereby create meaning. Meaning does not pre-exist its use as language, as Wittgenstein argued at the beginning of the 20th century. In a lecture delivered in Cambridge, Wittgenstein contends that language does not just 'translate' thoughts into communication, contrary to the common opinion at that time: "In the process of thinking, the thought does not appear first, to be translated subsequently by us into words or other symbols. There is not something which exists before it's put into words or imagery" (*Wittgenstein's Lectures* 86). Derrida would agree here, expressing that "there is no linguistic sign before writing" (*Of Grammatology* 14) and argues against the notion of a 'pure meaning,' that is to say a "prelinguistic [...] meaning whose presence would be conceivable outside [...] and before the process or system of signification" ("Semiology and Grammatology" 31). The notion of a "prelinguistic meaning" has a religious ring to it; it can be seen as a function God usually inhabits—ordering and giving meaning to the world.[115] Derrida refutes the existence of such an organizing principle, declar-

115 In fact Jean Baudrillard makes this argument in *Simulacra and Simulation*: "All of western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange—God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest its existence? Then the

ing that "no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field" ("Différance" 7). Thus, the notion of the origin (an author of a message; a message as beginning of communication; a primary word)—is denied in all three cases.

In fact, for Derrida, there is nothing 'outside' or beyond language. One of his most seminal works in this regard is "The Truth in Painting," in which Derrida investigates the nature of the frame and its relevance for paintings. Derrida reasons that the frame (which he refers to as 'parergon') belongs and does not belong to the painting at the same time; the true nature remains undecided: "A parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the ergon, the work done [fait], the fact [le fait], the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside" ("The Truth in Painting" 54). The frame, like the context of a piece of work, can never be pinned down: "The frame labors [travaille] indeed. [...] Like wood. It creaks and cracks, breaks down and dislocates even as it cooperates in the production of the product, overflows it and is deduc(t)ed from it. It never lets itself be simply exposed" (ibid., 75). In fact, there is no way to exclude even oneself from the process of language, meaning that there is no way to actually inhabit a position that is truly located 'outside.'[116] The subject is never the origin of a linguistic message; rather, he is formed by it. For Derrida the subject is simply part of language, meaning that he or she is subjected to the movement and inner logic of *différance*: "Nothing [...] precedes *différance* [...] There is no subject who is agent, author, and master of *différance*" ("Semiology and Grammatology" 28).

This philosophical insight can be transferred to postmodern fiction. As signs can only be grasped through their relation to other signs, a text as conceived in postmodernism can only be understood in relation to

whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum—not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (5-6).

116 The most famous quote by Derrida refers to this fact: "there is no outside to the text" [Il n'y a pas de hors- texte] (*Of Grammatology* 163).

other texts. No work of art is singular, as Paul Auster's character Quinn formulates it in *City of Glass:* "What interested him about the stories he wrote was not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories" (7). A text is always based on its predecessors, from which it borrows or delimits itself. The idea that there is no piece of art that is completely 'new' was most famously stated by John Barth in "The Literature of Exhaustion": "By 'exhaustion' I don't mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities—by no means necessarily a cause for despair" (64). The critique of God has evolved into a general critique of overarching structures. Their claim to authenticity and originality is strongly refuted.

To illustrate how this critique is expressed in relation to sacredness in postmodern fiction, I have chosen two short stories by Jorge Louis Borges. Even though there has been some dispute about whether Borges should be considered a modern writer or an early postmodern one, I think it is clear that there are certainly traces in his work that connect very well to postmodern issues, in particular in terms of sacredness, as I will explain in the following.[117] In "The Aleph" (1945) Borges narrates how his character named 'Borges' finds out about an aleph that is hidden in the cellar of a friend. The fictive Borges explains:

> "aleph" as we all know, is the name of the first letter to the alphabet of the sacred language. [...] In Kabbala, that letter signifies the En Soph, the pure and unlimited godhead; it has also been said that its shape is that of a man pointing to the sky and the earth, to indicate that the lower world is the map and mirror of the higher (285).

117 Frisch writes, referring to "Aleph," that Borges "contrasts monistic truth with pluralistic skepticism" (21). Frisch also explains in his study that Borges' work could be considered to be a postmodern predecessor, but that Borges combines modern and postmodern elements with each other: "monism and pluralism strike a balance and live together in Borges" (24), and: "Borges defines a pluralistic vision that challenges and subverts some of the perceptions and values of aesthetic modernism, and yet how he avoids a radical relativism that argues for chaos rather than a cosmos" (17).

Borges goes to look for this so-called aleph where "without mixture of confusion, all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist" (ibid., 281). When he encounters this supernatural phenomenon the character Borges fails to put it into words, too grand is its effect on him. However, the ontological status of the aleph is never stated clearly. Mark Frisch notes that the character in Borges' story "leaves doubt in the reader's mind about whether the vision was illusory or real" (21). In this respect what Borges describes is a true phenomenon located 'outside,' since the epistemological sphere described by language cannot re-present it. And yet, this impression is only temporary; later the narrator qualifies what he has seen, claiming that it was a "*false* Aleph" (ibid., 285) and goes on to list several similar phenomena that have been documented. In fact, it is only when he learns about the other phenomena that he seems able to understand what he has witnessed. What is called aleph in the story could be what one understands as a 'beginning'—of the universe, time or existence. Such a phenomenon is here brushed aside by claiming that it was not an extraordinary phenomenon, as there are others similar to it. Implicitly, the uniqueness of God is questioned, even qualified, which makes Borges' story postmodern in the way that it problematizes sacredness. By questioning the originality of a supposedly otherworldly thing and by insinuating that it can be repeated, copied and even faked, sacredness desolves.

In another short story by Borges this line of argument is followed up to an even stronger degree. In "The Circular Ruins" (1940) a man creates a being—similar to God creating humanity—and breathes it into existence. Later he recognizes that he too has been a creation of another's mind: "With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he realized that he too, was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him" ("The Circular Ruins" 100). He is not a god, and likewise not the origin of the child he has imagined and brought into existence. He is the product of another man, who might be the 'real' God—but then again, maybe there is yet another creator, who created his creator. The origin can only be followed by the traces of dreamed up people it leaves behind. In Borges' story the issue is not that there is no God, but that there might be a multitude of Gods, each of which in turn nullifies

the possibility of sacredness. I am not suggesting that Borges makes a philosophical or even theological statement here, rather, I would like to point out that the critique of God—as a singular being, a centre, an origin, a beyond—is accentuated in postmodern literature in a particular way. The critique is directed against the notion of transcendence in general, which is dependent on the notion of an 'outside,' dependent on the possibility of inhabiting a singular position that exists separately from any other structure.

Yet, this critique does not reduce a character's yearning for such a transcendent figure or form of guidance. In fact, very often characters are confused by the world and hope for guidance. However, they struggle and are pushed from one place to the other instead, as in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). Pynchon's character is left in a state of indecision, waiting for some event that might give her clarity, but the novel ends before this can happen. With the death of God, the necessity of guidance is as strong as ever. The characters clearly struggle with their place in the world, yet postmodern writers cannot provide them with any meaningful sense of security or reassurance, since this would require that they possess an authority they themselves criticize.

In contemporary literature, forms of guidance are re-introduced. This does not mean that the authority of a controlling God is simply re-established. The characters are struck by events that restructure their worlds; as a result their status as a subject is completely inverted. However, this does not suggest that these characters are more open to the sacred or could even be considered 'believers.' On the contrary, often the characters' attitude towards sacredness and God is filled with doubt. This is most evident in McCarthy's *The Road* where the belief in God has been shattered by a catastrophe that has destroyed nature and has made the earth uninhabitable for humankind. In such a world God must have ceased to exist, otherwise he would not have allowed this to happen. In Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* the question of god is not even an issue, since scientists have replaced God by reshaping the world with genetic engineering projects, ultimately killing humanity. However, in each of the novels discussed captive characters turn into

sacred figures. They are never assumed to be truthful or 'real' in the sense of a 'return' of a God. The captives themselves are inadequate and often failing characters, and the events rather banal occurrences. Yet, the characters possess an immanent sacredness, since they have the *effect* of sacred figures. Suddenly they mean more than they really are, which describes their transformation from captives into subjects.

5.2 *Oryx and Crake*—The Prophet

5.2.1 Introduction

"Death hangs over [Oryx and Crake] from the start," writes Howells about Atwood's dystopic novel (2006: 162), whose title refers to the names of two characters who, at the beginning of the novel, are already dead. Humanity has been wiped out by a deadly virus, and the only survivors seem to be Jimmy and a genetically engineered human race, called the 'Crakers.' In the chapter on responsibility it was outlined how Jimmy became the victim of Crake's mad plan to annihilate humanity and replace it with his own new humanoid race. Jimmy has in the end no other choice than to become the guardian of the innocent Craker race. However, I will show that Crake's plan has unforeseen side-effects. Bound to and held captive by his obligation to be a guardian, Jimmy becomes an involuntary prophet, accidently altering Crake's plan for the new world.

5.2.2 Becoming a Guardian

Long before the virus break out environmental catastrophes have made the fictional United States' nature highly unstable: "the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the midcontinental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to salt dunes" (Atwood 29). The seasons are out of balance and staying outside has become dangerous: "June was now the wet season all the way up to the east coast, and you couldn't have held an outdoor event then, what with the thunderstorms. Even early February was pushing it: they'd

ducked a twister by only one day" (ibid., 211). The novel's title itself is proof of these environmental changes, since it refers to two species, *Oryx Beisa* (an antelope common in East Africa) and the red-necked Crake (a waterbird), that are both extinct in the novel (cf. Atwood 98; 373–374). Thus, the future world is already out of control when the novel starts. Now, however, after the virus breakout the world has been turned into one big 'outside.' There are no more sheltered communities; there are no more boundaries between nature and civilization. A deformed state of nature that is harmful to human life has been activated. There is no more order in the world whatsoever:

> Out of habit he [Jimmy] looks at his watch [...] He wears it now as his only talisman. A blank face is what it shows him: zero hour. It causes a jolt of terror to run through him, this absence of official time. Nobody nowhere knows what time it is (Atwood 5).

The world is a timeless sphere, unregulated by office hours or dates. Having lost its original function, the watch becomes Jimmy's talisman, a relic from a lost world. Zero hour marks a new beginning that only Jimmy witnesses: he experiences the first hour of a new humanoid race that is making itself comfortable in a world without humans. In this zero hour there is only a small and diminishing space left for the (supposedly) last human. Animal-human hybrids that were developed in laboratories have broken out of their cages and are roaming the streets. The literary critic Crane comments on this: "His [Jimmy's] status as a human who has control over his environment is thus [...] reverted to that of one organism among many" (173). Jimmy is exposed to the circumstances, covered only by a simple sheet, and has retreated into the woods, where he lives on tree branches, careful to avoid the glaring sun in the day and the freezing cold at night. Crane points out the comparison of Jimmy to a "manlike ape" (Atwood 10) and calls him "the missing link to a prior level of evolution" (Crane 159). However, I contend that Jimmy has not simply reverted to a prior level, but that his situation is more precarious—he is a human being who is made into a *homo sacer*-figure and has been thrown into a state of nature humanity has accidently created.

This is further supported by the outsider status he possesses in the new society. To the Crakers, the new species on earth, Jimmy is a freakish being. When he introduces himself to the Crakers he calls himself "Snowman."[118] Kuhn believes that this name alludes to 'no man' (391) which suggests that Jimmy loses touch with civilization and takes on a non-human form. Indeed, his new name embodies not only his personal decay, but the decay of the whole of humanity: "the last *Homo sapiens*—a white illusion of a man, here today, gone tomorrow, so easily shoved over, left to melt in the sun, getting thinner and thinner until he liquefies and trickles away altogether" (ibid., 271). In comparison to the robust Crakers, Jimmy is highly vulnerable, even to such an extent that he considers himself sick: "His whistle is like a leper's bell: all those bothered by cripples can get out of his way. Not that he's infectious: what he's got they'll never catch. They're immune from him" (ibid., 187). Ironically, the *homo sacer* in this context is the one who is *not* genetically modified. Agamben would regard the genetically engineered human being as the *homo sacer*, since this person's life would have been controlled even before conception. However, in this scenario Jimmy is the *homo sacer*, because his natural body leaves him unprotected. The Crakers have genetically manipulated and, thus, very capable bodies that allow them to live in "complete instinctual harmony with their environment" (Dunning 95). Further, the Crakers are completely self-reliant and only tolerate Jimmy. He, however, desperately needs them: "He needs to be listened to, he needs to be heard. He needs at least the illusion of being understood" (Atwood 127). Jimmy is a captive, because he simply does not belong, is unable to adapt and is therefore completely helpless: he has no home, no shelter, has difficulty nourishing himself and cannot access the Crakers' community, a problem which he voices as follows:"I'm your ancestor, come from the land of the dead. Now I'm lost, I can't get back, I'm stranded here, I'm all alone. Let me in!" (ibid., 129; emphasis omitted).

118 Schmalfuss views this as the first evidence of Jimmy's struggle against Crake's rules: "Even though he recalls Crake's warnings against symbolism now and then, Jimmy's first words to the Crakers are already a lie: 'My name is Snowman' [Atwood 348]" (100).

Jimmy realizes that he needs to find a way to become part of the Crakers' realm, which he can only do if he offers them something they cannot attain without him. He recognizes that the only positive thing that sets him apart from the Crakers is his relationship to Crake, thus he starts telling them stories about Crake and also Oryx, turning them rather by accident into the Crakers' godly parents. Jimmy does not *want* to install his friends as gods, but he has to keep the Crakers interested otherwise they would "wander away" (ibid., 126). Since his dead friends are the only people that the Crakers knew besides Jimmy and the only people they show an interest in, Jimmy has not much of a choice. Their sacralization starts rather harmlessly, even accidentally. In the beginning he alludes to Crake in a very literal way. When he leads the Crakers out of the compounds, he legitimizes their journey by claiming: "They needed to do this because Crake had said that this was the proper way" (ibid., 417). This is, of course, true, however, this is also a double entendre, allowing Crake to be understood as a godlike figure. Yet, this is not the first time that Crake is referred to as a God. Crake's girlfriend, Oryx, who worked as a teacher for the Crakers before the catastrophe, already paved the way for turning Crake into a deity:

> "Do they ever ask where they came from?" said Jimmy. "What they're doing here?" "You don't get it," said Crake, in his you-are-a-moron voice. "That stuff's been edited out." "Well, actually, they did ask," said Oryx. "Today they asked who made them." "And?" "And I told them the truth. I said it was Crake. [...] I told them he was very clever and good" (ibid., 374).

Oryx's phrasing moves Crake into the sacred sphere: he is an absent figure, defined as the Crakers' creator and described as "good." Most importantly, however, he exists to the Crakers only as an idea. They have never seen him or talked to him. Crake's deification goes directly against Crake's will, as he was trying to dispose of such concepts for the new generation of humans: "Crake was against the notion of God, or of gods of any kind, and would surely be disgusted by the spectacle of his own gradual deification" (Atwood 126). In fact, to maintain

the Crakers' innocence, Crake is convinced they must be kept in an almost pre-linguistic stage. Although they are able to speak, they are only taught to recognize what is in front of them. They are not allowed to be introduced to metaphysical concepts: "It was one of Crake's rules that no name could be chosen for which a physical equivalent [...] could not be demonstrated. No unicorns, no griffins, no manticores or basilisks" (ibid., 10).[119] When Crake is regarded as a God by the Crakers, Jimmy feels no satisfaction by having destroyed Crake's plan for a secular world, but envy: "He too would like to be invisible and adored. He too would like to be elsewhere" (ibid., 198). Instead, Jimmy becomes the 'inside-man' of a new mythology and in this way he becomes part of the Crakers community: "He's the only one left who'd known Crake face to face, so he can lay claim to the inside track. Above his head flies the invisible banner of Crakedom, of Crakiness, of Crakehood, hallowing all he does" (ibid., 117).

Not only do these stories pave the way for Jimmy's acceptance in the Crakers community, they also ensure his survival. His stories nourish the Crakers on a spiritual level only, serving as "symbolic food" (DiMarco 2011: 141), but they feed Jimmy on a very literal level and are fundamental to his survival. Jimmy invents a fish-ritual, an offering to him that he claims Crake has decreed:

> Every week [...] the women stand in tidal pools and call the unlucky fish by name—only fish, nothing more specific. Then they point it out, and the men kill it with rocks and sticks. That way the unpleasantness is shared among them and no single person is guilty of shedding the fish's blood. If things had gone as Crake wanted, there would be no more such killing—

119 The disappearance of certain vocabulary is reflected by Jimmy throughout the novel: "From nowhere a word appears: *Mesozoic*. He can see the word, he can hear the word, but he can't reach the word. He can't attach anything to it. This is happening too much lately, this dissolution of meaning, the entries on his cherished wordlists drifting off into space" (Atwood 45–46). Cooke notes on this matter, in reference to the literary tradition: "Part of the biotechnological eschatology that informs the book is the idea that with the death of the human race comes the death of language. This is an idea that is not uncommon in post-apocalyptic texts, generally figured within a cold-war, nuclear scenario" (120).

> no more human predation—but he'd reckoned without Snowman and his beastly appetites. [...] The people would never eat a fish themselves, but they have to bring him one a week because he's told them Crake has decreed it (Atwood 122).

He needs this ritual in order not to starve. DiMarco calls Jimmy a 'symbolical' cannibal, 'absorbing' the dead with his stories about them (cf. DiMarco 2011: 141). But Jimmy not only absorbs the dead, he literally nourishes himself with the dead via the stories. The Crakers would never kill an animal and he is not skilled enough to do it himself. It is necessity that makes him adopt religious patterns. Jimmy demands these offerings from the Crakers not as a deity who needs his subjects to prove their adoration and loyalty, but as a simple man who is living on the edge, isolated, abandoned, starving and unable to hunt food for himself. The ritual is, thus, a selfish ploy. Thus, whatever religious contents Jimmy falls back on, they are always grounded in the banal and the common. Nevertheless, Dunning points out that these stories bear several similarities to general Christian concepts:

> The relationship between Crake, Snowman, and Oryx unmistakably suggests the Christian Trinity whose authority science has effectively displaced. Crake assumes the role of Father, creator of all, triumphant over chaos; Snowman, that of sacrificial Son and immanent Logos (and perhaps also of Gnostic Logos marooned in matter); and Oryx, that of Spirit, omnipresent, "feminine" Paraclete (95).

Jimmy certainly relies on known concepts, using them as models for his own mythology/religion. However, the deification of Crake and Oryx is a rather accidental outcome of Jimmy's doings than a calculated strategy. Only late in the novel, does he recognize what power he had and how he could have changed the whole mythology to his own advantage. When he realizes this, however, his teachings have already become dogmatic and he cannot make any major changes any more: "At first he'd improvised, but now they're demanding dogma: he would deviate from orthodoxy at his peril. He might not lose his life [...] but he'd lose his audience. They'd turn their backs on him (Atwood 126).

Jimmy is the Crakers' connection to the sacred world, but that does not make him part of their group. In fact, he remains in his captive state, having only slightly rearranged and ameliorated his position. Yet, the basic facts remain the same: he is still the leper with his ringing bell, only now it summons the Crakers to join him and listen to his stories.

5.2.3 Becoming a Prophet

Jimmy is a story-teller born out of necessity, and born under captive circumstances. He simply has no other choice than to invent stories that keep him alive, turning into a sort of post-apocalyptic Scheherazade. He continues to refer to absent people and, thus, creates a religious structure. These made-up stories eventually create an unexpected side-effect: "He is Crake's prophet now, whether he likes it or not, and the prophet of Oryx as well" (ibid., 126). In a way, he really is a prophet, since he is connected to a world about which the Crakers know absolutely nothing. Though Jimmy is acutely aware of the illusory nature of the world he is creating, his inventions have an effect on him. He, too, begins to think about Crake in a different way. He begins to talk and pray to him: "'Crake!' he whimpers. 'Why am I on this earth? How come I'm alone? Where's my Bride of Frankenstein?'" (ibid., 207). The way he addresses Crake makes Crake into a strange mixture between god and mad scientist, and Jimmy into one of his followers, since he asks him to explain to him the reasons for his existence and he also demands—similar to the biblical Adam—a mate. He becomes swallowed up and even captivated by the mythology he has made up; not so much by his belief in Crake as a God, but by his nostalgia and his inability to let the past go.

Jimmy's stories do not remain fiction, but have real consequences. Although he is clearly not a holy being—unable to care for himself, shabby looking—he is recognized by the Crakers as a prophetic figure. This becomes evident when he leaves the Crakers village for a couple of days to look for food and other supplies back at the compound. To the Crakers he explains his absence by telling them that he is 'visiting' Crake. This is a statement that is not untrue, since Crake's corpse is still

back at the compound. When Jimmy returns he makes an astonishing observation. He discovers that the Crakers are following a ritual he has never before seen them perform:

> As he approaches the village, he hears an unusual sound—an odd crooning, high voices and deep ones, men's and women's both—harmonious, two-noted. It isn't singing, it's more like chanting. [...] They're sitting in a semi-circle around a grotesque-looking figure, a scarecrowlike effigy. [...] What's the thing—the statue, or scarecrow, or whatever it is? It has a head, and a ragged cloth body. It has a face of sorts—one pebble eye, one black one, a jar lid it looks like. It has an old string mop stuck onto the chin (ibid., 428–429).

The Crakers have constructed a small statue that is supposed to represent Jimmy. Sitting around Jimmy's double they pray for his safe return. This means, they have come up with their first religious ritual on their own. Jimmy mishears at first, believing they are chanting 'Amen.' However, this mistake is a first clue to Jimmy's new role. In fact, they are actually chanting 'Snowman' which means Jimmy has been made into a religious figure they are calling out for. Dunning summarizes how Jimmy unwillingly changes from a holy mouthpiece into a holy being:

> Though Snowman begins narrating the novel simply as interceding priest, he is eventually promoted into heaven, a development conceived by the Crakers alone, and affirmed during a ceremony in which they attempt to commune with and manipulate him through his effigy (95).

Contrary to Jimmy's expectations, the Crakers do not simply consider him an intermediary to Crake. They have given him his own position in his mythology. Jimmy, the Snowman, isolated and hunted, forced to be their story-teller, is now an adored holy being for whose safe return the Crakers pray. The Crakers make Jimmy a transcendent being; he becomes a prophet, simply because in the world of the Crakers there is no other category for him; they have no concept of culture or art, but regard his stories as truth.

Cook considers the invention of myths as part of the rebuilding of a community and thus as a logical step in the evolution of the Crakers:

> After the end of civilization and the decimation of humanity through a nuclear war, survivors must rebuild not merely their technological infrastructure, but their linguistic, cultural, and mythic infrastructure as well. Scavengers for food and technology, the survivors must also be linguistic scavengers, constructing new myths out of the remnants of old ones (120).

However, in this case, there is only one human survivor, Jimmy, who only accidently constructs myths, as the side-effects to his attempts to survive. Clearly, story-telling, writing and myths are central to *Oryx and Crake*, as it is to the two other parts of Atwood's trilogy, *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam*. In the last novel the Crakers even learn how to write and are taught the concept of historiography. Dunning detects in Atwood's interest for myths a general critique. According to him, Atwood reflects on the contemporary experience that has disposed of myths, referred to as 'grand narratives':

> It finds our current vulnerability to unprecedented disaster arises not from dystopian societies with hostile political structures, underwritten by oppressive metanarratives, and established through threat of imprisonment, torture and death, but rather within the qualitative vacuum of a culture that has lost its 'great' narratives (86).

Thus, although Atwood portrays a dystopian world in *Oryx and Crake*, shaken by environmental catastrophes and a virus breakout, the world at the end of the novel has one advantage to the contemporary one: it has regained its myths, beliefs and rituals. That these are completely fabricated and the products of an incapable guardian, seems to be rather secondary. After all, Jimmy is successful. He becomes part of the Crakers' new community and thus humanity can survive. To show how a character invents new and even comical narratives and rituals instead of retrieving the 'grand narratives' emphasizes the fact that the creation of new myths is not carried out with total naiveté by Atwood, but with an awareness of past criticism.

To summarize, Jimmy's repositioning in the new world stems from an initial captivation. By doing what he was supposed to do—taking care of the Crakers—Jimmy inadvertently subverts Crake's plan. Even though Crake has lured and locked him into his personal experiment, Jimmy takes control—or, as DiMarco described it, "Jimmy becomes the monkey looking back, having the potential to turn Crake's game plan upside down" (2005: 186). He destroys Crake's plan for a new innocent race by 'soiling' the Crakers with metaphysical and religious concepts, while he himself becomes a prophet. The Crakers turn into believers, dependent on a 'sacral' sphere; exactly what Crake tried to prevent. Dunning comments on this as follows, pointing out the irony of this situation:

> Atwood ensures that we do not miss the telling irony. Crake believes that he has successfully removed their capacity for any form of metaphysical speculation, though he admits that their prototypes consistently frustrated his attempts to eliminate their dreaming and singing. Yet we learn that Snowman has been required to satisfy their relentless curiosity about their origins by telling them sacred stories, religious cosmologies in which Crake and Oryx figure as creative and sustaining deities (95).

From captive story-teller Jimmy not only captivates the Crakers with his stories, but turns into a sacred being by accidently 'captivating' himself. He becomes inscribed into his own mythology. This reinvention of myths does not only occur in Atwood's novel. In fact, in many contemporary novels myths, religious concepts and sacred figures are introduced that bear similarities to known concepts; they are not a nostalgic reversion, but rather a construction of new and very limited concepts. These constructions will also be relevant in the other two novels to be discussed in the following two chapters.

5.3 *The Road*—The Voice of God

5.3.1 Introduction

Cormac McCarthy is known for his brutal and dark novels that often imply the meaninglessness of the world, which has led many critics to characterize them as 'nihilistic.' Graulund renders this consensus with "[a]s some of his critics have suggested, it may even be that the central meaning of McCarthy's authorship, the central message, is that there is no meaning to be found" (69). McCarthy's projected worlds speak a violent language that negates any form or even possibility of transcendence. *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's critically most acclaimed work, is summarized by Graulund as follows:

> The world described in *Blood Meridian* is the world in its primal condition, a world in which mercy is non-existent and death will always win out. But it is also a world in which the defeated will be replaced by another living being, be that man, animal or plant (63).

Arnold notes, however, about McCarthy that "there is also evident in his work a profound belief in the need for moral order, a conviction that is essentially religious" (144). Kuczma adds that McCarthy's novels are religious, but without real religious content (cf. 111). In general there is no hope given to any of McCarthy's characters in the novels preceding *The Road* even when they might strive for this. Transcendence is never attained. Nevertheless, the characters are searching for answers. In *The Road*, which has one of the most severely hopeless settings, McCarthy has chosen not to withhold answers, but to let the characters create them on their own.

In the chapter on responsibility it was described how the father in *The Road*, captivated by his son, develops ethical guidelines for his son. The son, his only companion, demands from him to be nurtured—both physically and metaphysically, otherwise the son would simply degenerate. Following this demand, the father presents ethical guidelines to the son that go against his personal beliefs. He shapes the son into an

ethical being, even though he does not believe in morality anymore and knows that this new world turns all good deeds into, at best, foolish mistakes. In the following I wish to examine a phenomenon similar to this on the religious level of the novel. The father's belief in a higher power is severely shaken. Paradoxically, as the novel progresses, the son becomes a sort of messiah figure for the father —and in the conclusion the father (at least in the eyes of the son) attains a god-like sanctity. These occurrences are, however, not located in a Christian belief, but are rather very convincing delusions that attain a form of reality. I will show how the father, captivated by his son, turns into a god. What is significant is the role of language in this instance. The reduced and simple language in *The Road* mirrors the hopeless state of mind of the survivors, who can only focus on the things that ensure their survival, having no energy for anything else. The conversations are spare and not very complex, since they are unable to put into words what is going on around them and do not see the point of it. However, this simple language to which they cling by using the same phrases over and over again becomes their way out. By being repeatedly used these words recreate the world around them.

5.3.2 Language: Empty Signifiers and Hidden Meanings

The world in *The Road* has lost its meaning, has become a "non-world, the 'absolute here'" as De Bruyn writes (782), meaning that the transcendent sphere is utterly shattered. The role of language is crucial to the understanding of the novel. Philipp and Delys Snyder contend that McCarthy is not only writing about a dystopian *world*, but moreover about the *language* of a dystopian world: "McCarthy interrogates the very meaning of language in a world full of empty signifiers—that is a world with names for a multitude of things which no longer exist outside of memory and books" (36). As with everything else in *The Road,* language has eroded, simplified, been stripped down to a bare pragmatism:

> The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible [sic] entities.[120] The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so its reality (McCarthy 88–89).

Language has been cut down to its raw elements. The changed world changes the vocabulary of the world. Not only has the old world sunk, the language used to describe it is about to follow. Thus, language joins in the ongoing deterioration of the world. About the passage quoted above Graulund writes:

> Even the power of the word, McCarthy suggests, is in the end divested of its power in the face of such devastation. In a world 'shrinking down,' there can be no beyond, no redemption and no hope. In such a world, there can be only desertion, a space that is 'desert,' bereft of any significance but the fact that it has been forsaken (67).

Language reflects what the world has become—de-sacralized. It cannot make up for what has been lost. The 'power of the word' is usually God's power, and it has disappeared, deserting humanity along with everything else. De Bruyn writes: "We are not only living in a 'borrowed world,' [McCarthy 130] [...] but also speaking with borrowed words" (783). Thus, the duo's desolate state also shows on a linguistic level; their language fails, leaving them no way of expressing their new state of being. Banco writes that McCarthy's use of language mirrors the world's inherent poverty:

> This negation of the modern world coincides with the minimalist structure and style McCarthy uses in this novel. Paragraphs are short; chapter breaks and quotation marks around dialogue are absent; punctuation is rare; and his tiny cast of almost entirely nameless characters speaks in bare

120 Neologism by Cormac McCarthy, from "to parse."

> monosyllables. Such restraint helps McCarthy's thematization of absence and lack, of moral and existential nihilism (276).

However, on the level of reception, language becomes, in fact, extremely meaningful. Kunsa writes "it is precisely in *The Road*'s language that we discover the seeds of the work's unexpectedly optimistic worldview" (58). Kunsa views the barrenness of the new world as more positive, underscoring the fact that the world's lack of sacred idioms is not necessarily a proof of decline but can also be considered a potential:

> The narrative's strategy is actually one of withholding place names, a provocative rhetorical move that forces the reader to imagine new possibilities, to think not solely in terms of the world that was, but also of the world that will be. The burned out landscape, strangely, is a new if unlikely Eden awaiting once again those perfect names (62).

Other scholars like Woodson have argued for the exact opposite, namely for an ongoing loss of a transcendent sphere:

> Although the story contains images and references to religion and spirituality, these too are largely signifiers without signs in the existing world, empty like the holes in the mantle of the father's childhood home where tacks had formerly held the stockings as the family celebrated Christmas [McCarthy 26] (2008: 93).

In fact, however, language does show a distinct sacredness on the level of reception. The sparse sentences often frame the characters as devout or holy beings. The bunker passage is informative in this instance. In this passage father and son discover a bunker filled with cans of food. The father's reaction to the bunker allows the passage to be read in a double way if one follows the argument of Wilhelm.[121] The father's first words when he realizes what miracle they have stumbled upon are "Oh my God.[...] Come down. Oh my God. Come down" (McCarthy 138). The father is addressing his son asking him to come down into

121 Cf. Wilhelm 136.

the bunker to see all the food stored there. However, to the reader it appears that he could also be addressing God in this passage. Wilhelm points out this double entendre: banal sentences are adorned with a second, theological meaning. The two sentences quoted are combined in such a way that their meaning goes beyond what is common. This writing technique invites the reader to speculate on the father's belief. Even though the father obviously did not address God, there is an underlying sacredness to this passage. Along with the bunker passage there is another dialogue between father and son where this phenomenon appears again. Impatient and angry with the son, the father accuses him: "You're not the one who has to worry about everything" to which the son responds "Yes I am, he said. I am the one" (ibid., 259). Kunsa points out that this passage marks a turning point for the son:

> This moment shines not simply for its transparency, but also for its singularity and the change it suggests: here, the boy unequivocally states who he is, whereas previously he has looked to his father for answers, asking whether they are the good guys (67).

Not only does the son take charge here, Joseph points out that the son's response clearly alludes to biblical language and portrays him even as a messiah figure:

> he is echoing Jesus in a number of instances—I am the way, the truth and the light (John 14:6); I am the door of the sheep (John 10:7); I am the light of the world (John 8:12); I am the alpha and the omega (Revelation 1:8), to mention a few of the most obvious. Suffice it to say the proclamation "I am" is among the strongest phrases in the Old and New Testaments, the latter inevitably an echo of God's pronouncement to Moses: "I AM THAT I AM" (Exodus 3:14). Not only does the boy offer to take responsibility, he offers to do so in unmistakably religious language (25).

The words that are used by the son position him in close proximity to a messiah figure. There is no real evidence to support this beyond language—the son is not equipped with supernatural powers nor does he carry a message from God—, the only 'evidence' provided comes in

the form of linguistic suggestions. The language the characters employ is so simple that it becomes biblical to the reader. Thus, it is precisely the poverty of language that produces this sacral atmosphere on the level of reception. Meaningful and promising phrases like these stand in contrast to the novel's overall godless impression.

5.3.3 Keeping Promises

Father and son find themselves in a world where language has lost its meaning, however, the son demands what sounds unreasonable to the father, namely that they should believe in language nevertheless. Thus, the son holds his father yet again captive, forcing him to do what he would not choose to do on his own. The boy empowers language and restores its (sacred) power by showing an unwavering belief in words and demanding the same from his father. The son orders his father to take words seriously and to speak the truth: "If we were going to die would you tell me?" (ibid., 94; cf. ibid., 184–185), and even refuses to listen to stories that he does not consider true (cf. ibid., 268). Everything the father says must be true or become true to the son. In a way this becomes a dogma, so that even simple phrases acquire a religious ring. Kunsa notes that father and son turn banal sentences into quasi-religious ones, into small prayers: "the repetition of 'carrying the fire,' phrases [...] become incantatory in the manner of a litany or a prayer" (59). As shown in the chapter on ethics, the son becomes the ethical fire, turning the metaphor into a reality. Thus, the son appears to be able to fill empty words with meaning again by believing in them, turning them from empty signifiers into truths. Another word, namely 'okay' is also provided with excessive meaning. Throughout the novel, the father takes care of his son by promising him that everything will be okay. Critics like Woodson's have argued that the use of the word 'okay' is proof of language having lost its power in *The Road*: "The potential for the power of language as a stay against death no longer exists as is demonstrated in the minimalism of the prose itself, in the primal repetition of 'okay'" (2013: 22). I strongly disagree, sharing rather views like Holm's, who interprets the expression even as a "minimal theodicy" (241), maintaining that "[i]n the absence of any external warrant

for the meaning of the world, minimal theodicy has shrunk to a single performative sentence, a human breath making a linguistic promise: 'Everything's okay. I promise'" (ibid., 241; emphasis omitted). The word 'okay' appears to be the only adequate choice of word, since more positive or optimistic words like 'good' would appear ill-fitting. Moreover, the word 'okay' is more than a minimalistic expression or proof of an empty world. Instead it is a promise, describing not what there *is*, but what *could* be there.

Promises are very meaningful in *The Road*. De Bruyn argues that the use of promises is proof that language does not mirror the world's barrenness, but rather suggests a contrast to the meaninglessness of the new world:

> The bonds of language also play a crucial role at the novel's end. If the dangerous man encountered at the beginning "has made of the world a lie every word [McCarthy 75]," the rugged but reliable man at the end honors his "promis[e]" [ibid., 286] to cover up the boy's father. As this re-lexifying gesture indicates, words may again become our bond. After the apocalypse, humans may still find shelter in language, even if nature may not (784–785).

Thus, words and promises defy the banal world and ignore the new circumstances of the world. This is also why the son commands the father to keep his promises: "If you break little promises you'll break big ones. That's what you said" (McCarthy 34). That the son's demands transform the father in the end becomes evident at the moment the father is dying. Here, the effect of the son's captivation is most visible. The father gives the boy a promise that appears impossible to keep:

> If I'm not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me and I'll talk to you. You'll see.
> Will I hear you?
> Yes. You will. You have to make it like talk that you imagine. And you'll hear me (ibid., 279).

He promises him what he has promised the son throughout the novel: whenever he is leaving the boy to search for wood or to scout their neighborhood, he assures the son that he will never be far away and is within calling distance: "I wont be far away. I'll be able to hear you if you call" (ibid., 70).[122] But now the father's promise touches transcendent realms. When he dies he cannot respond to the call anymore, not as a physical presence. Nevertheless, he advises his son to address him as if he were alive and to talk to him in his thoughts. He basically advises the son to pray to him when he is gone. This is distinctively different from the original promise in one other aspect. Before, when he left the son alone for a short period of time and the boy did not want the father to leave, the father was rather cruel and advised his son to kill himself if danger should approach: "Stop it. I want you to do what I say. Take the gun. I dont want the gun. I didnt ask if you wanted it. Take it" (ibid., 70). This contrasts emphatically with his attitude now. Instead of leaving him an instrument of death, the father provides his son with an idea and with hope and also reveals that he has started to believe in his son. Cooper notes that the father's "journey [...] is a moral quest to become a father, but the fathering of a human child is merged with a metaphoric journey towards authorship. *The Road* in particular emphasizes the creative force of language as a prophetic 'fathering' of humanity" (139). However, it is really the son who 'fathers' language and even shapes his father. Even though the father provides his son with faith in the moments of his death, that same faith was accorded the father by his son. As Wielenberg points out the father's promise to talk to the son when he is gone binds both, the father *and* the son: "The child's promise to talk to his father every day and the father's promise never to leave the child are intertwined; by keeping his own promise, the child enables the father to keep his" (5). Thus, as throughout the novel, even after the father's death the son makes sure the father is sticking to his promises by keeping them himself.

122 This was pointed out to me by Dianne Luce at the McCarthy conference in Berea, Kentucky 2013.

With this promise, the father turns himself into a god-like character in the eyes of his son. After the father dies, the son meets a family that appears out of nowhere. The mother of the new family is religious and tries to include the boy in her belief, but the son already has someone to believe in: "She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget" (McCarthy 286). What were originally practical concepts (namely the father's ability to hear the son when he calls) are taken out of their banal context and enriched with theological meaning. The novel's ending suggests that the father takes on the function of a god. Throughout the entire novel the son captivates his father who bases his whole life on his son and leads his life according to the son's rules. In the end, a promise turns the father into his son's ersatz god; he is the one the son addresses in times of need or sorrow. Following this, however, the son must now be considered God's—the father's—son, proving what the father has known all along—the son is simply 'more.' In fact, the father conceives of his son as the holy word: "If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (ibid., 5). Tyburski points out that this formulation alludes to biblical context:

> The man refers to the boy as "the word of God" [McCarthy 5], which of course, is how Christ is described in the New Testament (John 1.1–3; Heb. 4.12–13; II Pet. 3.5; I John 1.1–3; 5.7), and how the Messiah is described in the Old Testament (Ps. 138.2) (125).

Frye argues that this should not be considered a metaphor only: "the man's belief in the boy as the incarnate Word of God could be taken as an expression of mere sentiment, were it not for the many references to divinity, in the context of description and allusions to God" (172–173).[123] In a way, the son is now truly the 'word of God,' since his character is spoken into existence by the father-god. It is the father's words that have made out of a boy God's son.

123 In fact, the boy exemplifies pure excess when described. He is designated as "God's own firedrake" (McCarthy 31), as "golden chalice" (ibid., 75), and compared to a "glowing [...] tabernacle" hinting at an "unimaginable future" (ibid., 273). The boy is clearly associated with a messiah and/or holy vessel. The father even asks once: "What if I said

5.3.4 God's Image

The last passage of the novel suggests an ongoing dialogue between deified father and son that implicates a restored transcendent sphere:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery (McCarthy 286–287).

It is not entirely clear who voices this last passage. Critics like Cooper have pointed out that the voices of the narrator and the father are, in general, hard to distinguish from each other: "In *The Road*, revelations of the protagonist's interior world are tightly interwoven with the narrator's, to the extent that the two viewpoints merge and are frequently indistinguishable" (138). However, this passage cannot be attributed to the disinterested omniscient narrator, because it carries too many subjective markers. Yet, the only other character who is alive at that point is the son, who has never seen brook trout in his entire life and has never smelled moss before. Thus, the passage cannot stem from him. The passage starting with 'once' indicates a story that is told, similar in structure and style to the stories the father tells the son throughout the novel. Thus, I argue that it is likely the voice of the father that the son still hears when his father is in his thoughts. The father has pondered this particular kind of fish twice before in the novel, which links the topic to him.[124] Therefore, in the last passage the boy 'listens'

that he's a god?" (ibid., 172).

124 "He stood on a stone bridge where the water slurried into a pool and turned slowly in a gray form. Where once he'd watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath" (McCarthy 30) and "He'd stood at such a river once and watched the flash of trout deep in a pool, invisible to see in the teacolored water except as they turned on their sides to feed. Reflecting back the sun deep in the darkness like a flash of knives in a cave" (ibid., 41–42).

to his father creating a sensual image of brook trout, described in such a way that speaks to the son's personal interests: the brook trout are depicted as carrying maps on their backs and maps are also the only objects the boy is fascinated by throughout the novel.[125] All this makes it very plausible that the passage is voiced by the father, whether it be merely a memory that the son is replaying in his head, or a moment of transcendence, linking the father and the son through the symbol of hope represented by the image of the fish. Luce writes on this issue:

> The imaginistic links between the father's recurring memories of the trout and his vision narrated after his death suggest that the coda is another version of his own memory displaced in time, or the boy's memory of what his father has communicated to him about the lost world, or a vision that comes to the boy when he talks to his dead father, and his father, now internalized within the psyche of his beloved child, responds to him when he calls, as promised (81).

The fish becomes sacred imagery, however, placed in the new religious realm of the father rather than being part of a Christian theology. Holm notes that the image of the trout is "ripe with allusion," referring to Plato, Christian theology and a recurrent theme in American literature (cf. 245). The use of this particular image could have more than one purpose. Phillip argues that the type of fish could be seen as a fellow survivor:

> Brook trout are survivors from another era and another place. Holed up in refuges from southern Appalachia northward, they rode out the end of the last ice age, which had driven them from their arctic home (they are actually char, not trout) and then, as the glaciers receded, left them high—but not dry—and lonesome, isolated in pockets of high-country watershed, where they have been playing out their endgame ever since (187).

125 Holland neglects this fact, instead she writes on the maps: "The uselessness of the patterns on the fish echoes the uselessness of the maps loved by the man when he was a boy" (135). The useless maps are certainly of relevance, since nothing can serve as a blueprint for the world anymore. However, in this instance the maps suggest that *new* orders are created. These might be not very practical, but they still possess a mythic quality, in particular because they are carved into the bodies of fishes.

For my reading the fact that it invokes religious notions is significant.[126] Usually, the fish serves as a symbol of Christ, adopting different meanings depending on the textual basis it is related to. Fish are mentioned for example when Jesus is able to feed a large group of people with only bread and fish. This has been regarded as a 'prototype' of the last supper.[127] The nurturing aspect of the fish is certainly relevant for *The Road* since the father is continually striving to nurture his son: in a literal way, but also in a philosophical and metaphysical way. The father's actions are guided by the question of how he can provide the son with hope, and how he can enrich an essentially poor life. The image of the fish is the last meal the father can offer to his son. Thus, the fish does carry sacral importance, but it refers not to Christian content, but is rather linked to the father as the new figure of orientation.

Father and son are mutually dependent on each other, but this dependence is incredibly rewarding for both of them. The father is a captive to his son: the son demands of him that he be a better man (cf. Captives of Ethics) and he demands that words express truths. In the same manner that the son made his father into an ethical man, the son restores the father's faith in the sacred. In both cases the son convinces the father of the existence of ethics/the sacred by becoming himself the embodiment of the respective concept. Not only is the son the most ethical being, the "best guy" (McCarthy 279), he is also a sacred being, the word of god. The son becomes a messiah-figure to the father and thus evidence of the existence of the sacred. But the father also experiences a transformation. Whereas he feels like a "thespian" (ibid., 10) before whenever he tries to behave in a moral way for his son, in his dying moments he becomes a believer. After his death he takes on the role of a god—in the eyes of the son. Thus, the son becomes likewise captivated by his father, turning to him as one would to a God. Consequently, each of them undergoes a captivation by the other that allows them to become sacred figures, giving the statement "each the other's world

126 The master thesis of Swartz "'Ever is no time at all'. Theological Issues in post-apocalyptic fiction and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*" deals extensively with the Christian imagery of fish and its employment in *The Road* (cf. 60–67).

127 Cf. Forstner and Becker, eds. *Lexikon christlicher Symbole*, 255.

entire" (ibid., 6) new meaning. Language mirrors their captivation and also their empowered state. By using a language that seems to fail them every day they enter a pact, they believe in their words as long as their respective other does the same. In that way, the father becomes a god and his son the word of god. By taking the words they speak seriously, thus, by keeping their promises, father and son turn into subjects, safely integrated into the sacred sphere.

5.4 *The History of Love*—The Child God

5.4.1 Introduction

In the first chapter of this dissertation, "Captives of Authorship," it was mentioned that the main protagonist in *The History of Love*, Leopold Gursky, is delivered a package that contains a manuscript he thought he had lost a long time ago. The child responsible for these actions, Bird, takes on the function of a God figure in the novel. He influences and manipulates his environment, helps people struggling throughout the novel to 'find' each other, he further creates little 'miracles' and turns banal occurrences into 'callings.' The reader does not know about Bird and must assume that some things are carried out by a secret or even a higher power—e.g. an all-knowing character who has not revealed itself yet to the reader. In reality, however, Bird suffers from the trauma of losing his father at a young age and as a coping mechanism, he turns towards the Jewish faith and becomes drawn to the idea that he might be the next messiah. He decides to do good in the world in order to prove to himself that he is a holy figure. This delusion, which is clearly an expression of his traumatized state, is his captivation, since his view of the world is completely determined by his childish assumptions. From being a traumatized child he turns into a sacred subject, interfering with the lives of others, successfully connecting them and reshaping their lives.

5.4.2 Bird—The God Behind the Curtain

Bird, a twelve-year old boy, is a dreamer and a highly imaginative child. Every member of his family is stuck in a state of mourning caused by the father's passing away a couple of years before. Bird's mother retreats into her work, his sister Alma begins writing lists compulsively and Bird turns to the Jewish faith. In the beginning the reader learns about Bird mostly through his sister's narrative. At one point she stumbles over his diary, which gives some insight into Bird's rather peculiar character: "I have been a normal person for three days in a row. What this means is that I have not climbed on top of any buildings or written G-d's name on anything that doesn't belong to me or answered a perfectly normal question with a saying from a Torah" (Krauss 149). Bird tries to act normal, although, in reality, he believes he is anything but. He tries to foster the somewhat delusional idea that he might be a holy person:

> "I think I might be a *lamed vovnik*. [...] One of [...] [the] thirty-six holy people. [...] No one knows who they are. Only their prayers reach God's ear. [...] In every generation there's one person who has the potential to be the Messiah. Maybe he lives up to it, or maybe he doesn't. Maybe the world is ready for him, or maybe it isn't" (ibid., 52–53).

This idea continues to develop, when Bird is confronted with doubt at the time another tragedy occurs in his life and Bird begins to suspect that he has lost the connection to God: "When I was almost 100 percent positive that I was a lamed vovnik I used to think G-d could hear me. But I'm not sure anymore" (ibid., 207). Instead of distancing himself from his beliefs, he plunges deeper into them and thus gives in to his captivation. Bird intensifies his relation to God. He attempts to prove to himself that God is still on his side. If that's the case, then he can influence the world around him and even change fates: "If I could do one good thing to help someone and not tell anyone about it, maybe Mr. Goldstein [his friend] would get better again, and I would be a real lamed vovnik!" (ibid., 207). His turning towards the Jewish faith is more than a way of dealing with his grief. It is also a way of making

sure he is not doomed to passiveness. Instead of waiting for a sign that proves God's existence, he wants to deliver this proof by himself by becoming the evidence himself. Similarly to the character Amélie Poulain in *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* he begins manipulating his environment, but whereas Amélie was driven by the utter need to do good, Bird needs to prove to himself that he is the messiah.[128]

Bird decides to help his sister Alma in order to find proof of his specialness. He falsely assumes that Alma is looking for her real father, an assumption that is based on an erroneous and naive corollary. When Bird is at home, wondering how he could be helpful in his sister's quest, he turns towards God, and believes he receives a gift from God:

> After I heard the door close and the key turn in the lock I went to the bathroom to talk to G-d. Then I went to the kitchen to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. That's when the telephone rang. [...] when I answered it the person on the other end said Hello this is Bernard Moritz, may I please speak with Alma Singer? That's how I found out G-d can hear me (ibid., 216).

His prayers seem to be answered, when he receives a call in a literal sense: the phone rings. The timing is conspicuous and aids in the creation of a transcendent moment for Bird. As in *Atonement,* the event is not 'meant' for Bird. In *Atonement* the letter should have been received by Cecilia only, but Briony seizes the letter, coming between the message and its intended recipient. Here, it is Bird who receives and proceeds to act upon a call that was not meant for him, but for his sister. Similarly to Briony, he was just waiting for something like this to happen; Bird was literally praying for such an event. Due to the coincidence of these two events, he sees the telephone call as a sign from

128 The observation that Amélie Poulain is a 'miniature' god figure is made by Eshelman who writes on the film: "In terms of plot, playing God is perhaps the most direct way of emulating a transcendent, personified source. A fine example of this is the movie *Amélie*, in which the eponymous heroine sets up little, contrived situations that help unhappy people change their lives for the better (or, in this case, to punish a despotic bully). In contrast to what one might expect from religious tradition, this doesn't lead to acts of hubris and abuse of power on the part of Amélie" (14).

God. The caller gives him the name of a man and an author—Leopold Gursky. The call received by Alma would have been merely an act of communication, one person exchanging information with the other. In Bird's hands this call becomes more than it was supposed to be. Bird has a revelation: he thinks Leopold Gursky must be Alma's father. Bird's conversation with the caller overwhelms him:

> Inside I was going crazy because even though I didn't understand everything I was sure I was very close to solving the mystery about Alma's father, and that if I could solve it I would be doing something helpful in a secret way I might still be a lamed vovnik, and everything would be OK (ibid., 217).

This is, of course, highly amusing to the reader who knows that half of these assumptions are wrong. In fact, a completely different story is taking place. Nevertheless, this incident shares similarities with a spiritual or religious call: what a person experiences when called by God goes beyond one's capacities, knowledge and imagination. Thus, Bird is "going crazy" because what he encounters surpasses his own scope of knowledge. He is overwhelmed by what the phone call revealed to him and acts according to this new knowledge. As a consequence, Bird sends the manuscript to Gursky and sends letters to both Alma and Gursky, arranging their meeting which I discussed in the chapter on authorship. Bird's 'calling' not only reestablishes his faith in a transcendent outside communicating with him. Bird is also given an assignment that—as far as Gursky and Alma are concerned—results in a good deed, since it gives relief and a sense of closure to each of the parties, most of all Gursky (cf. Captives of Authorship). When meeting Alma, Gursky realizes that he is a published author and that the girl Alma was even named after one of his characters. He also learns that his son had identified him as his true father before he died. This information seems miraculous to Gursky, who feels recognized for the first time. Not only did he never expect this kind of recognition, he also considered it practically impossible. All of this, he would not have

known had Bird not arranged this meeting. In a way, Bird not only proves to himself that he is a *lamed vovnik*, he demonstrates this to the other characters as well by arranging miracles.

The positive outcome of the novel might seem kitschy to some readers; however, the reason for this is that Bird's story is connected to bigger themes, namely to the traumatic past of Holocaust survivors. Even though Bird has not been impacted by the Holocaust himself, he has lost his father at a young age and is dealing with an individual loss. In addition, by his real name, 'Emanuel Chaim,' he is very much linked to the generation of Holocaust victims/survivors:

> the Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum, who buried milk cans filled with testimony in the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Jewish cellist Emanuel Feuerman, who was one of the great musical prodigies of the twentieth century [...] and her [his mother's] uncle Chaim, who was a joker, a real clown, made everyone laugh like crazy, and who died by the Nazis (ibid., 35).

However, Bird refuses to be called by that name, underscoring the need to construct his own identity, unburdened by the memories of his parents (who have no first-hand experience of World War II themselves). In a way, Bird is part of a larger trauma, which is evoked by his parents by giving him a name that connects him to the victims of the Holocaust. One could argue that Bird's fate serves as a stand-in for a greater loss. Under these circumstances, the fact that Bird can reposition himself is hopeful. The subject can take on another position in life and start again. This positively formulated subjectivity is relevant in the context of Holocaust fiction, since it suggests a strengthening and rejuvenation of subjectivity and overall an overcoming of trauma. A new beginning can even be created by utterly passive figures (Gursky and Bird), failing and deficient creators who do not even know about their own actions.

5.5 Claiming the Sacred

The universe is not empty and cold anymore, as Nietzsche proclaimed. It has been warmed by the actions of sacred figures. All these sacred figures appear against the background of a de-sacralized world which makes the appearance even more noticeable. Most of the captive states that generated receptive characters were of an existential nature. In these cases, the characters' receptivity was fueled by the will to survive. They had to find a way to continue living, to continue to have hope in order to persevere. Their openness to an event was thus conditioned by extreme circumstances that endangered their lives. It becomes most evident in these examples, how under the pressure of these captivations even the most banal occurrence necessarily appears like a miracle and how the event emerges out of a constricting frame. This is also linked to another phenomenon, namely that all the sacred figures are the result of a misrepresentation. They only *appear* to be sacred figures, because of the circumstances, because of their own captive state or the captive state of others. Thus, it is captivation that creates sacredness and not an inherent sacred essence. Their banal and brutal captivation is reworked by their efforts, allowing them to position themselves as newly strengthened subjects in a hostile world.

6 Conclusion

The intention of this dissertation was to find a method for describing contemporary literature in a systematic way and by doing so to underscore its divergence from a postmodern aesthetic. The procedure proposed for this project was to take a close look at the 'event' and analyze how it affects the 'subject,' and thus the dynamic relationship between event and subject became the main concern of this dissertation. It was assumed that this relationship would indicate most convincingly how contemporary literature goes beyond postmodern notions of eventfulness and subjectivity, and therefore postmodern principles in general.

It soon became obvious that the contemporary subject-event-relationship that I defined with the term *captivation* stands in contrast to the general openness that underlies many of the postmodern notions that are reflected for example in Derrida's *différance*, Foucault's 'discursive practices' and Deleuze's and Guattari's rhizome. In a postmodern environment structures of meaning are in flux, are dependent on the context and are highly changeable under varying circumstances. Although this has consequences for the postmodern subject who is considered equally changeable and even elusive, I could not discover a similar phenomenon in contemporary literature. Instead, I noticed stable and capable beings, even if this stability lasted only for a limited period of time. The reasons for this stability are powerful events that exert their influence long before they are apparent to the subjects themselves. I described the attraction and effect of these events with the term *captivation*, which is a concept defined by a type of coercion that can range from visual or intellectual limitations to physical and violent imprisonment. This concept suggests that subjects in contemporary literature are cornered and made to react and are in general more easily determined than their postmodern predecessors. In fact, I consider this passivity and ensuing receptivity to be one of the key characteristics of contemporary literature. It enables the subject to become open to an event and empowered by it. Accordingly, the characters in the

novels are shown to become powerful authors intervening in the lives of innocents, or dominant guiding figures in the form of fathers, scientists or murderers, and even sacred figures who introduce forms of transcendence into the world.

The way subjects are capacitated and empowered in relation to authorship, ethics and the sacred is decisively different from a postmodern understanding of these topics. In the post-postmodern examples used in this dissertation all three topics were found to be determined by what Marion calls 'counter-intentionality.' Forms of authorship, ethics and the sacred emerge by accident, against one's expectation, surprising everyone including the respective subjects themselves. The emergence of these phenomena is based on the subjects' fallibility, shortcomings and ignorance. Instead of being in control of either authorship, ethics or the sacred, the subjects are involuntarily governed by these matters and forced to adopt concepts that might not be their own. This reduction of the subject to a reactive element cancels a postmodern critique that focuses on the detrimental effects of power structures and an authorial subject, since the contemporary subject is not really in power, but *over*powered.

The overpowering effect is one of the key arguments in this dissertation and is crucial in interpreting the term *captivation*. Clearly, *captivation* has been developed in order to provide a strong contrast to the postmodern concepts described above. Nonetheless, the attempt to identify the exact nature of passivity that *captivation* necessitates has been problematic, since the exact motivations of a character in a literary text are not always that clear and should perhaps not be completely clear in order to keep a reader interested and to allow a literary text to remain ambivalent. Locating decisively when the *captivation* of the event begins and the active participation of the subject ends was not always an easy undertaking. The reasons for this are multiple: sometimes actions take place slightly below the level of the character's intuition, often the characters are simply blind to their own motivations, and there is also the fact to consider that a literary text does not reveal everything about its characters, but may have necessary blind

spots itself. In some cases it seemed that the characters supported and even helped in generating events, even though it was not clear if was done intentionally. This is why, in one case (*The White Tiger*), I relied on Agamben's descriptions, whose theory does not depend on a subject's inactivity, but presents symmetrical power-relations. I expanded the concept of *captivation* in this case in order to go into depth about the empowered subject's ensuing relationship with other captives that have now become *his*. The empowerment was not singular, there were similar cases in which the powerful subject defines its power by the submission of the other, however, never has it been implied as a potentially endless cycle without any possibility of change. It was this specification that made a reading without Agamben almost impossible. Yet, *captivation* remained, even in this case, the identifiable core structure and backbone of my analysis. The term *captivation* has proven to be productive, showing how the subject's (re)actions could be read in relation to a privileged event. The presumption of a fortified event is not only based on theoretical notions, but is echoed and underscored by the literary texts themselves, which all presented at least one significant event, and this makes it difficult to argue that events do *not* play a great role in contemporary literature and that subjects are *not* seriously affected, formed and shaped by these events. What could be viewed differently, however, is how the involvement of the subject should be evaluated in this respect. The term *captivation* does not account for all of the subject's complexities, but it does describe its unique relationship with the event and explores the multi-layered dynamics between event and subject.

To put my findings in perspective, the comparison with postmodern literature was crucial. As the subject today does not return to a previous concept of subjectivity, but goes beyond a postmodern understanding of it, I referred to this situation as 'post-postmodern.' Post-postmodern literature transforms the notions of authorship, ethics and the sacred by turning destructive strategies into affirmative methods that help in defining the subject and its capacities anew, especially when it comes to writing, helping, supporting and believing. As a result, authorship, ethics and the sacred are granted an investigation

unbiased by postmodern principles and thus they are permitted to take on new forms. These new forms are briefly summarized in the following.

Post-Postmodern Authorship

The most interesting author figures in the novels discussed are an extreme version of the overbearing author figure, who captivate their audience by force. Postmodern theory's greatest success has been to reveal what kind of authority the readers relay to authors and how this reflects power-mechanisms in general, implementing a general critique of authority. As a result, author figures in postmodern literature are destabilized, qualified, ridiculed and even destroyed. This is based on the assumption that authorial figures are corrupt, misleading and deceiving. Briony from *Atonement* and the spirit from *Ghostwritten* prove to be precisely such controlling and even deceiving characters. They exhibit all the negative effects a powerful author can have. However, this does not mean that their portrayal is in line with a postmodern reading of authorship. In fact, I argue that these novels reject the postmodern treatment of authorship. *Atonement* and *Ghostwritten* do not fragment the author or destabilize the concept. Instead, the author figures are allowed to go to the extreme and display their power to the fullest. By manipulating the reader these figures make the reader part of this process. The novels force readers to become skeptical of the author concept on their own. Thus, instead of reading *about* the criticism of the concept, the reader experiences it first-hand, beginning to question not only one's own stance towards the guiding author figure, but also towards the conventions of fiction. Thus, the reader is not 'taught' or even fed with the insight that the trust in author figures or narrators is rather arbitrary and dependent on conventions, instead the readers are *affected* by this insight directly, without knowing about it beforehand. Either, they are surprised and flabbergasted or provoked, enraged and may even become furious. This is a completely different reaction than one might have towards a postmodern novel, since the readers are now not allowed to keep their distance from the novels or even remain slightly uninvolved. They are made part of the game, even if they did not agree to be so.

Even though the reader feels duped and mislead, *Atonement* and *Ghostwritten* seem to suggest that the reader is partially to blame. It is his or her captivation that made them fallible. This argument is implied in central metaphors that the novels provide and which describe essentially the same thing: a phenomenon that is existent and visible all the time, yet, not recognized. In *Ghostwritten*, one of the characters compares the appearance of a ghost to the humming of a fridge. Its humming sound increases until it cannot be ignored anymore. The metaphor indicates that the ghost-narrator, as the humming, has been there all the time and could have been spotted before, if the reader had been more attentive. Thus, even though the two novels mislead their readers, they place the blame for this on these very readers themselves. Thus, the reader is forced to take on responsibility for his reading, the mistakes he has made, the things he has overlooked, etc. The reader is made accountable by this particular form of authorship—he is pressured into having an ethical response and owning up to it.

The hierarchical structure between author figures and readers is similar to the relationship between *homo sacer* and sovereign—the powerful being can only become powerful because he has someone weak he can hold captive. Admittedly, the violence of the relationship Agamben describes certainly does not apply to the relationship between reader and author. Here, it is more a captivating force than captivity, and the weakness of the reader is a construed lack of information. Yet, the essential concept remains valid: as long as the author can captivate the reader with his narrative he exists to the reader—otherwise the reader would simply put the book down. Thus, in a sense it is required of the author to make captives out of his or her audience in order to force the immersion in a wholly aesthetic and manipulated experience. This certainly questions a postmodern understanding of authorship, in which the reader has difficulties immersing him- or herself in the fiction, since the qualification and destabilization of the author removes the reader from the narrative, treating it as that which it is: a fantasy whose inhabitants are painfully aware of their fictitiousness, 'ruining' the illusion for the reader. Thus, one could argue that the forceful author figures in *Atonement* and *Ghostwritten*, however ethically dubious they may be,

create an aesthetic experience that is difficult to shake off, because the reader is pushed to new ground. Captivation is thus a captivation by art (and even a definition of art), an infection that one remains unaware of, a hypnosis that one cannot remember entering.

Post-Postmodern Ethics

Ethics is probably one of the topics which is presented in the most diverse ways in the novels under discussion here. In postmodernism the notion of ethics and responsibility is severely doubted, since postmodernism questions the existence of an act that is without reason, without thought or calculation by the subject. Post-postmodern ethics, however, neither argues for a naïve and simplistic understanding of ethics, nor for the non-existence of 'true' ethics. The selected texts exhibit a deep and serious involvement with ethics, negotiating and discussing the definitions and workings of responsibility, loyalty and faith. Ethical issues are intertwined with a paradoxical range of phenomena in these texts: passivity and accident, but also power and violence. Thus, instead of declaring ethics to be 'true' or 'false' these texts succeed in shedding light on the complexity and inner contradictoriness of ethics.

The analyses reflect this complexity, introducing a spectrum of ethical acts that are not always carried out voluntarily and not always with the best intentions at hand. Some of the subjects one finds here come very close to Marion's understanding of the subject, which is basically an unknowing and helpless witness who simply responds to what's coming to him, and thus being purely reactive. This raises the questions of how voluntary these acts are and whether an ethical act can be considered as such when there is no clear form of agency or intention behind it. However, these passive subjects, or 'witnesses,' as I called them in reference to Marion's notion of the subject, have a specific ethical purpose. They not only give an account of the victims and what happened to them, but also give an account of themselves. In fact, it seems that they primarily present themselves and the relationship they have with their victims. The witnesses are clearly restricted by their own perspective, their limitations and faults. However, instead of completely destabilizing the reports of the witnesses and qualifying their insight, the wit-

nesses prove their own fallibility themselves, which makes them involuntarily very authentic witnesses. They deliver the truth about their victims in an indirect way and often even accidently. In that way, they turn into perfect witnesses, communicating a truth that seems inaccessible to them themselves. They become mediums of the truth. Thus, these novels made possible what would lead to an epistemological crisis in postmodern fiction. Even though it is undeniable that the perspective of the witness can distort their account, the exposure of the truth and the ethical act itself are not hindered or qualified by this. Authenticity is made possible by creating passive subjects that are unwillingly and uncontrollably authentic—they do not know any better.

However, there are also other types of subjects, active and even desperate characters who purposely pursue ethical acts, but whose motivation may be flawed. In these cases, ethical actions are accompanied by longings for power which can result in violence. Yet, responsibility is not presented as a 'false' or 'untrue' act, but rather as always having had the potential of being misused, insinuating that this lies in the sheer nature of responsibility. To be responsible for someone else means taking control over someone's life to a certain extent. One novel, *The White Tiger*, has taken this quite literally, making a murderer the responsible person. Novels like these seem to follow the line of thought that Agamben describes in his figure of the *homo sacer*—to take care of someone necessarily has biopolitial implications. Agamben shows this most obviously in the case of the comatose patient whose caretakers made efforts to determine when life is worth living and thus when it is allowed to be ended. While taking care of the patient and thus trying to find legal solutions for his/her situation, they also endanger his/her life by determining the quality of life and thus by determining the parameters for when it no longer possesses 'value'(cf. *HS* 163 ff.).

Ethics in post-postmodern literature are not simply 'good' deeds committed by 'good' people; the characters portrayed in the novels are highly complex in their motivations. They are conflicted, distracted, act out of calculation or out of a misunderstanding, by mistake or

by accident. Responsible subjects are made, they never choose their actions by themselves. While acting responsibly or in an ethical way the characters are bound to the imperfect world they are living in, reflecting in their actions the limitations of that world. Ethics can even be considered to be dangerously limited in some cases. This becomes clear whenever the novels tend to be very closely related to Agamben's conceptualization of power relations. The existence of the *homo sacer* is proof that the political structure is faulty and that this original fault is constantly reproduced by creating new *homo sacer*-figures. When a political system has this flaw in its matrix, all ethical actions carried out inside this system are necessarily restricted by this fault and thus hindered from being an unbound ethics. Accordingly, the characters' ethics are imperfect in the manner that they are more a make-do-ethics than anything else. They suffice —for the moment, for this specific situation, under these specific circumstances. Are they more capable than that, can they even become universal ethics? This is highly questionable. Their ethics are ethics for those who need it, even those who are needy. To van Dijk and Vaessens this poses a problem; they complain that "their late- or post-postmodern 'rhetorics of sincerity,' and 'reality' and 'truth' don't have a universal and absolute base" (14). However, I do not see that this is a problem for post-postmodern texts, but rather a fact that they wholeheartedly embrace and underline. None of these novels presents a form of universal values. Ethics are not established as a general system of rules, instead ethics are individual rules; they can even be the imperfect rules of a little child. Yet, these imperfect rules prove again and again to be productive, once they are believed in. This is why ethics is thus oftentimes closely associated with sacral images, ideas and occurrences, underlining how belief factors into ethics. Novels like *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake* further suggest that the reality of the world, however brutal or failing it might be, has nothing to do with the nature of ethics; ethics makes its own world.

Post-Postmodern Sacredness

What sacredness shares with authorship and ethics is that it is a similarly complex and highly reflected topic in post-postmodern literature. The transcendent sphere in all the novels discussed is the immanent

sphere; the sacred stems from the banal, even the comical. The transcendent is not located outside, it surrounds us. This observation shows how much post-postmodern sacrality can be understood in terms of Marion's theory, since he, too, sees the excess of the event in the banal givenness of it. Marion's phenomenological understanding of transcendence locates it in the normal everyday world. Sacredness is a product of this deficient and barren world.

In all of the novels selected one finds a sacred figure, an incompetent human being whose neediness turns him or her into a sacred being. This sacred figure can only exist because he has created an audience that makes him one, which makes sacredness the outcome of a performance and the sacred figures also artistic figures. This relationship between performer and audience is always based on a mutual dependency. The father in *The Road* thinks of himself as an actor who enacts a drama for his son. However, through the demands of his audience he ceases to be an actor and becomes a believer, turning into an audience member himself when the son becomes a living light, a messiah figure. In *Oryx and Crake* the storyteller is turned into a sacred being by his audience, which draws sustenance from his stories. His performance inspires the Crakers to come up with their own religious ritual that honors him. The role of the audience is also crucial in the *The History of Love*. Bird is conceived of as a god only by an unknowing readership and by unknowing characters. It is only because of this audience that Bird can attain the effect of an all-knowing and intervening God.

The fact that an audience creates its own sacred beings and in a way its own 'creators,' constitutes the connection to the first analytical chapter of this dissertation. In this chapter on authorship, the audience, the readers, 'helped' unwillingly in creating its author figures. In fact, the novels suggest that only by way of a captive audience could these author figures appear. This connection implies a certain kinship between the mechanisms of religion and art, which is certainly not a new insight, however, it is noteworthy that the novels themselves provide the material for this speculation, and further-

more, that they do not use it to devaluate religion or art, but show how the interplay leads subjects onto a new path: a regenerating one with new plans for the future.

The chapter on sacredness also revealed surprising insights into the changed role of language. Sacredness often develops through language operations alone. Language creates meaningful structures, which contrasts with a postmodern view of language in which it is often pointed out how diverting, confusing and even misguiding language can be. In my introduction I mentioned DeLillo's *White Noise* in which language cannot be trusted to be dependable. Instead, language is considered to contribute to confusion and to be standing in the way of perceiving reality in its 'true' form, in fact, creating a false sense of reality altogether and turning reality into a simulation. In contrast to this, in *Oryx and Crake*, and in particular in *The Road*, language is often all the characters have left, and they lean heavily on language for moral support. They have only communication to reassure them, repetitions of simple words that structure their day and also the way they understand and categorize the world. In a slow evolution it is shown how words turn from empty signifiers into meaningful concepts and beliefs. Instead of being a hindrance and an untrustworthy nuisance, language is a maker of meaning. It sacralizes the secular world and provides it with meaning the dead world cannot produce by itself anymore. These language operations, for example giving promises, are completely contrary to the reality of the fictional world and construct nevertheless a belief system that gives the characters hope, agency and intent. By trusting in language, using it to their own advantage and insisting on its meaningfulness, the characters find a way to deal with the harshness of their world. In that way language takes on a crucial role, inhabiting the centre of post-postmodern sacredness.

Concluding Remarks

The possibilities for further research in this area are infinite, since contemporary literature seems to be increasingly creative in coming up with its own concepts, and thus leaves postmodern criticism behind. Following the argumentative structure of this dissertation, I think it

would be fruitful to look at more phenomena that have been influenced by a distinct postmodern interpretation and investigate how they are treated in contemporary literature. An example for this would be language, communication and the concept of 'meaning.' How is language presented in contemporary fiction, what capabilities and what kind of limitations does it have and how does one deal with them in a productive way? Does a shift in a subject's position create a linguistic transformation as was apparent in *The Road*? Another matter that could be discussed along this line are the particular genres popular in postmodern literature. Especially the historical novel has been utilized for postmodern writing. Recently, there has been an emergence of successful contemporary historical novels, for example Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009) and David Mitchell's *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2011). It would be interesting to compare how these contemporary forms deal with the rules of the genre differently and how they alter conventions of the genre.

What remained completely untouched within the scope of this dissertation is the question of gender, which can certainly be considered significant in the context of subjectivity. If one regards traditional or conventional gender constructions as forms of captivations—limitations that constrain characters and restrict their agency—it seems logical to investigate subjects' empowerment also within the gender realm. Can gender limitations be overcome, and how can this be presented? In relation to the theoretical approach of this dissertation, it would be productive to pursue Agamben's theory further, in particular the way in which a subject's empowerment is linked to social and political structures. In this area, the problem of the (bio)political power of the subject could be further discussed by posing the question of whether there are alternatives to the opposition between weak and powerful and even possibilities for dissolving or transcending this hierarchy. Finally, when considering that the act of turning into a subject is intrinsically an artistic one, as I have argued in this dissertation, it might be constructive to analyze the performative process between the event and captive artistic subject in other kinds of contemporary literary exploration.

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Anglophone contemporary literature has changed significantly since the 1990s. In this book Nadine Feßler investigates the role of the event and how its new importance invigorates and empowers the subjects in the novels discussed. She analyzes seven novels by the authors Ian McEwan, Cormac McCarthy, Margaret Atwood, Nicole Krauss, David Mitchell, Anne Enright and Aravind Adiga and focuses on three areas in which this development manifests itself: authorship, ethics and the sacred.

The study examines not only how these notions are reworked, but also how they relate to eventfulness and subjectivity. In particular, Feßler demonstrates how these novels discard traditional notions of the subject and replace them with what she calls 'captivated' or unexpectedly empowered subjects.

The changes revealed in this study clearly point to the emergence of a post-postmodern literature. Feßler explores this new landscape by describing how these new novels are different from classical postmodern ones and why this difference is important for the study of contemporary fiction.

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