



Università
Ca'Foscari
Venezia

Corso di Laurea Magistrale
in Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane e Postcoloniali
ordinamento ex D.M. 270/2004

European Joint Master's Degree in English and American
Studies

Tesi di Laurea

Multiple Realities and Alternate Lives

Navigating Conflicting Scenarios in Paul Auster's *4 3 2 1*, Philip
Roth's *The Counterlife*, and Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*

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2016 / 2017

The true story is vicious
and multiple and untrue

after all. Why do you
need it? Don't ever

ask for the true story.

—Margaret Atwood, “True Stories”

“Who are *you*?” said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

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Introduction

When six-year-old Ferguson—the protagonist of Paul Auster’s latest novel, *4 3 2 1*—falls out of a tree and breaks a leg, he feels infuriated, even more than at his own recklessness, at the senselessness of the accident. If only his friend Chuckie had not dared him to climb that tree, he thinks, or if the branches of that tree had not been so far apart, or if he had lived in a different town and had never even met Chuckie—if, in short, only a small detail had been different—that misadventure could have been avoided. However, while things could have gone better, Ferguson realizes, they might also have gone much worse. Hence the epiphany: every action in life has infinite possible outcomes; every moment has the potential to generate an endless multiplicity of different realities, projecting a number of alternate lives that can feel strangely real as soon as one starts envisaging them. “Such an interesting thought, Ferguson said to himself: to imagine how things could be different for him even though he was the same” (Auster, *4 3 2 1* 54). In fact, contrary to Ferguson—or rather, to Ferguson number 2—readers of *4 3 2 1* do not need to *imagine* alternate scenarios, as Auster’s novel provides them with no less than four versions of the story.

While *4 3 2 1* undoubtedly has an original take on the exploration of multiple realities, it is also one among many recent works of fiction that have explored the narrative possibilities offered by counterfactual thinking to investigate the inextricable link between factuality and possibility, truth and imagination, inherent in a life story. Auster’s book can, thus, be placed in productive dialogue with two similar, though different in many respects, contemporary novels, namely Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife* (1986) and Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life* (2013), insofar as all these works disorient their readers by compelling them to walk down a multiplicity of mutually incompatible narrative paths. Indeed, the “forking paths” metaphor is commonly employed to describe stories offering multiple conflicting versions of the events, and especially with regard to a kind of interactive narratives, generally referred to as “multi-path” or “branching,” that require their audience to choose among a variety of narrative developments at given decision points (cf. Aarseth 323). Although the three novels analyzed here do not give readers the chance to preserve coherence and linearity by excluding redundant narrative branches,

challenging them, instead, to make sense of a juxtaposition of incompatible storylines, terms such as “multi-path” and “branching” can be usefully applied to their structures as well. As it has been widely acknowledged, an ideal model for this kind of narratives can be found in Jorge Luis Borges’s 1941 story “The Garden of Forking Paths,” whose title alludes, in fact, to a peculiar book, described as follows:

In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible-to-disentangle Ts’ui Pen, the character chooses—simultaneously—all of them. *He creates*, thereby, ‘several futures,’ several times, which themselves proliferate and fork. This is the explanation for the novel’s contradictions. (125)

Janet H. Murray provides an apt definition of the type of story under discussion, which she terms “multiform story” (*Hamlet* 30-38 *passim*) and describes as “a written or dramatic narrative that presents a single situation or plotline in multiple versions, versions that would be mutually exclusive in our ordinary experience” (*Hamlet* 30). The ways in which *4 3 2 1*, *The Counterlife*, and *Life After Life* diverge from our ordinary experience and the kind of unusual reading experience they, in turn, call for are definitely worth examining in detail and will, therefore, represent the main focus of this thesis.

Incidentally, it should be noted that, besides their fortune in print narratives, films, and theater, a variety of multi-path structures have also been the basis for the development of interactive experiences supported by digital media, such as hypertexts and videogames. While the recipient’s active involvement is evidently central to such experiences, whose narrative potential has been of great interest for the field of intermedial narratology (cf. Ryan, *Narrative*; Murray, *Hamlet*), a discussion of multiform novels should also emphasize the active role granted to their readers. Although, as Marie-Laure Ryan observes, drawing on the work of Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser, “reading is never a passive experience” (*Narrative* 16), nonetheless,

the inherently interactive nature of the reading experience has been obscured by the reader’s proficiency in performing the necessary world-building operations. We are so used to reading classic narrative texts—those with a well-formed plot, a setting we can visualize, and characters who act out of a familiar logic—that we do not notice the mental processes that enable us to

convert the temporal flow of language into a global image that exists all at once in the mind.
(*Narrative* 16-7)

Novels like *4 3 2 1*, *The Counterlife*, and *Life After Life*, instead, break this automatism, making readers aware of their own efforts, and can thus be said to invite a more interactive participation than traditional narratives. Indeed, in Murray's words, "[w]hen the writer expands the story to include multiple possibilities, the reader assumes a more active role. [...] This can be unsettling to the reader, but it can also be experienced as an invitation to join in the creative process" (*Hamlet* 38).

As they all revolve around multiple different versions of their central characters' lives, the three texts analyzed in this thesis can be further defined as counterfactual narratives of the type Hilary P. Dannenberg calls "fictional (nonhistorical) biographical counterfactuals," namely narratives presenting "multiple versions of a character who does not have a real-world historical counterpart" (119). In these novels, the counterfactuality of some of the represented events is, therefore, to be measured against other events within the boundaries of the storyworld (or worlds) projected by the same text, as opposed to counterfactual stories in the genre of alternate history, which, instead, call for a comparison with the actual world we, as readers, inhabit.

Uri Margolin calls the relationship between an "original" individual and his or her "versions" "intra-textual" in the former case and "extra-textual" in the latter, also acknowledging a third, "inter-textual" case, in which multiple versions of a character are to be found across storyworlds projected by different texts ("Fictional Individuals" 43). Although in the intra-textual variant it is generally possible, just like in the extra-textual, to assess "an internal ontological hierarchy or primacy" between original and versions ("Fictional Individuals" 43), Margolin also considers a particular intra-textual case in which "[t]he alternative versions [of the same IND] are all of ontologically equal status and no choice between them is hence possible," representing a situation which can be seen "as a branching or divergence of worlds, following a common world stage, with the IND's having several undecidable futures, one in each world" ("Individuals in Narrative" 864). Although, as will be shown, *4 3 2 1*, *The Counterlife*, and *Life After Life* complicate the situation described by Margolin in various ways, this observation provides

nonetheless a useful starting point for their analysis. Indeed, all three novels appear to reject a clear distinction between (fictional) facts and counterfactuals, and therefore between an “original” individual and his or her “versions.” Thus, by blurring the boundaries between the actual and the nonactual dimension of their characters’ lives, *4 3 2 1*, *The Counterlife*, and *Life After Life* project complex ontologies that readers are challenged to ascribe coherence to in order to be able to construct cohesive storyworlds.

While multi-path structures have frequently lent themselves to the exploration of multiple dimensions in science-fiction narratives, specifically in the three variants identified by Ryan as “the narrative of transworld exploration, the narrative of alternate history, and the time-travel narrative” (“Parallel” 656), they have also frequently been exploited in postmodernist works aiming to challenge traditional narrative coherence and linearity by presenting their readers with a plurality of irreconcilable scenarios.¹ Hence, the multiform narrative might arguably be considered as one of the many motifs shared by “the two ontological sister-genres” (65), as Brian McHale defines science fiction and postmodernist fiction in his discussion of their independent, yet parallel, developments and many thematic overlappings (cf. 59-72). Remarkably, however, neither do the three novels discussed here belong to the sci-fi genre nor can they be considered as distinctly postmodernist, despite showcasing a number of postmodern aspects.

McHale considers the essential difference between modernist and postmodernist fiction to be represented by a “shift of dominant from problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being*—from an epistemological dominant to an *ontological one*” (10). In other words, while central to modernism are questions concerning the possibility to know the world and one’s own self, and the modalities in which this knowledge can be attained (cf. McHale 9), typical postmodernist questions are,

What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they

¹ Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) is frequently mentioned as an example of sci-fi novel dealing with multiple realities, whereas often cited postmodernist works of fiction of this kind are—just to give a couple of examples—Robert Coover’s short story “The Babysitter” (1969), with its proliferation of incompatible sequences of events, as well as *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* by John Fowles (1969), which presents the reader with three different endings. However, the narrative possibilities offered by alternate scenarios have also been frequently exploited in comedy, for examples in films such as *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *Groundhog Day* (1993) (cf. Murray, *Hamlet* 30, 35-6).

differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (McHale 10)

Although these issues are also certainly pivotal to Auster's *4 3 2 1*, Roth's *The Counterlife*, and Atkinson's *Life After Life*, it is worth noticing that, despite their questioning of basic real-world ontological assumptions, these texts do not seem to imply—as opposed to many postmodernist works—a fundamental impossibility to know reality. Rather, it is precisely by destabilizing the boundaries between real and unreal, actual and possible, that these novels attempt to represent, and provide a way to understand, the experience of a life in all its multifacetedness, thus betraying—though certainly no epistemological optimism—at least a desire to persist in the search for truth and meaning. Thus, while “in postmodernist texts [...] epistemology is *backgrounded*, as the price for foregrounding ontology” (McHale 11), in the texts discussed here the two modes are tightly intertwined, as the suggestion at their core seems to be that, in order to gain epistemological access to the essence of life, we must inevitably go through a destabilization of ontological certainties.

Hence, it can be further argued that a great part of the appeal of *4 3 2 1*, *The Counterlife*, and *Life After Life* lies precisely in their evocation, by “unnatural” means, of a most “natural” and, indeed, deeply human experience, namely the impression that life cannot be reduced to a single, linear, and consistent course of events, but rather, to quote Roth's Nathan Zuckerman, that it must consist simultaneously of “the accidental and the immutable, the elusive and the graspable, the bizarre and the predictable, the actual and the potential, all the multiplying realities, entangled, overlapping, colliding, conjoined—plus the multiplying illusions!” (*The Counterlife* 310). What makes these three narratives so easily engaging is exactly their materialization of a multiplicity of dimensions that, in our actual world, can only remain in the domain of the virtual, thus thematizing the widely shared mental activity of wondering about the alternative courses our lives might have taken. Indeed, as Murray observes, “[w]hether multiform narrative is a reflection of post-Einsteinian physics or of a secular society haunted by the chanciness of life or of a new sophistication in narrative thinking, its alternate versions of reality

are now part of the way we think, part of the way we experience the world” (*Hamlet* 38).

Nonetheless, although the concept at the center of *4 3 2 1*, *The Counterlife*, and *Life After Life* is intuitively graspable and easily compelling, readers facing its literalization in the form of multi-path stories will inevitably find the reading experience disorienting, as the contradictions arising from a succession of incompatible scenarios conflict both with their knowledge of the world they inhabit and their general expectations for a coherent development of narrative plots. This thesis will, therefore, investigate the complexities of a reader’s experience of Auster’s *4 3 2 1*, Roth’s *The Counterlife*, and Atkinson’s *Life After Life*—a task which will be attempted by juxtaposing a cognitive approach with concepts drawn from possible worlds theory and unnatural narratology. While the first chapter will serve to explain this approach in detail, clarify the terminology to be used, and raise a number of questions equally relevant to all three texts, chapters 2, 3, and 4 will deal respectively with *4 3 2 1*, *The Counterlife*, and *Life After Life*, attempting to provide some answers to the questions raised and, thus, illuminate the parallels and divergences between them.

1. Defining the Approach

1.1 Possible Worlds

In order to describe the complex fictional worlds of Paul Auster's *4 3 2 1*, Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*, and Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life* and come to grips with their elusive ontologies, it is useful to start by clarifying some basic concepts from possible worlds theory, which will provide a framework for the analyses that follow. Originating in the fields of modal logic and analytic philosophy, and partially indebted to Leibniz's ideas, the possible worlds approach has been applied to the study of narrative since the 70s, starting with the seminal works of David Lewis, Umberto Eco, Thomas G. Pavel, and Lubomír Doležel (cf. Ryan, "Possible Worlds" para. 1). Their theories have, then, provided a basis for other models, including the one proposed by Marie-Laure Ryan, which will be used as a main reference throughout this thesis.

Fundamental to PW theory is a notion of reality as composed of a multiplicity of different worlds, which are ordered according to a hierarchy positing an actual world (AW) at the center of the system. Around the AW, a number of nonactual worlds are found, which are merely possible but not real and are, therefore, referred to as "alternative possible worlds" (APWs). In order to distinguish the actual world from alternative possible worlds, two approaches have been proposed. According to the "absolutist view" (Ryan, "Parallel" 645), the difference between AW and APWs is ontological, since the former exists autonomously, while the latter are "the product of a mental activity, such as dreaming, imagining, foretelling, promising, or storytelling" (Ryan, "Parallel" 645). On the contrary, according to Lewis's "modal realism"—which appears to offer a better point of departure to describe the way readers deal with fictional storyworlds (cf. Ryan *Possible Worlds* 21)—the distinction between actual world and alternative possible worlds does not depend on their ontological status, but rather on indexical reference. In Lewis's words, "'actual' is indexical, like 'I,' or 'here,' or 'now': it depends for its reference on the circumstances of utterance, to wit the world where the utterance is located" (*Counterfactuals* 86). Hence, the actual world is the one "'where I am located' and all possible worlds are, in turn, actual from the point of view of their inhabitants" (Ryan, "Parallel" 645-6).

Ryan further argues that immersion in a fictional narrative presupposes a gesture of

“fictional recentering” (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 13-30), whereby the reader is able to enter, and settle in, a universe distinct from the one he or she inhabits when not reading, which is centered around a different actual world. Therefore, while our original universe is centered around the “actually actual world” (AW), every fictional text projects, in turn, a textual universe centered around its own “textual actual world” (TAW) (cf. *Possible Worlds* 24) and comprising, just like our own system, a number of virtual alternative possible worlds (APWs). These are generated by the characters’ mental processes and include an “epistemic world” consisting of their knowledge and beliefs, as well as a number of model worlds represented by their obligations, wishes, goals and plans, pretended worlds, and fantasies (cf. Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 109-23).

In fiction, the TAW is automatically brought into existence by the narrator’s statements concerning it, as a result of their intrinsic performativity, although a particular case is represented by the assertions made by unreliable narrators (cf. Ryan, “Parallel” 648-9). Thus, whereas in the case of nonfiction the TAW has as its reference the AW, in fiction this is not so, as the TAW offers, instead, a representation of a textual reference world (TRW), where the “implied speaker” is situated and that, in fact, “does not exist independently of its representation” (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 25, 26).

Most significantly, as Ryan remarks,

Trying to establish what holds as fact in the actual domain of the narrative universe, distinguishing the factual and physical from the possible and virtual located in the mental representations of characters, but also building an image of these mental representations as a way to grasp the human significance of physical events and actions are some of the most fundamental of the cognitive operations that lead to the construction of narrative meaning. (“Parallel” 651)

What is especially relevant to a discussion of narratives such as *4 3 2 1*, *The Counterlife*, and *Life After Life* is that the distinction between their textual actual worlds and their nonactual alternative possible worlds is not always easy to discern. Indeed, these three novels frustrate the reader’s efforts to order the conflicting worlds composing their textual universes according to an ontological hierarchy, either by presenting a multiplicity of realities as equally actual—as in the case of Atkinson’s *Life After Life*—thus going against the reader’s innate tendency “to regard [the

textual] universe as centered around one, and only one, actual world” (Ryan, “Parallel” 652), or by making it hard to figure out the ontological status of the single worlds they project, as in Roth’s *The Counterlife*, whose textual universe is not centered around a stable actual world (and which, moreover, calls for a comparison with other books by Roth featuring the same protagonist in order to determine what holds as actual within the boundaries of the textual universe they, together, project). A slightly different challenge is presented by *4 3 2 1*, as this novel tricks readers into accepting the coexistence of multiple realities only to reveal, at the very end, that only one of them should be considered as (more or less) actual.

Ryan also provides an analysis of “multiverse” narratives, namely stories that project a multiplicity of actual worlds to reflect the many-worlds cosmology theorized in physics as a possible explanation for quantum mechanics (cf. “Parallel”). Generally belonging to the genre of science fiction, these multi-branch stories usually offer a scientific or pseudo-scientific explanation for the coexistence of plural realities (cf. Ryan, “Parallel” 671) and often feature characters who either can move physically from one branch to the other or are, at least, aware of their plurality (cf. Ryan, “Parallel” 656). While none of the texts analyzed in this thesis seems to offer a proper example of “multiverse” narrative as defined by Ryan—with reservations concerning Atkinson’s *Life After Life*, which indeed comes very close to representing one—all three of them appear, nonetheless, to invite a similar reading experience to that produced by a “multiverse” story, insofar as they, too, require readers to acknowledge “that [their] actual domain is made of a number of different worlds and that, within each of these parts, the distinction actual/nonactual repeats itself” (“Parallel” 653).

However, it can be observed that this constant gesture of recentering in ever new worlds is likely to result in a disrupting reading experience if the coexistence of multiple versions of the facts within the same textual system is not explicitly justified, or if the justification comes as an unexpected one. Moreover, as acknowledged by Ryan, texts offering too many contradictory versions of the events often come to the point of “inhibit[ing] recentering” (“Impossible” 142), as well as undermining the aesthetic illusion (cf. “Impossible” 140). Nonetheless, it is essential to notice that “the readers of literary fiction have a broader sense of what is a world than logicians, and [...] they do not treat inconsistencies as an excuse for giving up the attempt to build mental

models of texts” (Ryan, “Impossible” 130). The cognitive processes readers can activate in order to construct coherent storyworlds out of texts implying impossible or undecidable ontologies will be explored in detail in the next section.

1.2 Naturalizing Impossible Storyworlds

In order for a world to be possible in philosophical terms, it is generally acknowledged that it must observe logical laws.² Hence, texts such as Auster’s *4 3 2 1*, Roth’s *The Counterlife*, and Atkinson’s *Life After Life* appear to project “impossible” storyworlds insofar as, by presenting multiple versions of the same events, they violate the two basic laws of logic, namely the principle of noncontradiction and of the excluded middle (cf. Ryan, “Impossible” 129-30). To be more specific it might be noted that, even when the conflict between different realities is acknowledged on the diegetic level of the story, as in *Life After Life*, or eventually resolved by a naturalizing explanation, as in the case of *4 3 2 1*, readers nonetheless experience part of these texts as “impossible” before being able to rationalize them.

The analysis of impossible storyworlds has been a central concern of unnatural narratology, namely a branch of literary theory developed as a reaction to, and an expansion of, Monika Fludernik’s “natural narratology” (cf. Alber, Iversen, et al., “What Is Unnatural”). Starting from the assumption that we tend to navigate storyworlds on the basis of our real-world experience, that is, to interpret narratives in the light of the same cognitive parameters we apply to the actual world, unnatural narratology aims to describe the ways in which readers can make sense of fictional worlds deviating from that very experience (cf. Alber et al., “Unnatural Narratives” 115-6).

Although the “unnatural” in narrative has been variously defined, the term will be employed here in the sense intended by Jan Alber, namely as characterizing situations which violate either the physical or the logical laws of the actual world (cf. “Impossible Storyworlds” 80). Interestingly, it has been pointed out that logical impossibilities are harder to overcome for

² Ryan observes that the equation of possibility with adherence to logic is not entirely suitable to deal with fictional texts, as these often project universes that violate logical laws and yet remain “accessible” from our actual world—and therefore possible—on the basis of different criteria, which she lists under the name of “accessibility relations” (cf. *Possible Worlds* 31-47).

readers attempting to reconstruct a consistent storyworld than physically unnatural elements, since the latter have often become recognizable as distinctive features of specific genres, resulting in their “conventionalization” (Alber et al., “What Is Unnatural” 373). On the other hand, logical impossibilities, such as are often found in postmodernist works of fiction, are cognitively challenging precisely because they clash against very basic assumptions concerning the world we inhabit. Nonetheless, even when faced with logical inconsistencies, readers will generally strive to naturalize them (cf. Alber, “Impossible;” Alber et al., “What Is Unnatural”). The notion of “naturalization,” developed by Jonathan Culler, who defines it as a process whereby we bring a text “into relation with a type of discourse or model which is already, in some sense, natural and legible” (138), has been elaborated by Fludernik, who uses the term “narrativization” to denote “a reading strategy that naturalizes texts by recourse to narrative schemata” (*Towards* 34) both on the basis of real-world cognitive parameters and of our previous experience of literary texts (cf. Alber, “Impossible Storyworlds” 81). Like Alber, I will consider “naturalization” as a similar process to Fludernik’s notion of “narrativization” (cf. Alber, “Impossible Storyworlds” 81), in order to investigate how readers can turn the three novels under discussion into coherent narratives despite their inherent contradictions.

It should be underlined that “natural” and “unnatural” are not rigidly distinct categories, as a great number of narratives involve a constant interplay of natural and unnatural elements (cf. Alber et al., “What Is Unnatural” 374). Acknowledging the fuzziness of these definitions, David Herman rejects Brian Richardson’s similar distinction between “mimetic” and “antimimetic” stories and suggests as a more suitable approach one that simply “assumes that a continuum spans texts that engage in more or less reflexive modes of narration” (*Narrative Theory* 224). Nonetheless, the distinction between “natural” and “unnatural” will be maintained here, as it appears to be intuitively useful at least to describe the considerably different reading experiences produced by texts located towards the two ends of this continuum.

In order to outline a reader’s progress through *4 3 2 1*, *The Counterlife*, and *Life After Life* in the light of a cognitive approach, the term “reader” will be employed, in Herman’s terms, as standing for the set of “inferential activities that support worldmaking” (*Narrative Theory* 16), while the reading experience itself will be considered as a process through which, as Menakhem

Perry observes in his seminal discussion of literary dynamics, “the reader constructs—according to models he is familiar with from ‘reality,’ from social or literary conventions and the like—a set of frames which can motivate the convergence of as many of the various details in the text as possible” (36). The “frames” referred to are, together with “scripts,” cognitive frameworks, or “schemata,” enabling us to interpret the world, as well as narrative texts, by retrieving previously stored and organized knowledge, and which can be modified or substituted—though often reluctantly—when we are presented with new information.³ It must be noted that these processes are also at work as we deal with unnatural narratives: “since we are bound by our cognitive architecture, the unnatural can only be approached by using frames and scripts” (Alber et al., “What Is Unnatural” 376).

Thus, when our real-world cognitive frames fall short of providing an explanation for unnatural scenarios, according to Alber, alternative cognitive strategies are devised (cf. “Impossible Storyworlds”). These include mental activities such as “blending scripts,” whereby two or more schemata from our real-world experience are conflated to produce a new frame, and “frame enrichment,” which constitutes an extreme case of the previous strategy and through which we “considerably stretch existing frames beyond real-world possibilities until the parameters include the strange phenomena with which we are confronted”⁴ (Alber, “Impossible Storyworlds” 82). Other options to interpret impossible narrative situations are, according to Alber’s classification, “reading events as internal states,” namely naturalizing the unnatural as embodying “dreams, fantasies, or hallucinations;” “foregrounding the thematic,” that is, seeing the impossible elements as a representation or specific themes; and “reading allegorically,” namely considering them “as parts of allegories that say something about the world in general”⁵

³ Such concepts, developed in the field of Artificial Intelligence by scholars such as Marvin Minsky and, subsequently, Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson, have been frequently and variously employed in narrative research (cf. Jahn, “Cognitive Narratology” 69-70).

⁴ For the sake of simplification, “frame enrichment” will be used throughout this thesis as an umbrella term for all the modifications and extensions of real-world cognitive parameters enacted by readers to cope with unnatural scenarios.

⁵ I am aware that the term “allegorical” might not be entirely accurate to describe the kind of interpretative inferences invited by the peculiar structural arrangements of the novels analyzed here. Nonetheless, in order to stick to Alber’s categories, the term will be used throughout this thesis in a broad sense, insofar as the juxtaposition of alternative scenarios presented by these texts can be seen as a concretization of abstract ideas or imaginative experiences.

(“Impossible Storyworlds” 82). It should be specified that the cognitive reconfigurations representing the first two among the strategies listed above are always at work as readers navigate impossible storyworlds (cf. Alber et al., “What Is Unnatural” 376), and are therefore to be seen as coexisting with, rather than alternative to, their attempts to interpret the underlying thematic or allegorical meaning of a text. Instead, “reading events as internal states” can arguably be considered as a less sophisticated strategy, by which we succeed in making sense of impossible elements through our real-world cognitive frames, without need to modify them. From the standpoint of PW theory, it can be observed that a reader striving to order conflicting scenarios according to an ontological hierarchy, that is, to distinguish the textual actual world from virtual alternate possible worlds, is still trying to naturalize the textual universe on the basis of real-world frames. Acknowledging the (unnatural) possibility either of plural or undecidable ontologies, instead, seems to require a process of frame enrichment.

According to Herman, when constructing a storyworld, readers make two fundamental kinds of inferences, namely “those bearing on what sort of world is being evoked by the act of telling, and those bearing on why (and with what consequences) that act is being performed at all” (*Narrative Theory* 17). Thus, it seems possible to consider strategies such as naturalizing the impossible through our real-world frames, as well as altering those pre-existing cognitive schemata through frame enrichment, as enabling inferences of the first kind, namely those “about [...] the internal structure [...] of storyworlds” (Herman, *Narrative Theory* 151), while strategies such as thematic or allegorical readings can be associated to inferences about their “communicative functions” (Herman, *Narrative Theory* 151).

I further suggest emphasizing that naturalization either through real-world frames or frame enrichment serves the function of maintaining a certain degree of immersion in the projected storyworld, while thematic or allegorical readings represent attempts to interpret the text from a more detached and critical point of view. While these two attitudes are not

incompatible, since aesthetic illusion⁶ always presupposes some degree of “rational distance” (Wolf, “Illusion (Aesthetic)” para. 2), in the novels under examination the immersive experience is often threatened by a strong awareness of the artificiality of the text. Thus, as Ryan similarly observes, when faced with impossible storyworlds, readers fluctuate between “the illusionist stance, which regards the text as the representation of a world” and “the metatextualist stance, which regards the text as a game with language” (“Impossible” 145). It is, arguably, precisely this textual awareness that prompts readers of *4 3 2 1*, *The Counterlife*, and *Life After Life* to wonder about their thematic or allegorical implications. Nonetheless, it must be underlined that “most readers will do whatever they can to construct a world in which they can achieve at least some degree of aesthetic illusion because make-believe corresponds to a basic need of the human mind, and it is simply more enjoyable than self-reflexivity” (Ryan, “Impossible” 144). The tension between these two complementary aspects of the reading experience must, therefore, necessarily be taken into account in an analysis of novels that, through their playful juxtaposition of alternate scenarios, invite a reflection on what it means to tell a life story.

1.3 Local vs Global Aesthetic Illusion and Narrative Interest in Auster’s *4 3 2 1*, Roth’s *The Counterlife*, and Atkinson’s *Life After Life*

As observed above, Auster’s *4 3 2 1*, Roth’s *The Counterlife*, and Atkinson’s *Life After Life* project problematic ontologies that jar with our experience of reality as centered around a single actual world and, therefore, call for naturalizing strategies, on the one hand, to preserve some degree of aesthetic illusion and, on the other, to interpret their unnaturalness from a thematic or allegorical point of view. As far as aesthetic illusion is concerned, Ryan aptly observes that

The world-creating power of literary works can be represented on an axis that connects two poles.

One of these poles is occupied by texts that build a coherent world—a world that can hold

⁶ Werner Wolf places the experience of aesthetic illusion “on a scale simultaneously influenced to varying (increasing or decreasing) degrees by its two poles of total rational distance [...] and complete immersion [...] in the represented world,” further observing that “[t]ypical aesthetic illusion maintains a position that is closer to the pole of immersion rather than to the pole of distance.” In the light of this definition, he regards the term “aesthetic illusion,” where “‘aesthetic’ [...] implies an awareness [...] that ‘illusion’ is triggered by an artifact” as preferable to its alternatives often found in research, including “immersion,” since these do not acknowledge the degree of “rational distance” representing an integral part of the experience (Wolf, “Illusion (Aesthetic)” para. 2). While it is essential to keep this distinction in mind, the two terms “aesthetic illusion” and “immersion” will at times be used interchangeably in this thesis.

everything that the text describes and where, consequently, the imagination can make itself at home. These are the texts that create aesthetic illusion. The opposite pole is occupied by texts that do not create a world at all: texts such as conceptual poetry, random collages of words, texts in an invented, incomprehensible language such as Hugo Ball's sound poetry, or even the impossible texts imagined by Borges. These texts offer no goal for recentering, and the only option left to the reader is to focus on the medium. In the middle of the axis are texts that construct partial, or unstable worlds, so that the world presupposed by a certain section is not the same world as the world presupposed by another section. ("Impossible" 141-2)

4 3 2 1, *The Counterlife*, and *Life After Life* definitely belong to this last category, as, by projecting multiple realities, they represent a challenge for readers aiming to construct a single and unified world out of them. Indeed, as Ryan further remarks, "[w]hen a text asserts both p and $\sim p$, one could imagine a world where p is the case superposed upon another world where $\sim p$ is true. The imagination can relocate itself into each of these worlds, or it can alternate between them, but it cannot inhabit both of them at the same time" ("Impossible" 142). Thus, while aesthetic illusion is generally possible within the single branches composing a multi-path story, their contradictory proliferation disrupts the immersive experience, drawing the readers' attention to the textual medium.

Starting from these assumptions, some questions are worth raising concerning a reader's experience of *4 3 2 1*, *The Counterlife*, and *Life After Life*. First, is it possible to preserve the aesthetic illusion not only on the local level of each single—and inherently coherent—version of the story, but also with regard to the global level of their sum total? That is to say, can the conflicting realities be conceived as part of a single storyworld in which readers can feel immersed without considerable disruptions? Secondly, if this is possible, what are the elements that enable this experience? Furthermore, what compels readers to read on, and prevents them from losing interest, when faced with a multiplicity of alternate versions of the same story? Can an overall narrative progress be traced on the global level of these novels which, by overarching their local fragmentation, counteracts the narrative "self-erasure" (McHale 99-127) produced by reiterated "rewinds" and ever new beginnings? Moreover, can we feel genuinely involved in the single alternate plotlines regardless of the inconsistent whole these add up to, or are we more likely to be mainly interested in finding out the reason for their coexistence, thus experiencing a

sense of “metasuspense,” to use Ryan’s term, namely a kind of suspense “in which the focus of the reader’s concern is not to find out what happens next in the textual world but how the author is going to tie all the strands together and give the text proper narrative form” (*Narrative* 145)? Differently put, does the narrative interest⁷ of these stories lie precisely in the conflict between their multiple scenarios or are the events belonging to each narrative path engaging enough to prompt us to mentally background their unusual multiplication? The following analyses of Paul Auster’s *4 3 2 1*, Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife* and Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life* will attempt to provide an answer to these transversal questions as well as raise points concerning the specific reading experience of each novel.

⁷ For the time being, I prefer to use the term “narrative interest” rather than “tellability” to denote what makes the stories under examination worth telling. This is because “tellability” is frequently employed to refer solely to features pertaining to the story level of a narrative, thus excluding the discursive characteristics contributing to its appeal (cf. Baroni, “Tellability” para. 4). According to Ryan, who considers tellability as depending on the degree of “diversification” of the worlds projected by a narrative (*Possible Worlds* 156), this notion is strictly limited to “properties of plot,” as opposed to properties of “performance,” which instead provide an aesthetic justification for the existence of a narrative text (*Possible Worlds* 149). As will be seen, a great part of the interest of the texts analyzed here lies in their peculiar structural arrangement, at times combined with the tellability of their plot (or plots).

2. “Identical but different”⁸: Paul Auster’s *4 3 2 1*

2.1 Making the Familiar Strange and the Strange Familiar: Paratext and Structure

“To combine the strange with the familiar” (455): this is the literary project undertaken by the protagonist of Paul Auster’s *4 3 2 1* in one of his four alternate lives. As a budding writer of experimental fiction, Archie Ferguson aims

to observe the world as closely as the most dedicated realist and yet to create a way of seeing the world through a different, slightly distorting lens, for reading books that dwelled only on the familiar inevitably taught you things you already knew, and reading books that dwelled only on the strange taught you things you didn’t need to know, and what Ferguson wanted above all else was to write stories that would make room not only for the visible world of sentient beings and inanimate things but also for the vast and mysterious unseen forces that were hidden within the seen. (Auster, *4 3 2 1* 455)⁹

The same intentions seem to drive Paul Auster’s 2017 novel itself. As an exploration of a boy’s life in four variations, *4 3 2 1* is sure to “mak[e] the familiar seem strange,” to quote Viktor Shklovsky (16), by turning the traditional form of the *Bildungsroman*—specifically in its variant as a narrative of artistic self-discovery—into an experimental feat. Thus, as four versions are offered of its protagonist’s story, Auster’s novel definitely has the potential to disorient readers, clashing with their expectations for a coherent and linear narrative plot. Yet, while the “familiar” tale of a boy’s development into young adulthood is made undoubtedly “strange” through its impossible multiplication, it can be observed that its “strangeness” can become, in turn, unexpectedly “familiar,” as a series of elements make it possible for readers to get accustomed to its unnatural narrative arrangement.

A first paratextual element serving to ease us into the textual universe of *4 3 2 1* is represented by the blurb on its inside flap, which, in presenting the gist of the novel, also anticipates its structure:

⁸ Paul Auster, *4 3 2 1* 863.

⁹ Future references to the novel will be included in the text thus: (*4 3 2 1* x).

On March 3, 1947, in the maternity ward of Beth Israel Hospital in Newark, New Jersey, Archibald Isaac Ferguson, the one and only child of Rose and Stanley Ferguson, is born. From that single beginning, Ferguson's life will take four simultaneous and independent fictional paths. Four Fergusons made of the same genetic material, four boys who are the same boy, will go on to lead four parallel and entirely different lives.

Indeed, in an online discussion hosted by the *New York Times* website, when asked whether he would prefer readers to know about the central idea of the book in advance or if they should ideally figure it out as they read, Auster explained that the function of the blurb is precisely to spare readers excessive confusion when faced with incompatible versions of Ferguson's life (cf. "Big City Book Club").

Once the journey into the four worlds of *4 3 2 1* has started, a second paratextual aid is offered to us by the double numbering of each chapter, which helps us navigate the succession of alternate scenarios by allowing us to keep track both of their alternation and of their chronological progression. Hence, after a first chapter titled 1.0, serving as the common stem of the multiple realities and ending with Ferguson's birth, the story branches in four directions. Chapter 1.1 offers a first account of the protagonist's early years, followed, in Chapter 1.2, by a second version of the events taking place approximately in the same stretch of time. Chapter 1.3 and 1.4 present respectively a third and a fourth alternative version. Then, the story of the first Archie Ferguson resumes in Chapter 2.1 and so, in turn, do the other three in the following chapters. The structure of the novel can, therefore, be described as a tree diagram whose stem is represented by the events recounted in Chapter 1.0, a single branching point coinciding with Ferguson's birth, and four branches, one for each of Ferguson's lives.

The four narratives of *4 3 2 1* proceed in parallel, each period of the protagonist's life being explored in four alternative ways in chapters of similar length before moving on to the next time span. "[T]he rhythm of prose is an important automatizing element," Shklovsky remarks (20), and indeed the order and length of the narrative sections endow *4 3 2 1* with a regular rhythm which contributes to the automatization of its reading process, thus counteracting the "defamiliarization" (Shklovsky 16, 18-19) produced by its juxtaposition of multiple scenarios. Significantly, Auster often refers to his works in terms of their "music" or their "dance;" it is

precisely the rhythm of a novel which, according to the author, propels its writing as well as its reading process. Thus, at a public reading of *4 3 2 1*, when a member of the audience asked him whether he would advise to read all the chapters concerning each of Ferguson's four lives in sequence, instead of following the order in which they are presented in the book, Auster answered negatively, remarking, "the book is a world, it's a dance, and it spins, and you've got to get into the music of it. You know, it's not a scientific formula, it's a human experience, and if you don't read it in the order of the cycles [...] I think you'll miss out on whatever pleasure there might be in it for you" ("Paul Auster, '4 3 2 1'" 1:00:47-1:01:06). As Menakhem Perry observes, "[t]he ordering and distribution of the elements in a text may exercise considerable influence on the nature, not only of the reading process, but of the resultant whole as well" (35). Indeed, the regular order in which Ferguson's four lives unfold places them in constant dialogue with one another, revealing their interconnectedness and ultimately affecting the readers's perception of their totality.

The following analysis will attempt to outline a reader's experience of *4 3 2 1*, taking into account the order in which the narrative material is presented and its possible effects on readerly inferences. Particular attention will be devoted to the narrative techniques employed to convey a lifelike account of Ferguson's four lives, but also to the ways in which the novel often metareferentially draws attention to its own artificiality. Further aspects to be explored will include the cognitive and emotional response to Ferguson's multiple identities invited by the text and the hypotheses that can be made, based on textual clues, to naturalize the plurality of incompatible versions of the events. The problems posed by the ending, with its retrospective revelation that one version of Ferguson has authored the other three, will then be analyzed in detail, with a focus on the peculiar narrator behind the entire narrative. Finally, some observations will be presented on the themes at the core of the novel, with an emphasis on the concept of identity emerging from it and the tight link between epistemological and ontological issues inherent in the presentation of a life reinvented over and over again.

2.2 The Common Stem: Truth and Fiction

“According to family legend, Ferguson’s grandfather departed on foot from his native city of Minsk” (4 3 2 1 1): this is how 4 3 2 1 begins and the relevance of these very first words should not be overlooked. By starting with the phrase “According to family legend,” the book invites readers to acknowledge that what will follow is not to be regarded as incontrovertibly true; rather, it will have a fantastic quality to it. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the word “legend” to the word “family” signals the significance of this potentially fictional story to the self-definition of a group: as a sort of foundation myth, the story about to be told counts as true, regardless of its possible historical inaccuracy. From its very beginning, 4 3 2 1 thus emphasizes the relevance of fiction, as opposed to factual truth, to a life story. Whose family is referred to is immediately made clear: this is Ferguson’s story and, indeed, the first character to be mentioned is not introduced by his own name, but rather by way of his relationship to the deictic center of the novel, as “Ferguson’s grandfather.” Before even learning about Ferguson’s birth, readers are, therefore, already positioned inside his perspective.

Reminders of these two aspects—namely, on the one hand, the possibly fictional, or at least inaccurate, nature of the account and, on the other, the narrative adherence to Ferguson’s viewpoint—are frequent throughout Chapter 1.0. Hence, the story of the Russian Jew Isaac Reznikoff, starting his new life in New York at the dawn of the twentieth century with a new name, Ichabod Ferguson, as the result of a linguistic misunderstanding with an immigration official, of his encounter with Fanny Grossman, and of the family originating from that encounter, is punctuated by remarks such as “No photographs survive of him, but *by all accounts* he was a large man” (4 3 2 1 2, emphasis mine); “Ferguson was not yet two when his grandmother died, which meant that he retained no conscious memories of her, but *according to family legend* Fanny was a difficult and erratic woman” (4 3 2 1 3, emphasis mine); “*No one knew* where she had been born, *but word was* that he had landed in New York as a fourteen-year-old orphan” (4 3 2 1 3, emphasis mine); and “When Ferguson was eighteen, his mother passed on one of Millie’s stories to him, which was presented as no more than a *rumor*, a piece of *unsubstantiated conjecture* that *might have been true*—and then again, *might not*” (4 3 2 1 3, emphasis mine). This last sentence further clarifies the source of the account: Reznikoff’s

immigrant adventure was narrated by Rose to her son when he was eighteen years old. Therefore, as becomes clearer reading on, adult Ferguson turns out to be the focalizer of this first stretch of narrative.

As the story proceeds to narrate the encounter of Ferguson's parents and the early days of their marriage, readers are repeatedly alerted both to its dubious accuracy and to the presence of Ferguson's mind filtering the raw material gathered from his family. Hence, we learn that what Ferguson knows about his father's childhood comes "[f]rom offhand remarks that occasionally crossed his father's lips" (4 3 2 I 4), that tales about Ferguson's maternal grandparents originate in "what had been passed down to Rose" (4 3 2 I 6) and what she "later confessed to her son" (4 3 2 I 6-7), and that some details have been omitted from the story as it was passed on, while others have been reconstructed with some effort, as in "Years later, when Rose told her son about the events of that night, she left out the name of the restaurant where she and Stanley met for dinner. Nevertheless, *if memory hadn't failed him*, Ferguson *believed* it was somewhere in midtown Manhattan, East Side or West Side *unknown*" (4 3 2 I 11, emphasis mine).

As the account delves into Rose's considerations on Stanley Ferguson's qualities and downsides as a potential husband, the focalization smoothly shifts from Ferguson's perspective to his mother's. A few pages later, however, it shifts again to include a curious authorial remark on Ferguson's parents' wedding, namely

The outcome, of course, was written long ago. Not only does it appear as an entry in the all-inclusive, authorized edition of *The Book of Terrestrial Life*, but it can also be found in the Manhattan Hall of Records, where the ledger informs us that Rose Adler and Stanley Ferguson were married on April 6, 1944, exactly two months before the Allied invasion of Normandy. (4 3 2 I 16)

Throughout the novel, similar omniscient asides will comprise further allusions to *The Book of Terrestrial Life*, as well as to the mysterious gods who seem to have authored it. As Auster has explained in an interview, these elements are meant to endow the narrative with an epic, yet playful, quality, revealing that "the delight in storytelling [...] is part of what the book is about. And the unleashing of narrative energy" ("In the Green Chair"). The author further comments,

That's why the book begins, "According to family legend..." Those are the first words of the novel. As if we're in another world. That's why there are the frequent references to "the gods" with a small 'g'. That's why I made up this ridiculous but I think amusing— [...] "The Book of Terrestrial Life" in which every single thing that ever happened in the history of humanity is recorded. So we're dealing with an older form of storytelling than 19th or 20th or 21st century novels. Even though it shares something with all those centuries as well. (Auster, "In the Green Chair")

Thus, the negotiation between truth and fiction—a theme already implicit in the fable-like account of Isaac Reznikoff's realistic immigrant experience—is reflected in the course of the novel in its elusive narrative perspective, oscillating between an internal focalization, mimetically representing Ferguson's thoughts, and sudden instances of omniscience acknowledging a supernatural dimension. Moreover, the structural arrangement itself evidently thematizes the close interrelatedness of facts and imagination in a life story, foregrounding the tension between a realistic mode and a kind of narration which playfully draws attention to its own fictionality. As Ferguson's lives will be realistically told and yet impossible in their mutual incompatibility, readers will be constantly invited to wonder whether the impossibility of the protagonist's multifaceted existence actually makes it less (or more) "true."

It should be specified that "realism" is intended here in the sense termed by Ryan "[t]he illusionist conception," according to which "[a] text is realistic when it creates a credible, seemingly autonomous and language-independent reality, when the style of depiction captures an aura of presence, when the reader is imaginatively part of the textual world and senses that there is more to this world than what the text displays of it" (*Narrative* 158). Hence, Ryan observes that a storyworld feels most real when it allows for a good measure of immersion, regardless of the unnaturalness of the narrative techniques employed to represent it (cf. *Narrative* 157-62). In fact, even in the traditional nineteenth century novels commonly regarded as typically realistic, "[t]he 'reality effect' [...] is achieved by the least natural, most ostentatiously fictional of narrative techniques—omniscient narration, free indirect discourse, and variable

focalization” (Ryan, *Narrative* 159).¹⁰ It is the readers’ familiarity with these techniques, which Jan Alber describes as “conventionalized types of antirealism” (*Unnatural Narrative* 103), that confers them the power to conjure up lifelike characters and storyworlds.

Returning to the origin story of Chapter 1.0, it should be finally observed that, despite the numerous clues of its imaginative quality and potential inaccuracy, this is also the only section in the book which is not multiplied in subsequent variations, thus representing a single and apparently stable point of departure for the branching of Ferguson’s multiple lives. As no alternative versions to it are provided, readers can easily consider this first chapter as actual within the textual system of *4 3 2 1*. As will be shown, however, the ending of the novel will require them to modify this initial inference, as the narrative will circle back to its beginning to further undermine its already dubious actuality.

2.3 Introducing the Four Fergusons

An omniscient comment on Archibald Isaac Ferguson’s birth closes Chapter 1.0, stating that “for several seconds after he emerged from his mother’s body, he was the youngest human being on the face of the earth” (*4 3 2 1* 29). As they turn the page, readers begin their journey through the protagonist’s four lives. The transition from the common stem to the first narrative branch is marked by a new shift in narrative perspective, as the beginning of Chapter 1.1 makes it immediately clear that the narration is now focalized through little Ferguson, presenting his thoughts and viewpoint through free indirect discourse: “His mother’s name was Rose, and when he was big enough to tie his shoes and stop wetting the bed, he was going to marry her” (*4 3 2 1* 31). Incidentally, this mode of representation of the protagonist’s consciousness can remind of the opening pages of James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, one of the most famous examples of narrative exploiting the expressive potential of FID. Whether intentional or not, this echo of Joyce’s *Künstlerroman* is definitely suitable to introduce the readers to the character of Ferguson, who will pursue literary ambitions in all versions of his life, whether as a reporter and translator of French poetry, a film critic and memoirist, or a fiction writer. Similarly to little

¹⁰ Dorrit Cohn refers to “the transparency of fictional minds” as the “paradox [...] at the very heart of narrative realism” (7).

Stephen Daedalus, Ferguson-1 observes the world around him and the people closest to him, starting with his parents, shows a preference for his mother over his father, and displays an early, instinctive interest in language. Hence, words are repeatedly commented upon as Archie delights in their sound, punctuating the chapter with remarks such as “Such a funny word: *adios*” (4 3 2 1 32); “Old Gold. Such a good-sounding name” (4 3 2 1 33); “(another excellent word),” referring to “a game called Parcheesi” (4 3 2 1 34); “He liked the word *tripod*, which made him think of peas, his favorite vegetable, as in the expression *two peas in a pod*” (4 3 2 1 41); and again “What a good-sounding name that was, Ferguson said to himself, Dusty Rhodes, which was almost like calling someone Wet Sidewalks or Snowy Streets” (4 3 2 1 44).

Internal focalization through Archie’s perspective remains consistent almost throughout this first chapter. Besides the significant use of free indirect discourse, some instances of “psycho-narration” (Cohn 21-57) are also present, making the narrator’s voice more overt, as in “Ferguson was not yet five years old, but he already understood that the world consisted of two realms, the visible and the invisible, and that the things he couldn’t see were often more real than the things he could” (4 3 2 1 36). Only in the last sentence of the chapter is the internal focalization apparently disrupted, as the narrator situates the adversities jeopardizing the Fergusons’ happiness within a universal dimension, stating that “before anyone could comprehend how swiftly the gods accomplished their work when they had nothing better to do, the Ferguson clan had been blown to bits” (4 3 2 1 48).

This representation of the protagonist’s consciousness, involving a pervasive use of free indirect discourse, can interestingly be analyzed with regard to its possible effects on the reader’s aesthetic illusion. As Ryan implicitly suggests, FID can reasonably be considered as the most immersive among the modes of speech or thought representation (cf. *Narrative* 134-5). In this mode, the readers’ “transportation” into the storyworld, to use the metaphor originally proposed by Richard Gerrig, is enacted by situating them in a stable middle position between “the perspective of the characters” (Ryan, *Narrative* 134) and “the point of view of the narrative act” (Ryan, *Narrative* 134). Indeed, by enabling readers to perceive the storyworld vividly as filtered through little Ferguson’s mind and senses, Chapter 1.1 of 4 3 2 1 invites a high degree of aesthetic illusion. It can further be noted that this immersive experience is also fostered by the

realistic—in the sense already specified above—mode of the narration. If the story feels “real” despite the intrinsic unnaturalness of the techniques of thought representation employed to convey Archie’s perspective, this is because the power of such devices to trigger a sense of “emotional immersion” (Ryan, *Narrative* 148-57, 263 *passim*) lies precisely in their unnaturalness, since both “[n]arratorial omniscience and the techniques of internal focalization allow a greater intimacy with the mental life of fictional characters than with the thoughts or emotions of real-life individuals” (Ryan, *Narrative* 149).

The possible correlation between narrative situation and the illusionistic power of the represented storyworld, particularly in emotional terms, might also invite some considerations on narrative empathy. It should be specified that no direct causal link between narrative technique and effect on the reader can be established with absolute certainty, as responses to a narrative text are always conditioned by a wide number of textual, as well as extra-textual, factors (cf. Van Lissa et al. 59-60). Nonetheless, as noted by Suzanne Keen, “[a] commonplace of narrative theory suggests that an internal perspective best promotes character identification and readers’ empathy” (*Empathy* 96). This can be interesting with reference to the “primacy effect” (Perry 53-4) generated by a novel whose main character is introduced multiple times. Because the first presentation of a character generally tends to have a lasting influence on readers as the narrative unfolds (cf. Perry 41), by giving readers access to little Archie’s mind from the beginning of his first life, *4 3 2 1* invites them to establish a tight emotional link with him that is likely to persist throughout subsequent developments and, possibly, parallel lives.

After the narrative has advanced until Ferguson is nine years old in Chapter 1.1, the first sentence of Chapter 1.2 takes readers back in time: “When Ferguson was six, his mother told the story of how she had nearly lost him” (*4 3 2 1* 49). Despite serving as a clue that a new version of Ferguson’s life is beginning to be told, this temporal indication can easily be mistaken for an instance of analepsis, merely disrupting chronological linearity on the discourse level of the narrative. Thus, the transition from one version of the story to the next can initially pass unnoticed, as no contradiction to the events presented in Chapter 1.1 arises in Chapter 1.2 until the end of its second page. While it is true that the summary on the inside flap of the novel should ideally prepare readers for its multiple realities, no clear indication as to when the first transition

from one world to the next will occur is inferable *a priori* from the chapter numbering. Rather, readers will only learn how the numbers relate to the alternate unfolding of the four parallel storylines as they read on.

The first clear indication that the world of Chapter 1.2 is not the same as that represented in Chapter 1.1, and therefore that the previously activated cognitive frames should now be replaced with new ones, is to be found in an allusion to the house the Fergusons have moved to after leaving Newark, which, in this second variant of the story, is located in West Orange instead of the previously mentioned Montclair. However, it can be argued that only an attentive reader will spot this first inconsistency. For an “off-guard” reader it can take some time to start registering the incongruities, which initially concern minor details, such as the fact that the Fergusons’ housekeeper is now called Wanda instead of Cassie, that Aunt Mildred “still wasn’t married to anyone” (4 3 2 1 61) whereas in the previous chapter she had “married Henry Ross” (4 3 2 1 38), or that Ferguson’s mother drives a “red, two-door Pontiac” (4 3 2 1 62) instead of a “green Chevrolet” (4 3 2 1 32). As Perry remarks,

When the reader expects the appearance of specific material at a given point in a text, there is, at first, a tendency to assimilate what has actually appeared to what had been expected, to make it conform as much as possible to the expectation. When this proves impossible, and the expectation is not fulfilled, there is a sharp confrontation between the expected and the actual [...] Unfulfilled expectations are essential for the production of new information. (52)

Hence, the inconsistencies between Chapter 1.2 and 1.1 become noticeable as they accumulate, culminating in a variation of the key event shattering the Fergusons’ economical security: while in the first version the appliance store set up by Ferguson’s father and uncles is burglarized by Uncle Arnold, in this parallel reality 3 Brothers Home World burns down. As readers eventually rationalize the two incompatible accounts of Ferguson’s early life as representing alternative realities, they can also start expecting similar inconsistencies to occur in the following chapters. Thus, 4 3 2 1 gradually habituates readers to its contradictions, enabling them to recognize and anticipate how its structure will unfold.

By the time they approach the beginning of Chapter 1.3, readers will probably have learned the rules of the narrative game. Only a few lines into it, it is made clear that this chapter starts in 1952 and Ferguson is, once again, five years old. This time round, however, the protagonist lives in Millburn and, significantly, “the disaster that struck on November 3, 1954, which expelled him from his youthful Eden and turned his life into an entirely different life” (4 3 2 1 67) is represented in this version by Stanley Ferguson’s accidental death in a fire of 3 Brothers Home World organized by Uncle Lew, who planned to use the insurance money to repay his debts. As this chapter ends, the story begins over again for the fourth time, and new geographical differences from the previous versions are revealed at the onset of Chapter 1.4, which reads, “First, there was the apartment in Newark, about which he remembered nothing, and then there was the house in Maplewood that his parents bought when he was three, and now, six years later, they were moving again, to a much larger house on the other side of town” (4 3 2 1 83). In this fourth version of the story, Stanley Ferguson has sold off 3 Brothers Home World to set up a larger business, thus enabling his family to live in affluence.

As far as the narrative situation is concerned, free indirect discourse and psycho-narration continue to be privileged ways to represent the protagonist’s consciousness throughout Chapter 1.2. Thus, even when the narrator’s voice diverges from the focalizer’s consciousness, such as in the aside “What a perplexing thing to throw at a boy who hadn't even finished kindergarten,” commenting on Rose’s question to her injured son “*Are you angry at yourself, Archie, or angry at the tree?*” Ferguson’s perspective immediately takes over again: “Angry? Why should he be angry at anything? Why couldn’t he just feel sad?” (4 3 2 1 50). The narrator’s voice becomes more frequently overt in Chapter 1.3, which includes statements such as “It would be years before Ferguson understood the full impact of this death on his family, for he was too young at the time to grasp anything but the ultimate effect it had on him, which wasn’t made manifest until he was seven and a half” (4 3 2 1 66), and details the events leading to Archie’s father’s death in the fire of his store by listing some “[a]mong the many things Ferguson knew nothing about prior to that fateful moment” (4 3 2 1 67). As these are presented, Stanley’s perspective is, in turn, foregrounded. Similarly, Chapter 1.4 is mainly focalized through Archie, but also comprises a number of authorial statements, such as the metareferential reminder that “at this point in the

story Ferguson was nine” (4 3 2 1 94) or the comment on Noah’s mischievous smile at Camp Paradise, which “lodged itself in Ferguson’s memory and was never lost, recalled again and again as he passed from childhood to adolescence and into his adulthood” (4 3 2 1 102). Despite this flexibility in narrative perspective and occasional foregrounding of the narrator’s voice, it can be observed that internal focalization is only rarely abandoned. Thus, on the whole, the narrative techniques employed in all four introductions to Ferguson contribute to giving readers a privileged access to the protagonist’s—and, at times, his parents’—inner life, never inviting a more detached experience and, thus, potentially laying the basis for their emotional involvement with Ferguson in all four versions of his life.

2.4 Recentering in the Four Worlds

By presenting multiple versions of the same story, *4 3 2 1* repeatedly requires readers to recenter from one fictional world into the next. Remarkably, however, all four realities allow for an equally high degree of aesthetic illusion. Together with the realistic presentation of the events and the use of an internal focalization conveying a lifelike impression of the protagonist’s consciousness, chapter length can be intuitively regarded as a further factor contributing to the immersive potential of each alternate plotline, since, as Marie-Laure Ryan observes, “[t]he power of texts with impossible worlds to create aesthetic illusion depends on how long the imagination can dwell in one of their partial worlds” (“Impossible” 142). *4 3 2 1* does not jostle readers in and out of conflicting scenarios; rather it provides them with long stretches of narrative vividly detailing each alternate world, so that “the imagination has ample time to make itself at home in each version” (Ryan, “Impossible” 142). Fictional recentering is, therefore, facilitated by the equal degree of immersivity of each of Ferguson’s lives, as well as automatized by their regular alternation.

Despite our instinctive tendency to search for a single actual world within the textual universe (cf. Ryan, “Parallel” 652), it can be argued that *4 3 2 1* makes it possible to background this cognitive necessity as the narrative progresses. Precisely because no explicit textual clue is offered that any of the four represented worlds should be regarded as “less actual” than the others, but rather they are all presented as equally “real,” readers are likely to suspend their

efforts to assess an ontological hierarchy and, instead, search for a naturalizing justification for the unnatural coexistence of four alternative textual actual worlds. This is also because, despite their logical incompatibility, the four versions of the story never explicitly negate each other, at least until the final chapter, when the fourth one is revealed to be the only actual one. Before the metafictional ending, however, no diegetic interference occurs between the parallel branches, which follow separate courses. Being presented as unaware of their plurality, the characters cannot argue for or against the actuality of any of the dimensions they simultaneously inhabit. Besides, not even in its omniscient remarks does the narrator's voice acknowledge the coexistence of multiple scenarios. Readers are not, therefore, required to "side with" one version of the story against the others, but rather seem to be encouraged to experience them all as "real." As realism is preserved on the level of the separate branches, since no character is able to trespass their boundaries, so is the aesthetic illusion, which, however, remains distinctly local, as the contradictions between the four versions of Ferguson's story prevent readers from projecting a unified world out of them. With each recentering, a new immersive experience begins, since, as noted by Ryan, it is only possible for the imagination to inhabit one world at a time (cf. "Impossible" 142).

It can be observed that, as they get used to the mechanism propelling the novel onwards and progress from one chapter to the next driven by a desire to know more about each Ferguson, readers might experience a similar kind of suspense to that triggered by a multi-plot novel, in which each plotline is alternately suspended to advance the others. Significantly, however, while in a traditional multi-plot narrative all the plotlines serve as complementary parts of a coherent fabula and are, therefore, due to intersect at some point, Ferguson's four lives represent incompatible, and thus alternative, fabulae.¹¹ Nonetheless, readers are likely to expect, if not some kind of intersection between the parallel branches within the diegetic dimension, at least an extradiegetic acknowledgement of their plurality. Indeed, as a reviewer has noticed, "[w]e grasp the logic of Auster's system before too long, but its *purpose* is a mystery that carries us to the end of the gargantuan novel" (Kiesling, para. 5). Therefore, a central aspect in the reading experience

¹¹ In his discussion of unnatural narrative sequences, Brian Richardson proposes the notion of a "multilinear fabula," namely "a fabula with one or numerous forkings leading to different possible chains of events" ("Unnatural Stories and Sequences" 28).

of *4 3 2 1* seems to be an increasing sense of “metasuspense” (Ryan, *Narrative* 145), as we cannot help but wonder how the implied author will eventually justify the game unblinkingly sustained for so many pages.

2.5 Ferguson’s Identity and Consciousness

As readers recenter into each of the four worlds of *4 3 2 1*, they are very likely to perceive the protagonist’s identity as cognitively problematic. A fundamental inferential activity we enact as we engage with a narrative is the construction of continuous fictional minds out of the discrete information provided by the text about its characters (cf. Palmer 170-204). This process is triggered every time a character is introduced for the first time. After the first reference, readers gather and store the subsequent information attached to a certain individual throughout the narrative, building what Alan Palmer terms a “continuing-consciousness frame” (175-83). Thus, “the reader collects together all of the isolated references to a specific proper name in a particular text and constructs a consciousness that continues in the spaces between the various mentions of a character” (Palmer 176). Given the relevance of characters’ proper names to their individuation, a question inevitably arising when dealing with a narrative like *4 3 2 1* is: how do readers respond to a text dissuading them from applying a continuing-consciousness frame to its main character? In other words, what cognitive processes do readers activate when confronted with four versions of Archibald Isaac Ferguson?

Palmer acknowledges that “the reader assumes that the character’s consciousness will continue between mentions of them in the text unless informed otherwise” (201) and, indeed, the inconsistencies between the parallel realities presented in *4 3 2 1* appear to ward off the possibility of regarding their protagonist’s consciousness as continuous with reference to the global level of the novel. Instead, it is necessary to build four distinct continuing-consciousness frames for the four Fergusons, as if they were different characters, making it possible to link the references specific to each version of the protagonist across the chapters pertaining to each world. Every time readers recenter from one world into the next, they should, therefore, select the correct frame among the four previously constructed, discarding the inferences made about the

other Fergusons. Yet, interestingly, keeping the inferences referring to each of the protagonist's four embodiments strictly separate is unlikely to be an easy task.

As Perry observes, the order of presentation always affects the readers' perception of a text as a whole (cf. 35). Thus, even when a narrative segment is interrupted by the introduction of extraneous material, this material will affect the reader's perception of what follows in spite of its being unrelated to it. In Perry's words,

material pertaining to one of the characters may come at the beginning of the text; then the text turns to another character or even another plot-line, and only later does it return to the first character. In between its two presentations, *extraneous* material has apparently been introduced. But only apparently. In a literary work no material is ever really extraneous [...] The reader will integrate such material by means of parallelism and contrast, motivate the transitions, and pursue the process of linking and subordinating without interruption. (58)

This claim becomes even more persuasive if we apply it to a narrative in which the "extraneous" material alternately interrupting each plotline does not simply concern a different character from the one featured in the previous section, but rather an alternative version of the same character. It can, therefore, be argued that, even if readers are rationally aware that the four Fergusons embody separate consciousnesses, their attitude towards each of them will inevitably be influenced, to some degree, also by the inferences they make about the other three.

As an evident example of how *4 3 2 1* exploits the potential to produce new meanings inherent in the juxtaposition of incompatible narrative segments, consider the following passage from Chapter 7.1:

[Ferguson] went into the college bookstore at the beginning of the first semester and stole the astronomy textbook, he who had never stolen anything in his life, who had worked at Book World during the summer after his freshman year and had caught six or seven students in the act of stealing books and had thrown them out of the store, now he was a book thief himself, slipping a ten-pound hardcover under his jacket and calmly walking toward the exit and out into the sunshine of Indian summer, now he was doing things he never would have done in the past, behaving as if *he were no longer himself*, but then again, perhaps this was the person he had

become now, for the truth was that he didn't feel guilty about pinching the book—he didn't feel anything about it at all. (4 3 2 I 771, emphasis in the original)

This episode, and especially Ferguson-1's claim that, in stealing a book, he is "behaving as if *he were no longer himself*," will inevitably prompt a comparison with Chapter 4.3, in which Ferguson-3 is depicted as he steals and resells books in order to earn the necessary money to pay a prostitute:

twice during those fifteen months Ferguson was willing to break the law by entering bookstores on the Upper West Side with a woolen coat over his multipocketed winter jacket and fill the pockets of both coat and jacket with paperback books, which he then marked up with numerous dog-ears and underlinings and sold to a used bookstore across the street from Columbia at one-fourth the cover price, stealing and selling dozens of classic novels in order to earn the extra money he needed to have more sex with Julie. (4 3 2 I 441)

Even if no narrative continuity is implied between the two passages (and consciousnesses), the latter depiction of Ferguson will predictably affect the readers' interpretation of the former. Hence, while the two frames referring to Ferguson-1 and Ferguson-3 are to be kept separate to preserve the continuity of each consciousness—otherwise Ferguson-1's consideration that he "had never stolen anything in his life" would be incongruous—the readers' previous knowledge of Ferguson-3 will also integrate with the new information about Ferguson-1. After all, as Ferguson-1 himself acknowledges, circumstances can change people, making them behave differently from how they usually would, resulting in a dissociation between one's projection of oneself and one's actual actions. It does not seem, therefore, so unnatural that the same person might be both an unrepentant book thief and, at the same time, a dutiful student considering his one-time rebellious act reprehensible.

The difficulty in considering the four versions of the protagonist as separate characters originates, quite intuitively, from their sharing the same name.¹² In addition to this pivotal detail,

¹² According to Samuel Kripke, a proper name acts as a rigid designator, meaning that it refers to the same individual in all possible worlds, regardless of the properties attached to him or her in each one of them, and thus enables his or her "transworld identity." Instead, David Lewis and his supporters would talk of a "counterpart relation" between the four Fergusons inhabiting different worlds.

however, readers can also recognize a stable core to the protagonist's self, despite the different circumstances he simultaneously inhabits. As Auster has remarked,

These boys are all genetically the same person. But the circumstances of their childhoods are all different. Sometimes subtly different, sometimes markedly different. After all, they have the same parents. And I have to say that the mother Rose is going to be Rose no matter what, whatever her circumstances. And so they're all going to develop in a certain way. But within that there are graded nuances of difference. That was the territory I wanted to explore rather than radically different outcomes. So they all gravitate toward writing in one way or another. But as they grew up and developed, their personalities became altogether distinct—four absolutely separate characters [...] (“In the Green Chair”)

Indeed, the different Fergusons are almost indistinguishable as children, their personalities only diverging as they grow up. Nonetheless, as they develop into young adulthood (with the exception of number 2, who dies at age thirteen), they all continue to display a number of similar attitudes and interests, first and foremost a deep love for language and a talent for writing, leading each of them to pursue a literary career, but also an invariable attachment to certain persons, among whom Amy Schneiderman stands out as a powerful influence on the protagonist, whether as a lover, cousin, or step-sister. As the recurrent parallels between the four versions can result in a blurring of the boundaries that should keep them ontologically separate—also due to the possible confusion arising between them—readers may conflate inferences pertaining to each reality into a single, though fuzzy, image of their central character. Hence, although on the one hand the novel enables readers to individuate each Ferguson's distinct personality and regard the four as separate characters, on the other, a sense of their sameness will almost inevitably persist throughout. If this statement sounds contradictory, it is because the text itself appears to invite a contradictory experience of its protagonist. In order to account for this experience, it seems, therefore, apt to endorse Maria Mäkelä's claim that “a crucial reading strategy is the simultaneous maintenance of contradictory frames” (145). Indeed, *4 3 2 1* appears to invite readers to activate, along with the four separate frames necessary to make sense of each version of its main character, also a “transworld” frame encompassing all of them, as inferences concerning each Ferguson add

up to produce a mental representation of a single complex and multifaceted (though discontinuous) consciousness.

The tension between the singularity and multiplicity of each person's identity represents a central theme in *4 3 2 1*. It is precisely by fostering this contradictory, yet engaging and, for the most part, immersive, experience of its main character that the novel conveys its message most effectively. While the notion of identity emerging from *4 3 2 1* will be explored later on, it will suffice for now to acknowledge, as suggested by Mäkelä, "the persistent uncanniness resulting from two opposite impulses" (146) and observe how, by fostering this dissonant experience, the novel reinforces its central concept, enabling us to share the protagonist's own sense "that there seemed to be several of him, that he wasn't just one person but a collection of contradictory selves" (*4 3 2 1* 241).

Because the readers' experience of the four Fergusons mirrors to some degree each Ferguson's perception of himself as multiple, it might also be suggested that the unnaturalness of the textual arrangement in *4 3 2 1* works together with the use of an internally focalized perspective to support, rather than discourage, an empathetic attitude towards its protagonist. Like the unnatural, though conventionalized, representation of Archie's thoughts, the juxtaposition of multiple worlds in *4 3 2 1* ultimately provides readers with an enhanced representation of his mind and life, comprising aspects which, in our actual world, would remain inaccessible. By the end of the book, we know Ferguson so well precisely because we have been given the chance to access his mind in four possible worlds, thus seeing how he would have behaved in a number of different situations, how different incidents would have affected his character, and how he would have evolved within different environments. By enabling readers both to participate in each Ferguson's inner life, thus feeling personally involved in his thoughts and feelings, and at the same time to occupy a superior epistemological position, as they learn about all four parallel realities he inhabits, the novel therefore complicates, but possibly also deepens, their emotional response to the main character.

The significance of empathy to a writer's and, possibly, reader's experience of *4 3 2 1* is also thematized in the last pages of the novel. As Ferguson-4 is eventually revealed to have invented the other three versions of his life, his feelings towards his imagined counterparts are

described as profoundly empathetic. Thus, for the fictional author, “the essential thing was to love those other boys as if they were real, to love them as much as he loved himself as much as he had loved the boy who had dropped dead before his eyes on a hot summer afternoon in 1961” (4321863). The three alternate Fergusons could be killed “only after he had learned to love them as if they were real, only after the thought of seeing them die had become unbearable to him” (4321863). While love does not necessarily presuppose empathy with its object, the fourth Ferguson’s perception of his own characters as real people, so vivid as to make their pain intolerable to him, appears to mirror the empathetic feelings acknowledged by many real-world fiction writers towards their characters (cf. Keen, *Empathy* 123-31). Furthermore, the fictional author’s feelings can also be seen as reflecting the emotional involvement with the four Fergusons that the novel invites on the readers’ part.

2.6 Naturalizing the Impossible Multiplicity: Frame Enrichment and Provisional Hypotheses

2.6.1 The Epic Dimension as a Possible Unifying Narrative

Despite the high degree of aesthetic illusion invited by each of the four versions of the story, throughout the novel their incompatibility remains a cognitive challenge for readers striving to naturalize their juxtaposition according to real-world frames. As observed above, since the narrative progresses from one version of Ferguson’s life to the next without offering explicit clues that might enable the assessment of an ontological hierarchy, cognitive strategies are likely to be devised to make sense of the impossible plurality of apparently actual worlds belonging to the same textual system. This naturalization can be enacted through a process of “frame enrichment” (Alber, “Impossible Storyworlds” 82-83, 91), making it possible to envisage a universe comprising parallel realities. By stretching their cognitive frames, readers can move beyond the natural assumption, based on their real-world experience, that a system must be centered around a single actual world (cf. Ryan, “Parallel” 652) and make a cognitive effort to acknowledge a fictional multiplication of actual worlds. Nonetheless, this multiplication can hardly be accepted without expecting a satisfactory explanation for its occurrence. As the reading of a narrative text implies a constant activity of meaning making, readers will tend to make a

series of provisional hypotheses to justify the impossibility of Ferguson's four lives, pending a confirmation on the part of the text.

In this respect, some textual elements can be highlighted that might suggest the presence, in *4 3 2 1*, of an overarching narrative, endowing Ferguson's parallel existences with some degree of unity despite their fragmentation. As mentioned above, while readers experience the four alternate worlds for a good part through each Ferguson's "human" perspective, which is realistically limited to the reality he inhabits, they are also frequently made aware of a "super-human" realm. Hence, mentions of the gods observing each of Ferguson's lives from above, as well as of a so-called *Book of Terrestrial Life*, in which records are kept of all the people inhabiting planet Earth—and therefore, presumably, of all four Fergusons—occasionally disrupt the prevalent realistic mode of the narration and might, consequently, alert readers to the possibility of a supernatural explanation for the ontological oddities presented by the text.

This epic dimension is frequently disclosed in sudden omniscient intromissions. Both the descriptions of Ferguson-2's and Ferguson-3's deaths, for instance, are followed by remarks curiously pointing to the existence of an all-encompassing superior design. Thus, when at the end of Chapter 2.2 the tree under which Ferguson-2 is repairing from a storm is struck by a lightning bolt and the boy is killed by a falling branch, the scene closes with the authorial remark that "from one end of the earth to the other, the gods were silent" (*4 3 2 1* 184). As for Ferguson-3, in Chapter 6.3 readers are proleptically informed that "[m]ercifully he was not aware of the cruel plan the gods had devised for him. Mercifully, he did not know he was destined to have such a brief entry in *The Book of Terrestrial Life*, and therefore he went on living as if there were thousands of tomorrows in front of him rather than just three hundred and four" (*4 3 2 1* 686). Then, when the protagonist is run over by a car in London, the chapter ends with a similar omniscient statement: "The gods looked down from their mountain and shrugged" (*4 3 2 1* 709).

Interestingly, however, the existence of a supernatural dimension is not only acknowledged in instances of narrational omniscience, but also by the characters themselves. Thus, for example, Ferguson-1 "sometimes wondered if he hadn't pulled a fast one on the author of *The Book of Terrestrial Life*, who was turning the pages too quickly that year and had

somehow left the page for those months blank” (4 3 2 I 528), whereas Ferguson-3, while reading *The Odyssey*, persuades himself that

There never had been and never would be a single God, but there were gods, many gods from many and all parts of the world, among them the greek gods who lived on Mount Olympus, Athena, Zeus, Apollo, and the various others who had gamboled their way through the first two hundred and ninety-five pages of *The Odyssey*, and what the gods enjoyed more than anything else was meddling in the affairs of men. (4 3 2 I 534)

While considerations on the God of monotheism are equally frequent throughout the novel, the characters of 4 3 2 I also seem to be strangely aware, just like the characters of epics, of a multiplicity of supernatural beings driving their fate. Just to give some further examples among the many to be found throughout the book, in Chapter 1.0 the narrative already informs us that “the gods were irrational, Rose decided, and they bestowed their gifts on us when and where they would” (4 3 2 I 23), whereas in Chapter 2.1 Ferguson is said to appreciate the Sundays spent with his parents, as “that one day a week helped maintain the illusion that the gods could be merciful when they chose to be” (4 3 2 I 110). In Chapter 5.1, reasoning on Amy’s momentary lack of self-confidence, the protagonist comes to the conclusion that “it was more difficult to be a woman than a man, and if he should ever forget that, he told himself, then the gods should come down from their mountain and pluck out the eyes from his head” (4 3 2 I 526). Similarly, as Ferguson-3 learns that the first name of his publisher and to-be lover Aubrey Hull means “*The ruler of the elves*” (4 3 2 I 674, emphasis in the original) and finds it remarkably suitable for his diminutive person, his amazement is conveyed as follows: “It was as if the gods had walked into Aubrey’s house the night before he was born and had instructed his parents on the name they should give their child, and now that Ferguson’s head was filing up [sic] with images of elves and gods, he looked at his publisher’s small, handsome face and wondered if he wasn’t sitting in the presence of a mythical being” (4 3 2 I 674).

Although these passages might support readerly expectations for a final supernatural justification for the coexistence of alternate realities, the solution to the enigma of Ferguson’s four lives will actually be revealed, in the last chapter of the novel, to be a metafictional, rather

than metaphysical, one. Yet, it is essential to emphasize that this epic mode and the self-referentiality of the narrative enterprise should not be regarded as mutually incompatible, but rather as tightly connected, as made clear by Auster's considerations on "the delight in storytelling" inherent in the "feeling of writing a legend, or some kind of epic" ("In the Green Chair"). Indeed, in *4 3 2 1*, it is precisely when the internal focalization is abandoned to include omniscient remarks opening up to a supernatural dimension that readers are most likely to become aware of the presence of a narrator reveling in the detailing of Ferguson's multiple destinies. Similarly, the characters' acknowledgement of a superior design driving their fate may draw the readers' attention to the fictionality of the arrangement and to the arranger behind it.

2.6.2 Metareferences and the Metafictional Hypothesis

The frequent metareferences to be found throughout *4 3 2 1* can act as further clues of the presence of an organizing instance behind its four realities, suggesting that the coexistence of incompatible scenarios might eventually be justified in metafictional terms. Ryan lists "Metatextualism" among the possible interpretations for narratives presenting multiple realities, representing a case in which "[t]he characters did not lead parallel lives; rather, these lives are different drafts of a novel in progress, different developments that the author is contemplating" ("Parallel" 670). This interpretation is generally encouraged by the presence of metafictional remarks within the text (cf. Ryan, "Parallel" 670). In this regard, it can be observed that *4 3 2 1* often thematizes its own structure and main concept, in a game of *mise en abyme* frequently reminding readers of its fictionality. An example of this strategy can already be found in Chapter 1.1, when Ferguson is described as he plays in his father's shop by switching on seven television sets simultaneously, clearly mirroring the readers' experience of the protagonist's four parallel lives: "Ferguson would run back and forth from one screen to another, then spin around in a circle until he was almost dizzy, gradually moving away from the screens as he spun so that when he stopped he would be in a position to watch all seven of them at once, and seeing so many different things happen at the same time never failed to make him laugh" (*4 3 2 1* 37).

Further possible hints at the structural arrangement of the novel can also be found in the passages describing Ferguson-2's and Ferguson-3's premature deaths. As the thirteen-year-old

boy of version 2 is hit by a branch detaching from a tree, the circumstances of this accident can be seen as metareferentially reflecting the detachment of a narrative branch from the tree structure of the novel, which indeed the death of one of the four Fergusons marks. Ferguson-3's death occurs in an equally meaningful situation, namely as he crosses the road "forgetting that he was in London and that in English towns and cities one was supposed to look to the right and not to the left" (4 3 2 1 708). Besides highlighting the inescapable role of chance as a major driving force in life, this passage also seems to refer to the branching structure of the text through the image of the alternative directions, thus reiterating a metaphor already presented in Ferguson-4's story "*Right Left or Straight Ahead?*" (4 3 2 1 492) as well as in his reflections, in a conversation with his friend Noah, on the human impossibility to "see the main road and the back road at the same time" (4 3 2 1 240).

Furthermore, life is often referred to, through Ferguson's perspective, as a narrative, in a series of remarks apparently threatening a metaleptical trespassing of ontological boundaries. This occurs for example when Ferguson-4 acknowledges the idea that "the narrative of his life demanded he marry [Cecilia Federman] in order to negate the injustice of her brother's early death" (4 3 2 1 477) or when he considers that "the world was made of stories, so many different stories that if they were all gathered together and put into a book, the book would be nine hundred million pages long" (4 3 2 1 499). Similarly, in Chapter 6.4 the protagonist considers that "perhaps another chapter of the story still had to be written before the book could finally be closed" (4 3 2 1 736). Although all these statements simply exploit the common metaphor of the book or story to refer to life, and are therefore always integrated in the narrative context without breaking its realism, at the same time, due to the ontological oddities at the center of 4 3 2 1, readers might be particularly alert to potential metalepses and, therefore, intend such remarks as possible clues that a metafictional solution is in store for them.

In other cases, it is ambiguous whether the references to "the story" of Ferguson's life should be regarded as instances of FID, and therefore attributed to their focalizer, or originate from an omniscient narrator's voice.¹³ Thus, in Chapter 6.1, readers are informed that the people

¹³ Poul Behrendt and Per Krogh Hansen consider this kind of narrative situation, in which it is difficult to assess whether the source of the information is an authorial narrator or a reflector-character, as "the fifth mode of representation," which they term "Ambiguous Discourse" (230).

sharing the apartment with the protagonist and Amy “had no role to play in the story” and that “[e]ven his decision to join the managing board of the *Spectator* did not weigh heavily in the narrative” (4 3 2 I 613). At times, however, an omniscient narrator appears to take the reins of the narration by explicitly referring to it, for instance when, in Chapter 7.1, a series of events is cut short by the remark that “they were all part of Ferguson’s story—but for now attention must be drawn to the war he was fighting against the symbolic figure of Nobodaddy” (4 3 2 I 764). In the last chapter, further metafictional statements make the narrator’s voice particularly overt, such as “In the months that followed, no more central characters in *The Ferguson Story* dropped dead on tennis courts or anywhere else, and no more loves were found or lost or even contemplated” (4 3 2 I 841) or as in the remark that “as the reader will have observed by now, Ferguson did not always act in his own best interests” (4 3 2 I 853), representing the first explicit mention of the reader in the entire novel. As will be shown, the difficulty to establish whether certain utterances, and particularly some of these metareferential hints, should be attributed to an authorial narrator or considered as originating from the protagonist’s perspective will be retrospectively justified (but not entirely resolved) by the final blurring of the boundaries between Ferguson-4’s agency and the heterodiegetic narration.

The frequent parallels between the protagonist’s alternative lives—the first and most evident example being the four different fates befalling 3 Brothers Home World, producing completely different outcomes for the Ferguson family—act as further indications of the fictionality of their arrangement. This artificiality is, in the case just mentioned, also highlighted by an interesting instance of intertextuality between two versions of the story, as the same phrase is used both in Chapter 1.1, to refer to Ferguson’s father’s concerns about the burglary carried out by his brother Arnold, and in Chapter 1.3, to describe Stanley’s death in the fire set up by his other brother, Lew. Thus, while in the former Rose explains the reason for her husband’s preoccupation to her son by telling him that “[i]t was the burglary [...] the burglary was *eating him alive*” (4 3 2 I 47, emphasis in the original), in the latter the narrator describes Ferguson’s father’s death by stating that “the fire was burning its way through the door of the back room, and once it had entered the room, it rushed over to the desk where Stanley was sitting and ate him alive” (4 3 2 I 77). Such parallels can be intended as further evidence of the presence of a

superior narrating agent pulling the narrative strings, and might therefore prompt readers to entertain the possibility of a metafictional solution.

However, the most evidently metanarrative passage before the final pages of the novel occurs in Chapter 5.3. As Ferguson-3 is writing his memoir about the period following his father's death, during which he became an enthusiastic fan of the Laurel and Hardy movies, some passages from his book *How Laurel and Hardy Saved My Life* are either quoted literally or summarized. After a first excerpt in italics, which recounts some events readers are already familiar with from Chapter 1.3, but without bearing textual similarities to the way these have been presented previously, another paragraph from Ferguson-3's autobiography is quoted. Remarkably, readers will recognize this passage, starting with the sentence: "*Little matter that the projector had been bought secondhand—it worked*" (4 3 2 1 546), as almost identical to a paragraph from Chapter 2.3. The only difference between the two excerpts lies, in fact, in the narrative perspective. As Ferguson-3's book is written in the first person, the pronoun "me" substitutes the previously used "him" (4 3 2 1 206) in the sentence: "*And with the films came a whole new set of words for me to master—'sprocket,' for example, which turned out to be a far better word to think about than 'scorched'*" (4 3 2 1 546-7). The narrative then goes on to outline the young writer's revision of his project, leading him to modify the first draft—a detail which may explain the divergence between the first italicized excerpt of Chapter 5.3 and the presentation of the corresponding events in Chapter 1.3—and divide the book into four sections. This partition is accurately described, with textual quotations demarcating where each section of Ferguson-3's memoir begins and ends, making it possible for readers to retrace their content in Chapter 2.3 easily, as the quotations represent *verbatim* repetitions of excerpts from this previous chapter. Nonetheless, the division itself and the titles of the sections are only present in Ferguson-3's memoir. Thus, while on the one hand the text seems to suggest that Ferguson-3 should be considered as the fictional author of some of the chapters relating to the reality he inhabits, the difference in narrative perspective and the absence of the subdivision into sections from Chapter 1.3 and 2.3 indicates that the equation is not so straightforward. Moreover, Ferguson's book is alleged to be 157 pages long, namely much more than the two chapters of 4 3 2 1 covering the same period.

A further passage from the manuscript of *How Laurel and Hardy Saved My Life* is quoted in Chapter 6.3, as Archie is asked by his stepfather Gil to remove a description of his mother, which would throw her in a bad light, from the final version of the book. Remarkably, this is the first time readers have been faced with the information presented in the quoted paragraph, which portrays Rose as she drinks and smokes compulsively after her husband's death. A justification for this divergence from the previously presented material is soon provided, since, as soon as he finishes reading the letter, Ferguson replies to it "promising to delete the offending passage from the book" (4 3 2 I 679). This resolution is clearly stated again even after Ferguson's mother changes her mind and asks her son not to cut the incriminated part: "As he watched the taxi disappear around the corner, Ferguson decided he was going to ignore his mother's wishes and cut the passage from the book" (4 3 2 I 685). While this decision on Ferguson-3's part accounts for the absence of the paragraph from the "official" version of the events presented in Chapters 1.3 and 2.3, thus supporting the hypothesis that Ferguson-3 should be considered as their fictional author, the already mentioned discrepancies between the protagonist's memoir and the previous chapters of 4 3 2 I detailing the events which he will include in his book undermine their textual closeness. Moreover, it should be noticed that the heterodiegesis of Chapters 1.3 and 2.3 represents a narrative situation which conventionally excludes the possibility of unreliability, since, according to Lubomír Doležel, "entities introduced in the discourse of the anonymous third-person narrator are *eo ipso* authenticated as fictional facts" (149). Hence, the realization that these chapters are "underreporting" (Phelan, *Living*) the facts, as they seem to have been subjected to the selection of material operated by the young memoirist, may strike readers as inexplicable, resulting in an odd destabilization of the presumed authority of the third-person narrator.

Although the instances of metareferentiality to be found before the last chapter of 4 3 2 I do not indicate a clear solution to the enigma of Ferguson's four lives, they may serve, nonetheless, to prepare readers for the metafictional ending. As the text occasionally seems on the point of disclosing the fictional game that is being orchestrated, a metafictional hypothesis might be held along with, or as an alternative to, a metaphysical one as a naturalizing justification for its impossible textual universe.

2.6.3 Allegorical Interpretations

A further strategy to naturalize the multiple scenarios of *4 3 2 1* consists in reading the novel “allegorically” (Alber, “Impossible” 82-3, 87-9). While the hypotheses mentioned so far represent inferences concerning the nature of the projected worlds, an allegorical interpretation of their impossible multiplicity can enable readers to make sense of the text by deducing its underlying communicative purposes. These, indeed, are made quite clear as the novel frequently thematizes the ideas serving as its premise.

An example of how *4 3 2 1* often presents its central themes as part of its protagonist’s reflections can be found in Chapter 1.2, when Ferguson wonders how his life could have been different, contemplating a long series of possible scenarios:

Such an interesting thought, Ferguson said to himself: to imagine how things could be different for him even though he was the same. The same boy in a different house with a different tree. The same boy with different parents. The same boy with the same parents who didn’t do the same things they did now. What if his father was still a big-game hunter, for example, and they all lived in Africa? What if his mother was a famous movie actress and they all lived in Hollywood? What if he had a brother or a sister? What if his Great-uncle Archie hadn’t died and his own name wasn’t Archie? What if he had fallen out of the same tree and broken two legs instead of one? What if he had broken both arms and both legs? What if he had been killed? Yes, anything was possible, and just because things happened in one way didn’t mean they could not happen in another. Everything could be different. The world could be the same world, and yet if he hadn’t fallen out of the tree, it would be a different world for him, and if he had fallen out of the tree and hadn’t just broken his leg but had wound up killing himself, not only would the world be different for him, there would be no world for him to live in anymore [...] (*4 3 2 1* 54)

Similarly, in Chapter 2.4 this kind of counterfactual reasoning leads Ferguson to convey a long parable on choice and chance revolving around two roads, concluding that “you’ll never know if you made the right choice or not. You would need to have all the facts before you knew, and the only way to get all the facts is to be in two places at the same time—which is impossible” (*4 3 2 1* 240). This inescapable sense of frustration at not knowing what possible consequences a different choice or a slight turn of the events might have produced is repeatedly foregrounded throughout the novel. At the same time, along with “the torment of being alive in a single

body” (4 3 2 1 863), Ferguson also often acknowledges a persistent sense that his identity is in fact multiple and discontinuous, as if he were composed of “a collection of contradictory selves” (4 3 2 1 241). Thus, just before dying in an accident, the third version of the protagonist realizes that

he had several selves inside him, even many selves, a strong self and a weak self, a thoughtful self and an impulsive self, a generous self and a selfish self, so many different selves that in the end he was as large as everyone or as small as no one, and if that was true for him, then it had to be true for anyone else as well, meaning that everyone was everyone and no one at the same time [...] (4 3 2 1 709)

The alleged universality of this experience is particularly relevant for an allegorical interpretation of the text, as readers are encouraged to recognize how the unnaturalness of Ferguson’s multiplication is meant to mirror the unsettling but familiar impression that identity is, in fact, plural and fragmented. Thus, the impossible juxtaposition of counterfactual scenarios in *4 3 2 1* can easily be rationalized as concretizing widespread reflections on the unrealized possibilities of life, as well as mirroring the relatable sensation of being more than just one person.

It should be observed that, just like the metaphorical references to the protagonist’s life as a story and the parallels frequently occurring between different narrative branches, Ferguson’s meditations on his possible alternative lives and multiple selves are always presented within a realistic context; yet, they also represent metareferential reminders of the multiplicity of dimensions the protagonist inhabits. Indeed, it is when the artificiality of the narrative is temporarily foregrounded through hints at its impossible structure that readers are most evidently invited to recognize its allegorical implications.

A further pivotal theme in *4 3 2 1*, thematized from its beginning and reflected in its very structure, is the equal relevance of truth and fiction to every life story. As the novel invites readers to recognize that roads not taken can be as significant to an individual’s personal narrative as seized opportunities, and that “what might have happened but never did” (4 3 2 1 824) frequently has a way of resonating powerfully throughout one’s life, the impossible multiplicity of Ferguson’s existence can be interpreted as a representation of life in its fullness, comprising

both what actually happened and what was just imagined. As will be shown in what follows, this idea is presented most explicitly in the last chapter of the novel.

2.7 The Metafictional Ending

2.7.1 Retrospective Establishment of the Ontological Hierarchy

In the last pages of *4 3 2 1*, the unifying element endowing its four alternative stories with narrative coherence is finally revealed to be their fictional author, coinciding with the fourth version of the protagonist. As the novel metafictionally thematizes its own writing process, readers discover how the young fiction writer decided to “invent three other versions of himself and tell their stories along with his own story (more or less his own story, since he too would become a fictionalized version of himself), and write a book about four identical but different people with the same name: Ferguson” (*4 3 2 1* 862). Moreover, an explicit mention of the title signals that the novel written by Ferguson-4 is meant to coincide with the book we are reading: “Hence the title of the book: *4 3 2 1*” (*4 3 2 1* 863).

This revelation eventually makes it possible to order the four worlds composing the textual universe of *4 3 2 1* according to an ontological hierarchy, in which the textual actual world is represented by the fourth version of Ferguson’s life, while the other three are to be considered as alternative possible worlds imagined by Ferguson-4. The novel, therefore, projects what Hilary P. Dannenberg terms a “*dynamic* ontological hierarchy,” since its “alternate-world plotting [...] involv[es] changes in the ontological hierarchy that generate narrative interest” (121). While, as Dannenberg explains, a reassessment of the ontology of the textual system can occur in a variety of different genres, the case of *4 3 2 1* appears to be akin to that of “experimental postmodernist metafiction narrative” in which “sleights of hand convert seemingly actual events into virtual ones” (121).

It is especially worth noticing that the establishment of an ontological hierarchy in *4 3 2 1*, despite enabling readers to naturalize the textual universe according to real-world frames, eliminating its ontological inconsistencies and making its internal structure resemble that of their native system of reality, results in an evident disruption of the immersive experience. This is because the ontological hierarchy is only imposed on the textual universe retrospectively, after

readers have been tricked into “believing” in the equal ontological status of the four represented worlds. Having stretched their cognitive frames to account for the narrative possibility of an impossible universe, readers are eventually presented with a naturalizing justification that is likely to represent a further cognitive challenge, as it presupposes the rejection of previously established frames through a gesture of “retrospective repatterning” (Perry 60). Therefore, even if the ending provides a satisfactory explanation for the previously inexplicable incongruities, this cannot be accepted effortlessly. While it is generally true that “the process of substituting frames is a tense one” (Perry 60), *4 3 2 1* makes it all the more difficult by deferring the last piece of the puzzle, which should give coherence to the rest, to its very end.

A further complication of the ontological status of the projected realities arises from the narrative acknowledgment that even the fourth version of the story, namely that which should reflect the textual actual world inhabited by the alleged creator of the other three, is “more or less his own story, since he too would become a fictionalized version of himself” (*4 3 2 1* 862). In other words, not even the version which comes closer to representing the textual actual world can be considered as completely actual, as this too is said to include virtual elements. Hence, most noticeably, as the narrative circles back to its beginning to explain that the origin story of the first chapter includes, in fact, a joke told to Ferguson-4 by his mother, the name shared by the actual version of the protagonist and his imagined counterparts is revealed to be a fictional one:

Ferguson, whose name was not Ferguson, found it intriguing to imagine himself having been born a Ferguson or a Rockefeller, someone with a different name from the X that had been attached to him when he was pulled from his mother’s womb on March 3, 1947. In point of fact, his father’s father had not been given another name when he arrived at Ellis Island on January 1, 1900—but what if he had?

Out of that question, Ferguson’s next book was born. (*4 3 2 1* 862)

Although the events presented in Chapter 1.0 had already been characterized as possibly inaccurate through frequent reminders of their legendary quality and of the dubious authenticity of their sources, before the ending their stability appeared to be ensured at least by their unique status, as part of the only narrative segment to which no alternative version is presented. The last

pages of *4 3 2 1*, instead, besides denying the actuality of three of Ferguson's lives and presenting the fourth as only partially actual, also further undermine the authenticity of their common stem. Thus, while the intrinsic uncertainty of details passed on from one family member to the next is reaffirmed in this last chapter in the bracketed remarks "(if family legend was to be believed)" and "(all based on the anecdotes he had heard from his mother over the years)," the misunderstanding from which the entire narrative originates is now revealed to have been placed at its beginning just "for the purposes of the story" (*4 3 2 1* 862).

Hence, the equal significance of truth and invention to an individual's construction of his narrative identity, already thematized at the beginning of *4 3 2 1*, is reaffirmed most powerfully in Chapter 7.4. In order to tell a life, one story is simply not enough. For Ferguson, multiple, contradictory stories are necessary to account for

the persistent feeling that the forks and parallels of the roads taken and not taken were all being traveled by the same people at the same time, the visible people and the shadow people, and that the world as it was could never be more than a fraction of the world, for the real also consisted of what could have happened but didn't, that one road was no better or worse than any other road, but the torment of being alive in a single body was that at any given moment you had to be on one road only, even though you could have been on another, traveling toward an altogether different place. (*4 3 2 1* 863)

It must be observed that, due to the considerable length of the novel, the high degree of aesthetic illusion each of its alternate plotlines allows for, and the frequent parallels between the various versions of Ferguson's life, making it often difficult to keep them strictly distinct, this retrospective reconfiguration of the ontological hierarchy will hardly result for readers in a clear-cut separation between "truth" and "fiction" within the textual universe. Because readers have experienced Ferguson's four lives, throughout the novel, as equally relevant and equally "real," a sense of their actuality will persist even after, and regardless of, the final plot-twist. Indeed, as Perry observes, "[i]n certain cases [...] rejected meanings continue to exist in the story even after their rejection, as a system of 'hovering' meanings to be taken into account in various manners" (49). In *4 3 2 1* this likely persistence of rejected meanings, even after the metafictional

ending, is significant because it reinforces one of the central ideas of the novel, effectively conveying a sense that it is not always possible to distinguish truth from fiction in a life story. The slipperiness of these two concepts makes it necessary to acknowledge their complementarity—a task which readers of *4 3 2 1* are encouraged to carry out precisely by accepting the impossible coexistence of its multiple worlds.

2.7.2 Retracing the Clues of Ferguson-4's Authorship

If the metafictional revelation of Chapter 7.4 comes to readers as a surprise, it might be relevant to investigate whether clues of Ferguson-4's authorship can be retrospectively retraced in the previous narrative material.¹⁴ It has already been shown how the novel might trick us into recognizing Ferguson-3 as the author of the account of his own life, and yet how the differences between his memoir and the book we are reading undermine this interpretation. Ferguson-4, instead, writes experimental stories which often revolve around the very themes at the center of *4 3 2 1*, such as the multiplicity of one's identity, the inescapable role of chance in life, and the potential consequences of each small choice.

An evident instance of *mise en abyme* of the core concept of the novel occurs, indeed, in a story Ferguson-4 writes at eighteen, in which “[a] man named Lazlo Flute [...] comes to a crossroads and must choose between the three possibilities of going left, right, or straight ahead” (*4 3 2 1* 492). A further example worth mentioning can be found in a story titled “*Eleven Moments from the Life of Gregor Flamm*” based on the protagonist's idea “to tell the story of someone without telling it as a continuous story,” presupposing that “the reader would stitch [the various moments] together in his mind so that the accumulated scenes would add up to something that resembled a story” (*4 3 2 1* 491). Similarly, a passage from another of Ferguson-4's stories, titled “The Scarlet Notebook,” in a manifest intertextual hint at the many notebooks to be found in Auster's fiction, reads,

¹⁴ James Phelan lists the presence of “material in the progression that can retrospectively be understood as preparing the audience for the surprise” as the first condition “for a surprise ending to be ethically and aesthetically appropriate” (*Experiencing Fiction* 95). The second condition requires that “the audience's emotional and other investments in the characters are rewarded—deepened, used in the service of meaningful instruction, or otherwise enhanced—rather than undermined by the surprise” (Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction* 95).

Memories are not continuous. They jump around from place to place and vault over large swaths of time with many gaps in between, and because of what my stepbrother calls this *quantum effect*, the multiple and often contradictory stories to be found in the scarlet notebook do not form a continuous narrative. Rather, they tend to unfold as dreams do—which is to say, with a logic that is not always readily apparent. (4 3 2 1 728)

In retrospect, such embedded stories can definitely be considered as proving Ferguson-4's suitability as the author of the experimental narrative of *4 3 2 1*. Thus, although all four Fergusons frequently meditate about the themes reflected in the structure of the novel, the fundamental difference between them and Ferguson-4 lies in the fact that the latter writes experimental stories about those themes, engaging in a constant search for the most suitable fictional form to represent a life. It must, therefore, be emphasized that it is ultimately the fiction writer, rather than the autobiographer, who is revealed to be the best candidate for writing his own story—the only one able to do justice to the inextricable intertwining of truth and fiction that constitutes an existence.

Moreover, Ferguson-4's frequent considerations on his own stylistic and thematic choices can also easily be applied to *4 3 2 1* itself. For example, when a professor asks him why the characters in his stories have "such odd names," he answers, "Probably because the names tell the reader those characters are in a story, not the real world. I like stories that admit they're stories and don't pretend to be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God" (4 3 2 1 494). A continuing consciousness seems, indeed, to connect the young man making this remark to the one writing a book inspired by "[a] name born out of a joke about names" (4 3 2 1 862).

2.7.3 4 3 2 1 as a Frame Narrative and the First-Person Narrator in Disguise

The final pages of Chapter 7.4 eventually reveal *4 3 2 1* to be a frame narrative, whose embedded level is represented by Ferguson's four lives and their common stem, while the final description of Ferguson-4's writing process, disclosing how the book came into existence, serves as its framing. Whereas in traditional frame stories the framing narrative generally provides both an introduction and a conclusion to the embedded text, it is not so unusual to find a partial framing

only at the beginning of a work of fiction (cf. Fludernik, *Introduction* 28-9). The omission of an initial framing in favor of a terminal one, instead, represents a device generally exploited in postmodernist works to produce a “startling, disorientating or metatextual effect” (Wolf, “Framing Borders” 188) on the reader. By revealing the metafictional framing only at its end, *4 3 2 1* can indeed disorient readers, as it calls for a retrospective reconsideration of the entire previous material.

To make the ending of Auster’s novel even more confusing, the boundary between the embedded text and its framing narrative seems impossible to establish for certain. At first, the transition from the former to the latter would seem to be visually marked by three squares, followed by the authorial statement “So ends the book—with Ferguson going off to write the book” (*4 3 2 1* 864). The paragraph then goes on to detail the young writer’s five and a half years in Paris working on his novel, ending with the information that “when he wrote the last word on August 25, 1975, the manuscript came to a total of one thousand one hundred and thirty-three double-spaced typed pages” (*4 3 2 1* 864). Nonetheless, what follows appears to invalidate the easy assumption that these concluding remarks should not be considered as part of Ferguson’s (fictional) book too. Thus, as we go on reading, it is explained how painful it was for the protagonist to write about his counterparts’ deaths, and particularly to kill Ferguson-1. Significantly, this death has not, in fact, occurred in the material readers have been presented with so far, as the last chapter detailing Ferguson-1’s life curiously ends with three suspension points, providing no closure to his trials. This lack of closure is eventually justified in this last chapter, as readers are informed that Ferguson-4 “put off writing [about Ferguson-1’s death] until the last pages of the book” (*4 3 2 1* 864). In line with this assertion, the circumstances of Ferguson-1’s death are outlined for the first time in the subsequent sentences, presenting “the account of the fire that consumed the house in Rochester, New York” (*4 3 2 1* 864) and killed the young man in his sleep. Immediately afterwards, a further passage seems to confirm that this final description of Ferguson-4’s writing process should be regarded as an integral part of his novel, namely “Ferguson took a pause. He stood up from the desk, pulled out a cigarette from his shirt pocket, and walked around and back and forth between the two rooms of the small flat, and once he felt his mind was clear enough to start again, he returned to the desk, sat down in the chair, and wrote

the final paragraphs of the book: [...]” (4 3 2 1 864). Remarkably, this short passage actually serves to introduce the final page and a half of 4 3 2 1, thus making it possible to infer that the book we are reading should be considered in its entirety as coinciding with Ferguson-4’s work. Yet, the impression of the parallel unfolding of Ferguson’s act of writing and its description, conveyed—in spite of (and jarring with) the past tense of the narration—by the assertion that he “returned to the desk, sat down in the chair, and wrote the final paragraphs of the book” significantly followed by a colon, might strike readers as irreconcilable with the previous authorial remarks on his finished novel, which anticipated an indication both of its exact number of pages and of the date “when he wrote the last word” (4 3 2 1 864).

It is essential to notice that what makes the revelation that Ferguson is the fictional author of 4 3 2 1 so confusing is the consistent use in all versions of the story—even in the fourth and “actual” one—of a third-person heterodiegetic narrative situation. At the end of the novel readers are, surprisingly, prompted to recognize Ferguson-4’s homodiegetic agency behind (or along with) the heterodiegetic narration, which thus appears to have served to “mask,” at least over the course of the fourth branch, the protagonist’s first person. Hence, 4 3 2 1 seems to showcase an instance of “first-person narration in disguise” (Behrendt and Hansen 236), proving “the unnatural fact that heterodiegetic narration might just as well be homodiegetic” (Behrendt and Hansen 237). This fact is especially interesting because it contradicts widespread assumptions regarding the reliability of the third-person voice. Poul Behrendt and Per Krogh Hansen confute the commonly held view that heterodiegetic narration cannot be unreliable, showing that, in many cases, fictional facts which are apparently authenticated by the third-person narrator turn out to be actually undermined by a reflector-character’s unreliability. Indeed, the first-person narrator in disguise represented by Ferguson-4 is particularly disorienting due to our tendency to consider third-person narration as conventionally authoritative, as opposed to the unreliability inherent in first-person narration. As soon as we learn that the other three versions of the protagonist’s story have been invented by Ferguson-4, their heterodiegetic narration too retrospectively turns out to be unreliable, insofar as they are revealed to represent virtual rather than actual worlds.

The presumed authority of the third-person voice, therefore, can also be considered as a further element persuading readers to believe in the equal ontological status of the four worlds

projected by *4 3 2 1* until the final revelation. Had Ferguson's four narratives been presented in the first person, it would probably have been easier to assume the narrator's unreliability as a naturalizing explanation for their impossible coexistence, making it possible to justify the incompatibility of the various versions of the events by supposing that their homodiegetic narrator, at least in some of them, must be lying. Instead, readers may come unprepared to the final metafictional twist, despite the potential clues already highlighted, precisely because the heterodiegesis of the narrative voice prevents them from guessing that this will eventually be revealed to originate, at least in part, from a homodiegetic narrator-character (pretending to be heterodiegetic).

Moreover, the sustained use, throughout the novel and in its final chapter, of a third-person heterodiegetic narrator also accounts for the difficulty to establish the exact point where the embedded narrative represented by Ferguson's book ends and the framing narrative begins. Because no shift in narrative voice characterizes the last chapter of *4 3 2 1*, it is ambiguous whether the third-person narrator stating, "So ends the book, with Ferguson going off to write the book" (*4 3 2 1* 864) still coincides with the first-person narrator in disguise or, rather, should be considered as a disembodied and "truly" heterodiegetic narrator occupying a superior diegetic level to Ferguson's disguised narration. According to Werner Wolf, "a typical frame story [...] contains at least one *mise en abyme* of storytelling" ("Framing Borders" 181). It can be further observed that the terminal framing of *4 3 2 1* appears to represent a particular case of *mise en abyme*, aptly described by Lucien Dällenbach's notion of "aporetic duplication," namely "a sequence that is supposed to enclose the work that encloses it" (35). Indeed, the description of Ferguson-4's writing process at the end of *4 3 2 1* seems to represent, paradoxically, both the narrative embedding his book and (part of) the embedded book itself.

To conclude this analysis of the strange terminal framing closing *4 3 2 1* and of the peculiar narrator hiding behind its four worlds, it seems appropriate to quote Auster's own considerations from a 2003 interview:

As a young person, I would always ask myself, Where are the words coming from? Who's saying this? The third-person narrative voice in the traditional novel is a strange device. We're used to it now, we accept it, we don't question it anymore. But when you stop and think about it, there's an

eerie, disembodied quality to that voice. It seems to come from nowhere, and I found that disturbing. I was always drawn to books that doubled back on themselves, that brought you into the world of the book, even as the book was taking you into the world. The manuscript as hero, so to speak. *Wuthering Heights* is that kind of novel. *The Scarlet Letter* is another. The frames are fictitious, of course, but they give a groundedness and credibility to the stories that other novels didn't have for me. They posit the work as an illusion—which more traditional forms of narrative don't—and once you accept the “unreality” of the enterprise, it paradoxically enhances the truth of the story. The words aren't written in stone by an invisible author-god. They represent the efforts of a flesh-and-blood human being, and this is very compelling. The reader becomes a participant in the unfolding of the story—not just a detached observer. (“Paul Auster: *The Art of Fiction*” 311)

While the manuscript undoubtedly turns out to be the hero of *4 3 2 1*, the revelation of how it came into existence does not, in the case of this novel, completely counteract the “eerie, disembodied quality” of the third-person narrative voice. While, indeed, the metafictional ending makes it possible to attribute the narrative, up to its final pages, to “the efforts of a flesh-and-blood human being” in the person of Ferguson-4, at the same time, by persisting in the use of a third-person heterodiegetic narration, it also leaves us dubious as to where the narrative voice originates from, ultimately reinforcing the impression of the fictionality of the entire feat.

2.8 Identity and the Reinvention of the Self

Published after seven years of silence, *4 3 2 1* has surprised readers and reviewers for being remarkably longer than anything Auster had written before, as well as for displaying a more traditional mode of storytelling than his most celebrated experimental works. Thus, although this novel can be considered as a compendium and a further exploration of the themes dear to its author, it might also be seen as marking a shift in sensibility from his previous novels, particularly with regard to the notion of identity at its center.

A fundamental issue in *4 3 2 1* is represented by the link between names and identities, continuing an investigation of the tense relationship between signifier and signified characteristic of Auster's fiction since his early works. Starting with *The New York Trilogy*, Auster's readers have been repeatedly shown how, while names create an illusion of stability, the entities they

designate are inevitably unstable. At times, in Auster's fiction, the only solution to account for the intrinsic mutability of things seems to change their names as well. Thus, when Ferguson-4 includes in one of his stories a "nutty excursus on the broken toaster and whether a broken toaster could still be called a toaster if it could no longer function as a toaster and if not whether it needed to be given another name" (4 3 2 1 748), he is echoing Peter Stillman's delirious considerations in *City of Glass*: "When you rip the cloth off the umbrella, is the umbrella still an umbrella? You open the spokes, put them over your head, walk out into the rain, and you get drenched. Is it still possible to go on calling this object an umbrella?" (Auster, *The New York Trilogy* 77). People's identities, in Auster's works, are equally discontinuous and elusive. Yet, curiously, there also seems to be a destiny in each name. As Daniel Quinn's name aptly "[r]hymes with twin" (Auster, *The New York Trilogy* 74) in a tale of endless duplications, and as Marco Stanley Fogg's name in *Moon Palace* "proved that travel was in [his] blood" (Auster, *Moon Palace* 6), because it coincidentally merges the names of Marco Polo, Henry Morton Stanley, and Phileas Fogg, just to give two examples, so Archibald Isaac Ferguson's name turns out to be extremely revealing. In Paris, "Archie" can sound as "the French word for *archive*, ar-sheeve" (4 3 2 1 551), betraying the inexhaustible complexity of his many life stories, but also as "*Ar-shee*," curiously disclosing its owner's bisexuality, as he notices himself: "*and wouldn't it be interesting if I could be a she for one night?*" (4 3 2 1 692). It can also be abbreviated as A.I., "known to some as a field of study called Artificial Intelligence—but there were other references buried in those letters as well, among them *Anonymous Insider*" (4 3 2 1 390), thus proving to be a suitable name both for a reporter and, possibly, for the "artificial" product of a writer's imagination. Alternatively, it can be shortened to Isaac:

A fine Jewish name, don't you think?

Not so much the *Ferguson* part, but definitely the *Isaac* part.

Isaac Ferguson, novelist.

Archie Ferguson the man, Isaac Ferguson the writer.

Not bad, I'd say. What do you say?

Not bad at all.

Two people in one.

Or one person in two. (4 3 2 1 468)

If slightly altering one's name can account for the many sides of one's identity, as well as for the inevitable changes one's self undergoes in the course of a life, then changing it completely may equal reinventing oneself. And indeed, only by calling himself by the fictional name of Ferguson can the protagonist of *4 3 2 1* tell his—partly real, but mostly fictional—life story.

When musing on his relationship with the parents of his deceased friend Artie Federman, Ferguson-4 considers, “It was a kind of performance [...] and every time he traveled to New Rochelle for another Sunday dinner, he had to take on the job of pretending to be himself by being himself, by enacting himself as fully and truthfully as he could” (*4 3 2 1* 476). If identity is a performance—an idea which, as will be shown in the next chapter, is also pivotal to Philip Roth's works—names are the masks enabling us to carry it out, imposing an impression of continuity on the fragmentation of our many selves. By imagining four possible versions of the same boy, *4 3 2 1* carries this idea to its extreme: the four Fergusons can be considered the same person because they share the same (fictional) name, no matter how different their lives are. And yet, as already observed, there also seems to be a core to their identity, so that a sense of their sameness pervades the novel, despite the contradictions inherent in their multiplicity. Because what the four Fergusons share appears at times to be more solid and significant than what divides them, the protagonist of *4 3 2 1* might, ultimately, be considered as always the same, just like Laurel and Hardy:

It pleased Ferguson immensely that those were the names of the real men who played the make-believe characters of Laurel and Hardy in the films, for Laurel and Hardy were always Laurel and Hardy no matter what circumstances they happened to find themselves in, whether they lived in America or another country, whether they lived in the past or the present, whether they were furniture movers or fishmongers or Christmas-tree salesmen or soldiers or sailors or convicts or carpenters or street musicians or stable hands or prospectors in the Wild West, and the fact that they were always the same even when they were different seemed to make them more real than any other characters in movies, for if Laurel and Hardy were always Laurel and Hardy, Ferguson reasoned, that must have meant they were eternal. (*4 3 2 1* 201-2)

If Laurel and Hardy can “[remind] Ferguson of himself” (*4 3 2 1* 203), it is because of their invariable sameness, safeguarded by their names, regardless of the changes they undergo in their

many lives. Indeed, *4 3 2 1* seems, more than other novels by the same author, to welcome this possibility of self-definition despite one's contradictions, of continuity regardless of one's fragmentation, thus betraying a need to overcome the dissolution of the self and creatively regain some control over one's life.

As a reviewer has observed, "what directs the evolution of each Archie seems to be an irreducible kernel of identity. [...] This looks like a reversal of the approach Auster took in his earlier work, in which a character, simply by changing his name, can be transformed into another person; in which the self is provisional, a product of fiction" (Miller, para. 11). Indeed, self-reinvention in *4 3 2 1* is a way to explore one's inner world rather than escape it. The power of imagination is not exploited for its own sake, but rather provides a way to understand life more fully, through an investigation of its unrealized possibilities. While for David Zimmer, the grief-stricken protagonist of *The Book of Illusions*, "the world was an illusion which had to be reinvented every day" (Auster, *The Book of Illusions* 57), in *4 3 2 1* Ferguson-3 the memoirist is insightfully told, "You don't want to reinvent the world, Archie, you want to understand the world so you can find a way to live in it" (*4 3 2 1* 687). The real world is there, awaiting to be understood and represented. And yet, as the novel itself shows, again interestingly mirroring a central reflection in Philip Roth's Zuckerman Books, reinventing and understanding one's life are not incompatible concepts. Rather than deny the possibility to access the meaning of an existence, *4 3 2 1* seems to imply that its meaning can indeed be grasped, and that the most suitable way to do it is imaginatively.

It must be noticed that, in a sense, *4 3 2 1* can also be considered as a reinvention of its author's life. While the allusions to Auster's biography and works are so frequent throughout the novel that retracing them definitely exceeds the scope of this analysis, an example might be worth mentioning to show how real-life events are imaginatively rewritten. As the author has acknowledged, a source of inspiration for *4 3 2 1* was the tragic episode he has often recounted, and an account of which is also included in his collection of non-fiction *The Red Notebook*, when, at summer camp, a lightning bolt missed him by inches, killing instead the boy in front of him (cf. "In the Green Chair"). In *4 3 2 1* this episode returns, transformed, in two variations, as one version of the protagonist is killed by a lightning bolt at Camp Paradise when he is thirteen,

while another, again at summer camp, makes friends with a boy sharing his initials, Artie Federman, who subsequently dies of brain aneurysm. While the parallels are not straightforward, they suggest that experience, no matter how distorted, represents almost invariably the raw material from which fiction originates. Nonetheless, Auster himself makes it clear that “the book is not an autobiographical book. It’s a book that borrows [his] geography and [his] chronology, but it’s not [his] story...” (“In the Green Chair”) and discourages readers from reading his fiction in the light of his own life, since “in a work of fiction, everything is invented, even the things that are not, because once a true event is brought into the realm of the imaginary, it becomes imaginary” (“Big City Book Club”).

However, imagination can be a way to take control over one’s life, to comprehend reality rather than simply evade it. In *4 3 2 1* imagination is key to regain unity over fragmentation, as can also be inferred from the reiterated allusions, throughout the novel, to a mythical narrative encompassing Ferguson’s four lives. Even though playful, the introduction of an epic dimension which might confer order to the inexplicable multiplication of Ferguson’s existence seems hardly a postmodernist move; rather, it appears more akin to the modernist sensibility described by T. S. Eliot in his theorization of “the mythical method” (178) underlying Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Of course, in *4 3 2 1* the hints at the supernatural beings leading the four Fergusons’ fates can ultimately be recognized as mischievous invitations to acknowledge the presence of the author behind them, who, just like his protagonist, plays God in inventing their stories. And yet, in implying the need for a unifying narrative, the book might suggest that we slightly reconsider the appeal of those “metanarratives,” to use Jean-François Lyotard’s term, that postmodernity categorically rejected. As long as they help us make sense of the world—whether the possibility of coherence is offered by myth or by the illusion of a continuous identity—maybe such narratives should, rather than be discarded, simply be reinvented.

The constant dialogue between life and fictional stories, representing an essential motif in *4 3 2 1*, is also foregrounded by the countless references to all kinds of literary works, including other works by Auster, which punctuate the novel. If, on the one hand, this pervasive intertextuality makes it clear that it is all just fiction, on the other it might serve to emphasize that, precisely because life and fiction constantly intersect, one should not be considered as less

real than the other. Thus, what is left at the end of *4 3 2 1* is a strong sense of the pleasure in storytelling animating it. As stories intertwine with and generate other stories, the novel moves onwards until it reaches its metafictional conclusion. Yet, the game is potentially never-ending and, indeed, the imaginative force driving *4 3 2 1* seems impossible to restrain up to its final pages, when, even after the final trick has been revealed and the four worlds have been conflated into one, a new “if” introduces a further counterfactual scenario: “If Ferguson-1 had lived through the night [...]” (*4 3 2 1* 864).

Maybe the most surprising aspect of *4 3 2 1* is that its ending does provide a solution to the riddle of its protagonist’s multiplicity. Of course there is only one Ferguson, but it is *as if* there were many, and in the acknowledgment and investigation of that sense of multiplicity lies the very key to understanding his life. Previously, in a conversation with his friend Howard Small, Ferguson-4 had made an incidental remark on fictional characters, stating that “[a]s long as we know who they are, they’re just as real as real people” (*4 3 2 1* 584). By the end of *4 3 2 1* we might not remember which details of Ferguson’s lives are supposed to be real and which imaginary, but, despite the confusion between truth and fiction generated by his manifold contradictory experiences—or actually because of it—we do have a sense that we know who he is.

3. “[I]n the absence of a self, one impersonates selves”¹⁵:

Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife*

3.1 Structure, Paratext, and Central Themes

“I think if we didn't contradict ourselves, it would be awfully boring. It would be really pretty tedious to be alive,” Paul Auster once stated in an interview about his memoir *Winter Journal* (“Paul Auster Meditates” 17:05-17:12). The idea that contradiction represents not just an inescapable condition in life, but rather its very essence—what, above all, makes life worth telling, as well as the very ingredient that, in telling it, grants us some degree of epistemic access to its complexity—is shared by Philip Roth, whose works revel in the exploration of unsolvable conflict as an inexhaustible source of narrative possibilities. Among his books, *The Counterlife* is possibly the most concerned with the inherent incongruity and irreducible multiplicity of an individual’s life, as contradictions are not just thematically investigated in this 1986 novel, but also integral to its narrative structure. Thus, incompatible accounts of the Zuckerman brothers’ vicissitudes succeed one another, producing an impossible textual universe constantly frustrating the readers’ attempts to discern the “truth” within it. Yet, according to Roth, no representation of life can be more realistic than a contradictory one. In his own words, “there really is nothing unusual about somebody changing his story. People constantly change their story—one runs into that every day. [...] We are all writing fictitious versions of our lives all the time, contradictory but mutually entangling stories that, however subtly or grossly falsified, constitute our hold on reality and are the closest thing we have to the truth” (“An Interview” 253).

Faced with a proliferation of mutually exclusive versions of the events, readers of *The Counterlife* are inevitably challenged to wonder, as Roth himself acknowledges, “Which is real and which is false? Which are you asking me to believe in?” (“An Interview” 253). They will strive, to put it differently, to discern the center of the novel’s textual system, the actual life against which to measure the counterfactuality of its alternate scenarios, assuming that, as Debra Shostak notes, “a ‘counterlife’ ought to presuppose a prior or ‘real’ life to which alternatives are being posed” (*Philip Roth* 173). On the contrary, however, “Roth declines to supply—or at least

¹⁵ Philip Roth, *The Counterlife* 324.

to identify—the ‘life’ that is countered in the novel. The prior or real referent (by antithesis) for the ‘counterlife’ is either missing or unknowable” (Shostak, *Philip Roth* 173).

This need to determine which among the projected worlds should be considered as the textual actual is likely to be even more compelling for readers already familiar with the central character of *The Counterlife*, Nathan Zuckerman, from Roth’s previous works. Since the publication of *The Human Stain* in 2000, the list of works by Philip Roth included in the introductory pages of each of his books, whether newly published or reprinted, has presented the author’s oeuvre as divided into a series of groups, organized on the basis of the various voices he has used to tell his stories, namely “Zuckerman Books,” “Roth Books,” “Kepesh Books,” and “Other Books,” plus a “Miscellany” section added since the publication of *The Plot Against America* in 2004 (cf. Shostak, *Philip Roth* 10; Masiero, *Philip Roth* 2, 10). Hence, as Shostak remarks, “[t]he highlighting of the books’ voices by name reveals Roth’s interest in retrospectively finding patterns in his compositional process, imposing a coherence from without that nevertheless bespeaks an internal coherence, if not exactly a plan” (*Philip Roth* 10). Falling into the first of these groups, *The Counterlife* is presented as an integral part of Zuckerman’s narrative trajectory, thus prompting readers to expect its content to fit into the arch of the fictional writer’s biography by offering a continuation of the (mostly coherent) events occurred over the course of *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, *The Anatomy Lesson*, and *The Prague Orgy*.¹⁶ Clashing with readerly expectations, however, *The Counterlife* offers not just one, but rather a series of possible continuations of that narrative, making it hard for readers to establish which ones among the fictional facts it presents “actually” belong to Zuckerman’s life. The key to navigate this proliferation of narrative possibilities, as provided by Roth himself, is quite straightforward, though cognitively demanding: “Which is real and which is false? All are equally real or equally false. Which are you asking me to believe in? All/none” (“An Interview” 253).

¹⁶ A character named Nathan Zuckerman actually makes his first appearance, in two variations, in *My Life as a Man* (1974), serving as a fictional mask through which the writer Peter Tarnopol carries out his narrative experiments (cf. Masiero, *Philip Roth* 17-39). However, the counterpart relation between these first “provisional and unstable incarnations” (Masiero, *Philip Roth* 39) of Zuckerman and the protagonist of the Zuckerman Books appears to be based on very few shared properties besides their identity of name.

The various alternate scenarios of *The Counterlife*, presented over the course of five chapters, originate from two mutually exclusive premises. In the first chapter, titled “Basel,” Henry Zuckerman has died after willingly undergoing a life-threatening operation to get rid of a coronary disease. While before the operation Henry’s condition had been easily kept under control through medications, the sexual impotence these caused as a side effect had started to make life unbearable for the successful dentist, forcing him to break his habit of entertaining adulterous sexual encounters with his assistant Wendy. The second chapter, “Judea,” explores an alternative course of events stemming from the same premise: Henry has survived the surgery and started what he believes to be an authentic Jewish life on the West Bank, where he is visited by Nathan. Chapter three, “Aloft,” continues the narrative of “Judea,” staging the attempted hijacking of the plane Nathan has taken from Tel Aviv to return to London, where he lives with his wife. In the fourth chapter, “Gloucestershire,” the initial premise is reversed. This time it is Nathan’s turn to fall ill due to a heart condition, undergo surgery, and die. Finally, in Chapter five, “Christendom,” no disease is mentioned. Nathan is alive again and back to England after a “quiet flight up from Tel Aviv” (Roth, *The Counterlife* 259).¹⁷ His tranquil life with his Gentile wife Maria is, however, troubled by the diffuse anti-Semitism the writer senses in his surroundings.

The structure of the book can, therefore, be summarized as follows: the first premise (Henry is ill and chooses to undergo the operation) originates two narrative branches, one comprising Henry’s death and the events following it (as represented in “Basel”) and the other presenting his survival and subsequent decision to start an ascetic life in Israel (narrated in “Judea”). The branch that continues the narrative of “Judea” further bifurcates at a branching point coinciding with Nathan’s flight, which is either a turbulent one, carrying the protagonist back to Tel Aviv (in “Aloft”), or an uneventful one, leading him to his destination (in “Christendom”). The second premise, namely Nathan’s illness, is developed in the fourth chapter, “Gloustershire,” and produces a single outcome, that is Nathan’s death in the surgery.

Each of the alternative scenarios comprised in *The Counterlife* explores the characters’ actions and reactions under different circumstances, as if testing the plausibility of each of their transformations, putting them in various roles and observing the act consequently taking place,

¹⁷ Future references to the novel will be included in the text thus: (TC x).

but only to reveal the trick every time a possibility has been fully concretized, abandoning it and starting shaping a new one. Roth himself has stressed the speculative nature of the narratives comprised in the novel: “I think of *The Counterlife* as a laboratory in which I’ve run a series of fictional experiments about what things would be like *if*” (“Philip Roth” 199). Because Nathan Zuckerman is the mask Roth dons to run these experiments, the book gradually discloses how all counterfactual versions of the fictional author’s life should, in fact, be regarded as figments of his writerly imagination, fictions he chooses to write—and live—in an endless process of self-remaking. “It’s all impersonation—” Nathan writes to Maria in the final pages of the novel, “in the absence of a self, one impersonates selves, and after a while impersonates the best self that best gets one through” (*TC* 324). Giving coherence to the fragmentation of *The Counterlife* is, therefore, the underlying idea that what we delusively believe to be a continuous and coherent identity is actually multiple and fragmented, so that, in fact, we repeatedly find ourselves forced to choose which among our possible selves it is most convenient for us to impersonate.

Thus, each chapter in the novel sets the scene for a new reinvention, exploring the multiplicity of the self in relation to different spheres of the Zuckerman brothers’ lives, which materialize as different settings. The three major areas within which identity is put under observation are aptly recognized by Josh Cohen as “carnality, Jewishness, and writing” (88), as he argues that

For Roth [...] these three themes are adjoining stages on which to play out the unending drama of doubled selfhood. Erotic, Jewish, and literary life are all forms of counterliving, of experiencing oneself as more than one self. Indeed, each of the places alluded to in the chapter titles—“Basel,” “Judea,” “Aloft,” “Gloucestershire,” “Christendom,” become names for the self-defeating struggle to forget this condition. (88)

The first place, “Basel,” is where Henry’s old lover, Maria, comes from, thus symbolizing his dream of escape from the domesticity of family life as well as an occasion to forget his Jewish origins and embrace a “de-ethnicized” life (Masiero, *Philip Roth* 111). In stark contrast to this first scenario, “Judea” shows Henry opting for the alleged authenticity of a life in Israel, where his displaced Jewish self can find its roots, searching for self-consistency within the communal

narrative that country embodies. Shifting the focus on Nathan, “Aloft” presents, instead, what seems to be a farcical allegory of the American Jew’s displaced condition. Fleeing Judea and the chance of rootedness that place might offer, Nathan finds himself literally up in the air, suspended between Jewish Israel and Gentile Europe, and temporarily prevented from escaping this stasis by Jimmy’s attempted hijacking, eventually resulting in their return to Tel Aviv.

Self-reinvention through writing is the main theme taken up in “Gloucestershire,” in which the merging of facts and fiction composing Nathan’s life is most overtly exposed. Gloucestershire is the place of origin of Zuckerman’s lover Maria, symbolizing “the known” she longs to flee, as embodied both by her background and by her husband, in order to embrace “the adventure” (*TC* 204) represented by a life with Zuckerman. But being “the land where the grass couldn’t be greener” (*TC* 199), Gloucestershire also stands for Nathan’s new pastoral fantasy of domesticity and tranquillity, concretized in his lover’s “quiet virtues” (*TC* 207)—a fantasy which, as implicit in the opposition at the center of Maria’s dream, “The Promised Land versus the Green Tweed Suit” (*TC* 200), is antithetical to Nathan’s Jewishness.

Finally, “Christendom”—that is, in Roth’s own words, “Zuckerman’s name for London, for his experience of the place” (“Philip Roth” 199)—offers a scene for the temporary triumph and inevitable fall of Nathan’s pastoral dream. Married to a now pregnant Maria, the writer fails to integrate into Christian England, which thus comes to represent a further instance of otherness against which to measure his identity, eventually leading him to realize the inescapability of his Jewish background. As can be seen from this brief overview, insofar as they all refer to dream places, the chapter titles might serve as paratextual indications of the counterfactual nature of each scenario (cf. Masiero, “Roth’s *The Counterlife*” 3). Once readers have been through “Basel” and realized that its title “refers to a place that may be termed a counter place, that is, a place where Henry could have lived his counterlife” (Masiero, “Roth’s *The Counterlife*” 2), they are also invited to question the truthfulness of the events narrated in the subsequent chapters.

Nonetheless, readers will hardly be prepared for the number of contradictions repeatedly facing them as they progress through the novel, shattering their default assumption that it will be possible to organize the represented events according to a linear and coherent narrative development. Whereas, as it has been shown, the alternate realities of Paul Auster’s *4 3 2 1* are

presented in such a way as to invite us to background our instinctive tendency to order them according to an ontological hierarchy, the opposite is true for *The Counterlife*, in which each version of the facts seems meant to assert its supremacy over the others, repeatedly foregrounding the question of authenticity, and therefore making the readers' desire to know the truth grow more urgent at each new inconsistency. The only possible truth to be achieved, however, lies in the recognition that Nathan Zuckerman's consciousness hides behind each scenario as its creator. As all versions of the facts stem from his fictionalizing impulse, Zuckerman's mind progressively reveals itself as an agency overarching their fragmentation and, therefore, endowing their incompatibility with metafictional coherence. Thus, in Pia Masiero's words, Zuckerman ultimately comes to represent "a unifying center providing meaningfulness, if not formal closure" (*Philip Roth* 105).

Besides gradually disclosing this metafictional justification for the coexistence of multiple accounts of the events, each chapter of *The Counterlife* invites new allegorical readings of its non-linear and contradictory structure, making it possible to rationalize its impossible textual universe by recognizing its symbolic implications. Thus, the multiple alternative scenarios become comprehensible as concretizations of the many possible answers to the questions Zuckerman is most concerned with, namely, as formulated by Shostak, "[w]ho is the lover? what is a Jew? what is a writer?" (*Philip Roth* 208). Only by *imagining* the answers can Zuckerman (and Roth through him) *know* the answers. Indeed, for Roth fiction is "a way of knowing the world as it's not otherwise known. Clearly a lot can be known about the world without the help of fiction, but nothing else engenders fiction's kind of knowing because nothing else makes the world *into* fiction. [...] Fiction derives from the unique mode of scrutiny called imagination, and its wisdom is inseparable from the imagination itself" ("An Interview" 247). Hence, even more explicitly than in *4 3 2 1*, the destabilization of ontological certainties at the core of *The Counterlife* reveals itself as the best possible way to gain epistemological access to the elusive essence of life.

The rest of this chapter will outline the readerly inferences invited by each narrative strand of *The Counterlife*, taking into account the possibility to organize them according to an ontological hierarchy and the hypotheses that can be made to justify their impossible coexistence,

both in naturalizing terms and allegorical terms. The final section will, then, provide an analysis of the ending of Roth's 1988 autobiography *The Facts*, which presents a continuation of the "Christendom" scenario of *The Counterlife*, highlighting its possible implications in relation to the wider narrative of Zuckerman's biography as developed over the course of the Zuckerman Books.

3.2 "Basel": Foreshadowing the Game of Counterfactuals

Beginnings generally serve to lay the basis for a reader's experience of a storyworld, often providing fundamental information to interpret the narrative they introduce. As Menakhem Perry observes,

The first stage of the text-continuum serves as a sort of heading for those following it. It creates a perceptual set—the reader is predisposed to perceive certain elements and it induces a disposition to continue making connections similar to the ones he has made at the beginning of the text. What was reconstructed from the text as the reading began affects the kind of attention paid to subsequent items and the weight attached to them. (50)

Despite presenting events which will be then repeatedly brought into question, the first chapter of *The Counterlife* is nonetheless essential to interpret the material that follows it, insofar as it implicitly foreshadows the narrative game of affirmation and negation of fictional facts that will be carried on, and taken to its extreme consequences, in the course of the novel. Thus, it can be observed that the oppositions facts/fiction and truth/imagination around which *The Counterlife* revolves are already thematized and structurally foregrounded in reiterated instances of *mise en abyme* to be found in its first fifty-five pages. Because the internal dynamics of "Basel" mirror the overall structure of the novel, its formal devices work as anticipations preparing readers to experience the recurrent deceptions which will inform their entire reading experience.

"Basel" opens with an italicized passage occupying several pages, in which the first narrative premise is presented. In this passage the events leading to Henry Zuckerman's death after the discovery of his coronary disease, including his unhappy marriage with Carol, his affair with his dental assistant Wendy, his previous love story with a Swiss patient called Maria, and his

decision to undergo surgery rather than renounce his sexual life, are told by a third-person narrator focalized through Henry's perspective. As David Brauner notes, "the status of the initial text is uncertain because it is italicised (a device often used in prose fiction to indicate the presence of a text within a text, such as a letter)" (70). Therefore, the readers' inferences concerning the source and nature of this first narrative excerpt will necessarily be provisional, pending a clarification on the part of the text. This clarification, indeed, comes immediately after the end of the italicized section: "Needless to say, these were not the three thousand words that Carol had been expecting when she'd phoned the evening before the funeral and, despite all that had driven the two brothers apart, asked if Zuckerman would deliver a eulogy" (TC 17). Hence, the apparently heterodiegetic authorial voice presenting Henry's misadventures is revealed in this sentence to belong to Nathan Zuckerman, who has turned his sister-in-law's request for a eulogy into an occasion for indulging in recollections of his brother's confessions and "piecing Henry's story together from the little he knew" (TC 17). Zuckerman's access to Henry's thoughts and viewpoint, conveyed through the use of an internal focalization, is retrospectively justified by a detail concluding the italicized account (cf. Masiero "Roth's *The Counterlife*" 3), namely the fact that, though unable to trust his brother after the blow inflicted on their family by the publication of *Carnovsky*, Henry had, nonetheless, eventually resolved to confide in him: "That night, from his study, he again phoned Nathan, his last remaining consolation, and this time found him home. He was barely able to dissolve into tears when he told his brother that he was seriously ill and asked if he could come to see him. It was impossible living alone any longer with his staggering loss" (TC 16-7).

Included in the initial pages of "Basel" is also a brief recapitulation of the events that shattered the peace of Nathan and Henry's family in the previous Zuckerman Books, making it possible for readers to infer that *The Counterlife* will offer a coherent continuation of the narrative developed up to this point (cf. Masiero, *Philip Roth* 99). However, despite establishing this (deceptive) intertextual link, it can be observed that the beginning of the first chapter also sets the stage, through its formal choices, for the constant overturning of fictional truths which will inform the rest of the novel. The first of these revealing choices can be detected exactly in the use of a seemingly heterodiegetic narrator to present Henry's story, followed by the revelation

that the italicized excerpt was in fact authored by Nathan, so that “we are led to believe something (narratologically speaking) and then we are told how things really are” (Masiero, “Roth’s *The Counterlife*” 3). Secondly, the embedded text is immediately rejected in the narrative following it as unsuitable for the occasion of Henry’s funeral, revealing it to be a eulogy which will not be delivered, or, in Ross Posnock’s words, an “antieulogy” (141), in a further retrospective problematization of the nature of the previously presented material. Thus, it can be said that the italicized beginning of *The Counterlife* represents both a “false start: a text that is defined in terms of what it substitutes for—a eulogy for Henry—and that is rapidly replaced by a new narrative” (Brauner 70) and, at the same time, “the most truthful start for what follows: explorative inventions, imaginative revelations donned realistically, which are both existentially possible and narratively tenable” (Masiero, “Roth’s *The Counterlife*” 5).

As Masiero notes, the narrative starting after the italicized passage and developed throughout the first chapter is presented, just like the not-to-be-delivered eulogy, by way of a third-person internally focalized narration, even though this time the focalizer is Nathan (cf. “Roth’s *The Counterlife*” 4). Due to this textual choice, readers are again hindered from attributing the source of the narration to the correct agency, which, as will be made clearer as the novel progresses, is actually to be found in Nathan Zuckerman himself, playing the part of an authorial narrator. Just like in Auster’s *4 3 2 1*, therefore, “here we are facing a first person in disguise, a Nathan who, nonetheless, plays his authorial tricks on himself as well, mixing strictly restricted focalization with authorial detachment” (Masiero, “Roth’s *The Counterlife*” 4). Similarly to Auster’s novel, the employment of a third-person narrator in “Basel” performs the function of misleading readers into taking the actuality of the represented events for granted, as these are apparently authenticated by the authority of a narrative situation that is generally assumed to be invariably reliable. Only by reading on will it will become clear that this is not the case. The first pages of “Basel,” therefore, present the facts including and following Henry’s death in a way which seems meant, on the one hand, to grant for their credibility and, on the other, to initiate readers to the constant narrative negations and revisions to come.

Further clues anticipating the ontological destabilization to be staged in the subsequent chapters are disseminated throughout “Basel.” Nathan’s considerations on his brother’s death are

especially telling in this respect, as they run along two parallel tracks, one being his need to understand the reasons behind Henry's fatal choice and the other the irresistible impulse to fictionalize his story, letting an imaginative narrative spring from his brother's confessions. Thus, shortly after the end of the discarded eulogy, readers are already alerted to suspect Nathan's reliability as a reporter of his brother's story, as they are informed that "Henry wasn't dead twenty-four hours when the narrative began to burn a hole in Zuckerman's pocket. He was now going to have a very hard time getting through the day without seeing everything that happened as *more*, as a continuation not of life but of his work or work-to-be" (TC 17). Nathan's very experience of reality is, admittedly, distorted by his work as a writer, so that, after the fictionalizing urge has presented itself, there is no way to avoid perceiving the facts through the lens of his imagination. And yet, the need to comprehend the motives which led his brother to risk his life appears to be equally strong: "Dead! All for twenty minutes with Wendy before hurrying home to the household you loved? Or were you showing off for me? [...] and yet there must be more, there *has* to be more! How could a genuinely good kid like you, with your ferocious sense of correctness, wind up in this box for the sake of that mouth?" (TC 21-2). As the heterodiegetic narration shifts into a first-person voice presenting Nathan's questioning of Henry's reasons unfiltered, it becomes clear that the writer's epistemological need can only be met by inventing a plausible (and aesthetically satisfying) narrative. The word "more," used here to mean more than what Henry admitted, but echoing the previously quoted passage, in which it stood for more than factual truth, signals precisely this overlapping of Nathan's desires to know and to compensate for his lack of knowledge through invention.

As the chapter progresses, his impulse to write a narrative about Henry's ordeals gradually surfaces from his thoughts:

What *was* he to do with those three thousand words? Betray his brother's final confidence, strike a blow against the family of the very sort that had alienated him from them in the first place? The evening before, after thanking Carol for her graciousness and telling her that he would sit down at once to compose a eulogy, he'd located, among the loose-leaf journals stacked atop his file cabinets, the volume in which he'd kept his account of Henry's affair with the Swiss patient. Must

he really go in now and plunder these notes that he'd mercifully all but forgotten—had they been waiting there all these years for an inspiration as unforeseen as this? (*TC* 26-7)

Following this passage, textual transcriptions of the mentioned journal notes start to disrupt the account of Henry's funeral, during which Carol delivers a eulogy falsely (as long as we rely on Nathan's perspective on the events) portraying her husband as a devoted family man. As the events of the day alternate with Nathan's notes about Henry's past, so that Carol's sober praise of her husband's faithfulness is counteracted by what seems to be tangible evidence of his disdain for domesticity and desire to flee family life, the tension between (inconvenient) truth and (seemly) self-delusion is powerfully foregrounded. And yet, later on in the novel it will become clear that even the alleged "raw factuality" (*TC* 46) of Henry's confessions as registered in Nathan's notes is delusional, thus further problematizing the seemingly clear-cut opposition between facts and fiction suggested by their inclusion in the narrative (cf. Masiero, "Roth's *The Counterlife*" 5).

The passage above confirms that Henry's fears, voiced by Nathan himself in his eulogy, were not unfounded. Vividly rendered in the first person, Henry's concerns had been previously conveyed (via Nathan) as follows:

I'll provide him with a sequel to Carnowsky! It had been idiotic enough ten years earlier telling him everything about Maria [...] but bursting as I was I had to tell someone—and how could I possibly understand back then that exploiting and distorting family secrets was my brother's livelihood? He won't sympathize with what I'm going through—he won't even listen. "Don't want to know," he'll tell me from behind the peephole, and won't bother to open the door. "I'd only put it in a book and you wouldn't like that at all." (*TC* 14)

Henry's old confessions are indeed about to be used to feed the writer's hunger for knowledge, serving as the starting point for a fictional narrative enabling him to investigate reality more deeply than adherence to the facts would. A final passage reaffirms that, for Nathan, the urge to understand life and to fictionalize it are inescapably interlaced. After a journal entry recounting a phone call during which Maria, back to Basel, had wished Henry "a Merry American

Christmas” (*TC* 45), the narrative goes back to reporting Nathan’s thoughts, making it evident that all his questions are going to be answered imaginatively:

And could *that* be why he’d let her go, because Maria observed Christmas and we do not? [...] If Henry had been right about the origins of his disease, if it did indeed result from the stress of that onerous defeat and those arduous feelings of self-contempt that dogged him long after her return to Basel, then, curiously enough, it was being a Jew that had killed him.

If/then. As the afternoon wore on, he began to feel himself straining more and more after an idea that would release those old notes from their raw factuality and transform them into a puzzle for his imagination to solve. (*TC* 45-6)

Remarkably, after he has started picturing a scene involving Henry and Maria, Nathan suddenly discards it and, instead, conceives a better idea, namely that he may try imagining himself in his brother’s shoes and see what happens:

No, that’s not them, thought Zuckerman [...] But then it needn’t be “them”—could be me, he thought. Us. What if instead of the brother whose obverse existence mine inferred—and who himself untwinnishly inferred me—I had been the Zuckerman boy in that agony? What is the real wisdom of that predicament? Could it be simple for anyone? If that is indeed how those drugs incapacitate most of the men who must take them to live, then there’s a bizarre epidemic of impotence in this country whose personal implications nobody’s scrutinizing, not in the press or even on Donahue, let alone in fiction... (*TC* 46)

As Nathan ponders the counterfactual narrative possibilities stemming from his brother’s predicament, readers are thus provided with the necessary tools to rationalize the series of incompatible scenarios of the subsequent chapters by way of a metafictional explanation. Indeed, as a result of his fictional experiments, Nathan will really “wind up in Henry’s shoes” (*TC* 50), as he allusively states in a later exchange with Shuskin.

The speculative nature of the narrative games which will follow this first chapter, clearly anticipated by Nathan’s considerations, is further highlighted in a passage presenting a conversation occurring—or rather, *not* occurring—between Nathan and Carol. As the words actually uttered by the two are taken over by a counterfactual dialogue that Nathan stages in his

mind, the ease with which the writer's unconstrained imagination absorbs and transforms the facts is again put to the fore. Thus, the alternation of actual and counterfactual utterances is marked by introductory statements such as

It was, for both of them, such a strongly emotional moment that Zuckerman wondered if he wasn't about to hear her say [...] But in Zuckerman's arms, pressing herself up against his chest, all she said, in a breaking voice, was [...] Consequently, he had no reason to reply [...] Carol did not then respond [...] Instead she said to him [...] Nathan did not ask [...] He said [...] Carol replied [...] instead of saying [...] instead of [...] instead of [...] (TC 51)

This dialogue offers a clear example of what Gerald Prince has termed “the disnarrated,” namely a category which “covers all the events that *do not* happen but, nonetheless, are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text” (2). In other words, “terms, phrases, and passages that consider what did not or does not take place [...] whether they pertain to the narrator and his or her narration [...] or to one of the characters and his or her actions [...] constitute the disnarrated” (Prince 3). Interestingly, Prince individuates the wider narrative relevance of this specific device in the fact that “it makes explicit the logic at work in narrative whereby, as Claude Bremond demonstrated, every narrative progresses by following certain directions as opposed to others: the disnarrated or choices not made, roads not taken, possibilities not actualized, goals not reached” (5). As we recognize that to lay bare this logic is definitely one of the main purposes of *The Counterlife*, it becomes even more evident that the counter-conversation between Nathan and Carol serves to anticipate the counterfactuality of the events to follow. Indeed, Prince acknowledges as a possible outcome of “the assault of narrative and of history as narrative” carried out by postmodern examples of the disnarrated “a lack of hierarchical distinction between several narrative lines of development (all of the narrated is hypothetical, all of it becomes disnarrated)” (7). While Roth's relationship to postmodernism is a complex one, the case illustrated by Prince perfectly applies to the multiple scenarios of *The Counterlife*.

As soon as the conversation between Nathan and Carol ends, the narrative goes on to further destabilize their respective positions. Nathan's considerations on the two possible reasons

behind his sister-in-law's decision to portray Henry, in her eulogy, as she did are thus presented by way of an either/or opposition: "*Either* what she'd told everyone from the altar was what she *truly* believed [...] *or* she was [...] a subtle and persuasive writer of domestic *fiction*" (TC 52, emphasis mine). Either truth or fiction: the tension between the two (indistinguishable) modalities to represent reality is highlighted once more. Hence, as Brauner notes, "the initial countertext is itself countered by a further series of hypothetical statements, so that the dialogical perspective fragments into a more kaleidoscopic picture. Instead of a primary and a secondary layer of signification, we are presented with a series of narrative possibilities, all of them provisional" (71). The conversation can, therefore, be regarded as representing "a microcosm of the book as a whole" (Brauner 71).

"Basel" anticipates what readers will encounter next not only structurally but also thematically, as it comprises various hints at issues which will be explored at length in the subsequent chapters. The appeal of adulterousness as opposed to family life and the fantasy of relinquishing ethnic connotations as opposed to bearing the burden of a Jewish heritage—the very appeal, indeed, of self-negation as a way to self-reinvention—are thus foregrounded in Henry's dream of moving to Basel with Maria as well as in the account of his recent affair with Wendy. The city of Basel represents Henry's promised land, the place where he could have lived the life he desired with "a woman whom [he] actually *loved*" (TC 18), and where he could have become "an unfettered, robust, fully grown-up American expatriate dentist" (TC 19). His apparently insignificant affair with Wendy, on the other hand, appears to be no less liberating than his old dream at least insofar as it frees him of the necessity of being coherent with his previous self and enables him to start seeing his identity as mere impersonation, as a role to be played rather than a fact to be passively accepted. This is made clear in an episode told by Henry to Nathan, in which the dentist engages in a peculiar roleplaying game with his assistant:

"Look," he said, "let's pretend. You're the assistant and I'm the dentist." "But I *am* the assistant," Wendy said. "I know," he replied, "and I'm the dentist—but pretend anyway." [...] "It was, it was wild, it made us crazy—it was the strangest thing I'd ever done. We did it for weeks, pretended like that, and she kept saying, 'Why is it so exciting when all we're pretending to be is what we are?' [...]" (TC 39)

Foreshadowing a concept central to the entire novel and which will be explicitly explored towards its end, Henry finds pretending to be himself exhilarating precisely because, by acknowledging that his identity is provisional and that it depends on (artistic) choice rather than being grounded in an inescapable essentialism, he also becomes free to endlessly remake himself anew. And indeed, both Henry and Nathan will be repeatedly made anew in the course of the following chapters, staging a succession of performances scripted by Nathan's imagination in order to fully understand who they are.

3.3 "Judea" and "Aloft": First Contradictions and the Multiplicity of the Jewish-American Self

Alerted to the possible counterfactual nature of the events comprised in the novel by the paratextual indications offered both by its title and by its chapter headings, as well as by the textual clues present throughout "Basel," readers of *The Counterlife* are, nonetheless, likely to find themselves disoriented shortly after entering the world of "Judea." The first difference from the previous narrative material to be found in this second chapter is a formal one, as the events are now presented through Nathan Zuckerman's first-person narration. Despite this shift in narrative situation, however, "Judea" can initially be mistaken as introducing a coherent continuation of "Basel," since no contradictions to the facts previously presented arise for a few pages. Back to Israel after eighteen years, Nathan now recalls the occasion for his previous journey to the country: "Because *Higher Education*, my first book, had been deemed 'controversial'—garnering both a Jewish prize and the ire of a lot of rabbis—I'd been invited to Tel Aviv to participate in a public dialogue: Jewish-American and Israeli writers on the subject 'The Jew in Literature'" (TC 54). While the purpose of his current visit remains, for the moment, unknown, Zuckerman's mention of his first book and of the sensation this had caused traces a continuity with events already familiar to Roth's readers from the previous Zuckerman novels, supporting the inference that the narrative of "Judea," just like "Basel," will develop coherently from them. Throughout this and the following chapter further allusions to Nathan's past—occurring, for example, in his encounter with Jimmy, an enthusiastic fan praising *Higher*

Education and *Carnovsky*, and in the course of an animated discussion with the Lippmans about his appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine—will confirm this assumption.

“Judea” thus opens with a recollection of Nathan’s previous experience in Israel, detailing a conversation the young writer had with Shuki’s father which anticipates the thorny issue to be explored at length in this chapter, namely what it means to be an American Jew. This problem is initially presented in terms of a clear-cut dichotomy, to be complicated in what will come next, between an allegiance to “the Negev wilderness, or the Galilean hills, or the coastal plain of ancient Philistia,” embodied by Mr. Elchanan, and Nathan’s own sense of belonging to “industrial, immigrant America” (*TC* 57). After this introduction, as the narration goes back to outline the current situation, readers are faced with information which can hardly be reconciled with what they have learned in “Basel.” Comparing the Israeli mild weather to the wintry scenario he has just left behind, Nathan alludes for the first time to his life as a family man in England: “Christmas trees were already stacked on the pavement outside of our London greengrocer’s, and a few evenings back, Maria and I had taken her little daughter, Phoebe, to see the Oxford Street lights” (*TC* 60). While the name “Maria” is sure to ring a bell, the fact that this Maria lives in London with Nathan and has a daughter called Phoebe offers sufficient proof that she cannot be the same person who was mentioned in the previous chapter, namely Henry’s Swiss lover (whose daughter’s name was in fact Krystyna). Thus, the sudden appearance of Nathan’s current wife, never mentioned in “Basel,” strikes a first jarring note for readers looking for a coherent development. At the same time, her sharing Henry’s lover’s name establishes a connection between the two characters which cannot pass unnoticed, suggesting that a precise narrative choice might underlie this apparent coincidence, thus metareferentially drawing the readers’ attention to the constructedness of Nathan’s narration.

However, the most evident blow to narrative consistency comes shortly after this first incongruity, as the Henry of “Judea” is revealed to have survived the operation that had killed him in the previous chapter:

Until his trip to Israel eight months after the bypass surgery, my brother, Henry, had never shown any interest at all in the country’s existence or in its possible meaning for him as a Jewish homeland, and even that visit arose from neither an awakening of Jewish consciousness nor out of

curiosity about the archaeological traces of Jewish history but strictly as a therapeutic measure.
(*TC* 61)

Besides presenting a fact which is logically incompatible with the previous narrative material, this passage also stresses how Henry's new predicament appears to be irreconcilable with his usual desires and inclinations as known by Nathan. In other words, the new Henry featured in this second chapter differs not only, in the very fact of being alive, from the one of "Basel," but also from the person he was before undergoing the operation. The formal disruption of narrative continuity, therefore, reflects a break in the continuity of his very identity.

As shown above, Nathan's considerations in "Basel" have prepared readers to expect the narrative to present an alternative version of the events. The scenario anticipated in the first chapter, however, was a specific one, in which the writer and not the dentist would be "the Zuckerman boy in that agony" (*TC* 46). Because that hypothetical situation was clearly presented as originating from Nathan's imagination, readers have also been prepared to consider it as nonactual, as opposed to the presumed actuality of the world of "Basel." "Judea," however, does not stage the counterfactual situation readers are expecting, but rather a completely unforeseen one. This second chapter thus frustrates both generic expectations for narrative coherence and the expectations invited by the previous material for a specific (incoherent) narrative development that could easily, thanks to textual clues, be naturalized as representing a figment of the writer's imagination. The ontological hierarchy of the textual system is consequently complicated, as "Judea" adds a third unexpected scenario, whose ontological status is undecidable, to the two already presented as (presumably) factual and counterfactual, inevitably compelling readers to wonder which among the incompatible narratives presented so far they should regard as the "real" one. Indeed, no explicit allusion to the possible counterfactuality of the events of "Judea" occurs throughout the chapter. Rather, Nathan's visit to his brother and the circumstances of Henry's new life are realistically and vividly depicted over the course of almost one hundred pages, thus facilitating fictional recentering and inviting an immersive experience of this new world. In Bonnie Lyon's words, "soon after we know that Henry is 'simply' a fictive proposition, because a living being doesn't die and then not die, Roth makes the reader believe in this new

passionately Jewish Henry and care about his furious debate with Nathan in ‘Judea’” (122). Yet, as will be seen, clues that Nathan’s imagination is taking over “real” life, though not as evident as those included in “Basel,” are disseminated throughout this chapter as well.

The Henry of “Judea” has started a new life in a settlement in Agor, having unexpectedly discovered a need to embrace his Jewish origins, annihilating his egotistic self and welcoming the possibility of self-renewal offered by a collective identity. Nathan, gone to Israel to understand his brother’s sudden transformation and persuade him to go back home, has undergone a considerable change himself, as he makes clear when he tells Shuki, “I’m not living in New York anymore. I’m married to an English woman. I’ve moved to London” (*TC* 68). Just like in “Basel,” in this second chapter Nathan constantly tries to make sense of Henry’s decision, striving to make his brother’s new self cohere with his idea of him. At the same time, his incapability, as a brother, to rationalize Henry’s choice is counteracted by the pleasure he derives, as a novelist, from its “originality” (*TC* 85). The tension between these two aspects of Zuckerman’s experience is repeatedly foregrounded in the course of “Judea.” Thus, the apparent inexplicability, from a brotherly perspective, of Henry’s decision is precisely what makes it highly interesting for a writer, leading Nathan to wonder whether he would actually prefer Henry to be reasonable and self-consistent rather than unpredictably incoherent:

Wasn’t it just liberal sentimentality [...] to prefer that I had a rational brother who had emigrated to Israel for the right reasons [...]? If not sentimental, it was surely unprofessional. For observed solely from the novelist’s point of view, this was far and away Henry’s most provocative incarnation, if not exactly the most convincing—that is, it was the most eminently exploitable by me. My motives too must be taken into account. I wasn’t there *just* as his brother. (*TC* 137)

Nathan’s words, acknowledging that Henry’s “provocative incarnation” is more appealing to him than a “convincing” one inasmuch as it lends itself to be “exploited” in his works, further highlight how his perception of reality is invariably affected by his urge to fictionalize it. The passage above may, therefore, alert readers to the potential unreliability of Nathan’s first-person narration, making them suspect that Henry’s transformation might be so suitable as narrative material precisely because it *is*, in some sense, a fictional narrative ensuing from his brother’s

imagination. Whatever factual basis might have originated Nathan's account, it has become inextricable from fiction. Hence, the writer's considerations on the implausibility of his brother's self-reinvention can be taken as a covert invitation to naturalize this version of the facts by way of a metafictional explanation. At the same time, they also emphasize that, in real life, an individual's identity can hardly be reduced to a coherent narrative. "You're making this up. Carnovsky's brother on the West Bank? This is another of your hilarious ideas," Shuki insightfully tells Nathan, who promptly answers, "My sister-in-law wishes it were. No, Henry's made it up" (*TC* 78). Indeed, both may be right.

Further passages offer evidence of Nathan's fictionalizing intents. In one of them he remarks,

Not that it was filial duty alone that was goading me on. I was also deeply curious about this swift and simple conversion of a kind that isn't readily allowed to writers unless they wish to commit the professional blunder of being uninquiring. [...] Wasn't there possibly more genius than madness in this escape? However unprecedented in the annals of suffocating domesticity, wasn't this escape somehow incontestable in a way that it never would have been had he run off with an alluring patient? Certainly the rebellious script that he had tried following ten years back could hardly touch this one for originality. (*TC* 84-5)

Far from being "uninquiring," Zuckerman needs this fiction exactly to inquire into the possible reasons behind an existential choice which he cannot understand and would never make himself—a task the writer performs by projecting the consequences of that very choice onto another person who would never dream of ending up in such a predicament. Indeed, as Nathan states, "How [brothers] know each other, in my experience, is as a kind of deformation of themselves" (*TC* 84). Thus, his efforts to understand Henry's conversion, conveyed through remarks such as "The truth is that, despite my persistent effort I still didn't know, at the end of the day, how to understand my brother's relationship to Agor and to his friends there" (*TC* 136) and "I could not grasp this overnight change so against the grain of what I and everyone took to be the very essence of Henry's Henryness. [...] I don't get it" (*TC* 123), alternate with his considerations on its aesthetic appropriateness. This tension culminates in "Aloft," which

continues the narrative of “Judea,” when, on a plane to London, Nathan again reflects on his brother’s situation, this time reversing his previous position on Henry’s “originality”:

I’d tried repeatedly while I was with him to invest this escape he’d made from his life’s narrow boundaries with some heightened meaning, but in the end he seemed to me, despite his determination to be something new, just as naïve and uninteresting as he’d had always been. Even there, in that Jewish hothouse, he somehow managed to remain perfectly ordinary, while what I’d been hoping—perhaps why I’d even made the trip—was to find that, freed for the first time in his life from the protection of family responsibility, he’d become something less explicable and more original than—than Henry. [...] People don’t turn themselves over to writers as full-blown literary characters [...] Most people (beginning with the novelist—himself, his family, just about everyone he knows) are absolutely unoriginal, and his job is to make them appear otherwise. It’s not easy. If Henry was ever going to turn out to be interesting, I was going to have to do it. (*TC* 159-60)

Rejecting what seemed to be a promising narrative, Nathan now acknowledges that Henry’s new life can, after all, too easily be made to coincide with his brother’s familiar, “unoriginal” self. Never disclosing the possible fictionality of the entire scenario, Zuckerman instead goes on to state that it is in fact the realness of his brother’s situation that has made it uninteresting. Nonetheless, his metafictional remark at the end of this passage makes it evident that his representations of Henry can hardly be taken as reliable, as long as reliability is intended as adherence to factual truth. And yet, in the light of the flexible concept of truth advocated by Nathan, his narrative efforts to make people “interesting” are actually the best possible way to access, and represent, the truth about them.

Besides offering clues of a metafictional justification for the coexistence of mutually incompatible scenarios, “Judea” and “Aloft” also provide readers with new interpretive tools to read the formal fragmentation of *The Counterlife* allegorically. As the two chapters revolve around an exploration of the multiple possible ways to embody a Jewish-American identity, the reflection on the plurality of the self carried out throughout the novel is here presented in specific ethnic terms. As Shostak notes, in *The Counterlife* Roth “inquires into how an American can act—or be—authentically *Jewish*, given the fluidity of that category for the Diaspora Jew, and

whether the category is usefully delimited only by the geographical site that reverses the diasporic effect” (*Philip Roth* 131-2). The Diaspora itself represents a narrative of fragmentation, which has as its consequence the inevitable splitting of the Jewish identity between a nostalgic desire for the roots a homeland can offer and the freedom of reinvention granted by uprootedness, embodied respectively by Henry and Nathan. According to Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky, “the authentic condition of contemporary or postmodern American Jews is freedom—not an unlimited, unrestricted freedom, to be sure, but the freedom to create themselves as Jews” (“Question of Authenticity” 90; qtd. in Shostak, *Philip Roth* 111-2). Nathan, struggling to convince his brother that his Jewish roots are not to be found in a foreign country but rather at “the kitchen table in Newark” (*TC* 142) embodies precisely this position and cannot, therefore, understand Henry’s choice to embrace Zionism, “an idea that was, without a doubt, brilliant, ingenious, courageous, and vigorous in its historical time—but that doesn’t really look to me to be so very cogent to you” (*TC* 153). And yet, at the same time, Zuckerman also acknowledges that that very idea has stemmed from “[t]he construction of a counterlife that is one’s own antimyth” (*TC* 151) and that Israel is in fact “a whole *country* imagining itself” (*TC* 149), highlighting how even living on the West Bank actually implies an imaginative feat of self-reinvention. In presenting the conflict between these two modes of self-renewal without resolving it, the novel makes it clear that all the existential possibilities available to the American Jew actually represent different facets, no matter how contradictory, of the very definition of American Jew. And yet, the Jew’s self-definition is also inevitably affected by the external factor represented by others’ projections of their idea of Jewishness, whether contextualized within a historical discourse or merely stemming from ethnic stereotypes, so that, even when embracing the possibility of self-reinvention, Jews also carry the burden of others’ inventions of them. By remaking Henry, conjuring up his own imaginative versions of his brother, Nathan might be presenting exactly this idea. Thus, in his words, “The treacherous imagination is everybody’s maker—we are all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everybody else. We are all each other’s authors” (*TC* 149).

As Roth wrote down, in capitals, in his notes for *The Counterlife*, “THERE IS NO SOLUTION TO THE JEWISH QUESTION” (qtd. in Shostak, *Philip Roth* 131). Reflecting this

unsolvable tension in its narrative structure, *The Counterlife* conveys its message precisely by raising unanswerable questions. Thus, not only by presenting Nathan's and Henry's conflicting viewpoints, but also by making readers wonder whether the real Henry is the "American expatriate dentist" (TC 19) of "Basel" or the "authentic Jew" (TC 78, 158) of "Judea," does the novel suggest the impossibility to determine who or what a real American Jew is, affirming in turn the fluidity intrinsic to that very concept. It is ultimately in the acknowledgement of that fluidity, rather than in specific and inflexible stances, that lies the possibility of constant self-reinvention. Hence, as Timothy Parrish remarks, "Roth's elaborate formal strategies are not deployed only to deconstruct his works as fictions separate from life or even to engage in contemporary philosophical debates concerning the nature of the self. Rather, his formal experimentation is intimately bound up in the cultural issues he depicts" (132). The seemingly postmodern fragmentation of that linear narrative which is generally assumed to constitute our identity—a fragmentation reflected both on the thematic and the structural level of *The Counterlife*—is actually revealed, in "Judea" and "Aloft," to be grounded in the reality of a Jewish-American self torn between belonging and displacement, history and individuality, and between the desire for a shared narrative and the urge to create a personal one.

3.4 "Gloucestershire": Reveling in Self-Referentiality

The scene shifts again as soon as readers approach the beginning of the fourth chapter of *The Counterlife*. This transition is marked by a new formal change, as the events are now reported in the present tense, though still through Nathan's first-person narration. As will be seen, "Gloucestershire" is, among the five chapters of *The Counterlife*, the one resulting in the most challenging and disruptive reading experience, as its account of the events not only contradicts the previous scenarios but also features internal inconsistencies. While the previous chapters have presented mutually incompatible but internally coherent narratives, each allowing for a certain degree of aesthetic illusion also due to their length and realistic mode of representation—a mode threatened but never manifestly broken by the metareferential allusions—"Gloucestershire" makes it hard to find the "truth" even within the chapter unit.

The chapter begins by introducing, at last, the alternative scenario foreshadowed in “Basel,” when Nathan considered the possibility of imagining himself in his brother’s predicament. Hence, in “Gloucestershire” it is Nathan, rather than Henry, who suffers from a coronary disease and decides to undergo the fatal surgery. The fictional nature of this version of the facts is, remarkably, reasserted at the very beginning of the chapter, as Nathan clearly acknowledges that his new condition is merely a product of his own counterfactual imagination. Thus, racking his brains in search of the most suitable counterlife for himself, he wonders, “If for Henry there’s Wendy, who is there for me?” (TC 186). Both adherence to existential plausibility and an aesthetic taste for symmetry inform his decision: “As I haven’t had to endure his marriage or suffer his late sexual start, a vampire-seductress won’t really do to lure me to destruction. [...] If the uxorious husband and devoted paterfamilias dies for clandestine erotic fervor, then I shall turn the moral tables: I die for family life, for fatherhood” (TC 186). Hence, Zuckerman dreams of a life antithetical to his usual inclinations, in which the desire for a family supplants his lascivious entertainments and the possibility of “a calm, conventionally placid, conventionally satisfying life” (TC 207) is envisaged as opposed to the conflict and struggle he is accustomed to experiencing and usually interested in representing.

Throughout the first section of “Gloucestershire,” which presents a tripartite structure, no attempt is made to persuade readers of the actuality of the narrated events; rather their fictionality is repeatedly highlighted through further metafictional remarks, so that “[w]e know we are being taken in; there is no disingenuousness here” (Shostak, *Philip Roth* 214). Imagining the woman who would most convincingly lead his anti-self to risk his life, Zuckerman conjures up “a Maria I love more each time we meet to speak, until at last the end is ordained and I go to meet my brother’s fate. And whether in the service of flagrant unreality, who will ever know?” (TC 187). This allusion to his “brother’s fate,” together with the previous mention of Henry’s lover, explicitly places “Gloucestershire” in dialogue with “Basel,” acknowledging the situation presented in the first chapter as an antithetical model for this new version of the events. The following exchange between Nathan and Maria similarly highlights the constructedness of the entire scenario: “I say, *like Henry*, ‘This is the most difficult thing that I’ve ever had to face,’ and she answers, *like the hardhearted cardiologist*, ‘You haven’t had a difficult life then, have

you?” (TC 188, emphasis mine). Moreover, when Nathan refers to the elevator connecting his apartment to Maria’s as his “*deus ex machina* reascending” (TC 191), the status of the narrated events as purely linguistic constructs is again brought to the fore.

Although “Gloucestershire” thematizes language itself, its self-referentiality does not seem to bespeak a postmodernist belief in pantextuality implying the impossibility to penetrate the real, but rather shows that textuality can be a way for the writer to access the real imaginatively, providing him with a chance to inquire into life by way of fictional counterliving. Therefore, the entire chapter revolves around a fascination with language which is concretized in Nathan and Maria’s long conversations, compensating for Nathan’s inability to consume their affair physically and, thus, serving as a way to channel erotic desire into language (cf. Shostak, *Philip Roth* 211). However, it can be noted that “Roth explicitly treats erotic desire as textuality” (Shostak, *Philip Roth* 211) most evidently by having the writer fall in love with a fictional—or, at least, acknowledgedly fictionalized—woman. Maria’s charm, in addition, is said to lie precisely in her way of articulating sentences, thus seemingly placing further emphasis on her textual existence rather than making her stand out as a flesh-and-blood human being: “Suppose all I have fallen in love with is that voice deliciously phrasing English sentences? The man who died for the soothing sound of a finely calibrated relative clause” (TC 207).

Besides being explicitly set in opposition to the events presented in “Basel,” the narrative of the first section of “Gloucestershire” also displays a startling connection to “Judea,” since the circumstances of Nathan’s encounter with Maria in this fourth chapter almost perfectly mirror the account the writer had given to Shuki when asked about his “English wife” (TC 69). In “Judea,” Nathan had “told him how [he] had met Maria in New York a little over a year before, when she and the husband from whom she was already hopelessly estranged had moved into the duplex upstairs from [his] apartment” (TC 69) and indeed, the Maria of “Gloucestershire” is conjured up as she moves “into the duplex at the top of the brownstone” (TC 187). Nathan imagines her to be “twenty-seven, younger than [he is] by seventeen years” (TC 187), confirming the details provided in “Judea,” as the events of that chapter, in which Nathan is said to be forty-five, take place a year after their encounter. Furthermore, in “Gloucestershire” too, “[t]here is a husband and a child” (TC 187). Reasserting what readers have learned in “Judea,” the former “has grown

estranged from his pretty wife” (*TC* 187), while the latter’s name is confirmed to be Phoebe. Therefore, contrary to the order of presentation, “Gloucestershire” appears to precede the events of “Judea” chronologically. Or rather, this is the kind of naturalizing inference we as readers are inclined to draw from textual evidence. Yet, *The Counterlife* frustrates these naturalizing attempts, presenting the scenario previously referred to as the premise for the events of “Judea” with a fundamental difference, which makes it impossible to assume a chronological and causal connection between the two chapters. The discriminating factor is, of course, represented by Nathan’s illness and consequent impotence in “Gloucestershire,” causing his encounter with Maria to result, this time, in death rather than marriage. Even though the two versions of the facts are clearly mutually incompatible and should, therefore, be seen as alternative variations on the same idea, Nathan’s presentation of the early days of his relationship with Maria as manifestly fictional in “Gloucestershire” retrospectively problematizes the status of their marriage in “Judea,” putting into question the possibility of its actuality within the narrative of Zuckerman’s biography and, in turn, providing new evidence that the writer’s imagination should be considered as the origin of all narrative strands.

Once the first section of the chapter has come to an end, as Zuckerman “move[s] beyond the words to the concrete violence of surgery” (*TC* 209), a further shift in narrative situation marks the beginning of the second section. As the narrating I cannot—or, at least, is not supposed to—carry on his narration from beyond the grave, the events following Nathan’s death are presented in the third person and focalized through Henry’s perspective. After attending his brother’s funeral, incapable of forgiving Nathan’s “*deliberate* distortion” (*TC* 219) of the lives of the people closest to him, Henry creeps into the writer’s apartment, conscious that “[t]hough the brain cells might have been burned to cinders, there was still this memory bank to worry about” (*TC* 226), and starts rummaging through his notes. His fears are confirmed as soon as he finds the journals in which Nathan has transcribed “every intimate detail, recorded for posterity” of his brother’s confessions concerning his affair with Maria, and “all more compromising than he’d remembered” (*TC* 226). Henry’s outraged reaction and his consequent decision to destroy the compromising pages seem to offer sufficient proof that their content is essentially truthful. As noted by Shostak, “Henry’s appalled recognition of the events as episodes in his own life gives

credence to them as ‘fact’ in our reading [...] even though the beginning of the ‘Gloucestershire’ chapter has very clearly reminded us that this ‘Henry,’ the reader’s locus of authority at this point, is a fabrication” (*Philip Roth* 214). It is precisely the awareness, prompted by the previous section, that even Henry’s recognition of his own biographical facts in his brother’s notes stems in fact from Nathan’s counterfactual imagination that should make readers doubt the alleged authority of Zuckerman’s journal entries. Nonetheless, the third-person narrative situation, apparently authenticating the facts it portrays, makes us almost forget that Nathan’s agency is supposed to be hidden behind it.

Immediately after this (deceptive) confirmation of the authority of Nathan’s notes, a fatal blow is inflicted on the reader’s aesthetic illusion as Henry discovers a manuscript, labeled “Draft #2,” strikingly similar to the book we are reading. As he goes through each of the four chapters composing the manuscript, respectively titled “Basel,” “Judea,” “Aloft,” and “Christendom,” Henry rejects all the versions of the facts readers of *The Counterlife* have been presented with before “Gloucestershire,” as well as the one they will encounter next, as “either an outright lie or a ridiculous travesty of the facts” (*TC* 229). While the absence of the “Gloucestershire” chapter from Draft #2 enhances the sense that this stretch of narrative might be depicting actual events, which would not be part of Nathan’s fiction, this inference is incompatible with Nathan’s previous metafictional declaration that the situation he is going to present, including his death, originates from his own imagination. Readers thus find themselves in a cognitive quandary which, again, can only be solved by recognizing Nathan’s agency behind the fiction of his brother’s discovery, acknowledging that “even as Henry is apparently giving full rein to his feelings of resentment at Nathan’s appropriation of his and everyone else’s lives, he may be unwittingly participating in that appropriation” (Brauner 78).

Yet, the fact remains that the only chapter in *The Counterlife* explicitly declared by Nathan to be a fictional projection is not included in his manuscript, prompting readers to wonder whether *The Counterlife* should or should not be considered as one of the fictional author’s books—a possibility which Shostak appears to reject when she states that Nathan “does use Maria as material—but for the fiction he invents as his biography rather than the fiction he publishes” (*Philip Roth* 208). However, *The Counterlife* seems to play precisely on this

uncertainty of attribution when both Henry in “Gloucestershire” and Maria in “Christendom” allude to previous passages by referring to the specific numbers of the pages where the mentioned material can be found in the first edition of Roth’s novel (cf. Masiero, *Philip Roth* 245; Parker Royal, “Roth” 29). It is exactly this blurring of boundaries between Zuckerman’s published fiction and Zuckerman’s (fictional) life that “Gloucestershire” foregrounds, as it is also made evident by the fact that, while Zuckerman’s manuscript does not, according to the narrative, survive Henry’s destruction for posthumous publication, we are obviously able to read it nonetheless, as part of Roth’s novel.

Having stolen the first three chapters of Draft #2, Henry goes about the business of dumping them into a bin, convinced of being able, in this way, to “edit out whatever [he] like[s]” (*TC* 228) from his brother’s narrative. The very fact that we do read both about the events represented in Draft #2 and about their destruction, however, demonstrates that Henry simply cannot interfere with Nathan’s authority, and that the writer “even retains a final authority, after his ‘death’: Henry destroys most of the manuscript he finds, but the *narration* of Henry’s destruction of the manuscript is still Nathan’s—just one more speculative version of his own story. The ‘destroyed’ manuscript remains intact for us to read” (Shostak, *Philip Roth* 213). As Shostak further notes, “Nathan, unlike Henry, cannot die. As author of his own text, he cannot disappear from the text without the text itself disappearing” (“This Obsessive” 201). Playful clues that Nathan’s death is not final can be found in Henry’s persisting sense that Nathan is following him, both as he enters his apartment and wonders, “Suppose he’s tailed me and shows up here” (*TC* 225) and when, as he opens his brother’s closet to take a raincoat beneath which to disguise the stolen manuscript, he is again “overtaken by the utterly ridiculous fear that Nathan would be hiding there among the coats” (*TC* 237). These tongue-in-cheek reminders that Nathan is indeed hovering above the entire representation of the events foreshadow his final ghostly apparition in the third section of the chapter.

After the metaleptic depiction of Henry’s reading of the very book in which he appears as a character, a further instance of ontological metalepsis occurs at the end of “Gloucestershire” as the fictional Maria is made able to converse with her author. Reduced to a purely linguistic entity after his death, Nathan anonymously interviews Maria referring to himself in the third person,

thus keeping his identity hidden both from his lover and from the readers, who are, nonetheless, gradually invited to infer it. As Maria is finally able to answer positively when asked, “*You know who I am, don’t you?*” (TC 256), the “*mise en abîme* of the reading experience” (Masiero, *Philip Roth* 108) represented by their conversation aptly culminates in an acknowledgement of Nathan’s agency which “foregrounds the crucial recognition of the author’s hand—which is often buried behind this or that pronoun but remains present in a ghostly way in what he writes” (Masiero, *Philip Roth* 108).

Before that acknowledgement, however, readers are faced with a further problematization both of the previous material and of the narrative which will be presented in the last chapter. Through Maria’s confessions we learn that, like Henry, she has visited Nathan’s apartment and found the only chapter of Draft #2 still intact, namely the one which we have not yet read. As she comments on it, Maria anticipates the content of “Christendom,” already proleptically summed up by Henry in the previous section, and, just like him, denies its truthfulness, describing it merely as the embodiment of Nathan’s “longing just to shed it all and have another life, his longing to be a father and a husband, things the poor man never was” (TC 246). Remarkably, however, there is a detail which, contrary to Henry’s judgement, she confirms as true, namely the very fact of her own existence. In the previous section, Henry had felt offended by Nathan’s choice to give his own fictional wife the same name as his Swiss lover, which he had justified by observing that “Nathan called all shiksas Maria—the explanation seemed to be as ludicrously simple as that” (TC 233). In this third section, however, Nathan’s lover explicitly states that Maria is her real name—that, in fact, all the names Nathan has used in “Christendom” are real, although everything else is pure invention: “he used our names, he used people who were recognizably themselves and yet radically different. I think he might have changed the names later on. [...] Of course I can see how Mariolatry appealed to him; in the circumstances he invented, Maria is the perfect name. And if it *was* the perfect name, he might *not* have changed it” (TC 248). Hence, although the fictionality of the entire passage is made evident in Maria’s metaleptic trespassing of ontological boundaries as well as in Nathan’s physically impossible return from the dead, Maria’s allusions to her real life exceeding, and deformed by, Nathan’s representation seduce us into believing in her claim to existence. This claim is reaffirmed as she

contextualizes previous metafictional remarks made by Nathan's narrating voice in the first section of the chapter, offering naturalizing explanations for their occurrence, in a way apparently meant to deny their metatextuality and, with it, her own status as a fictional construct. Thus, according to her version of the story, Nathan "called the lift [their] *deus ex machina*" and "[h]e said to [her] before he went into the hospital, 'I'm the man who fell in love with a relative clause.'" (TC 253). Yet, despite striving to distinguish her real life from Nathan's fiction, Maria ends up confusing the two: "After reading 'Christendom' twice I went upstairs, and [...] I began to wonder which was real, the woman in the book or the one I was pretending to be upstairs. [...] I began not to know which was true and which was not, like a writer when he comes to believe that he's imagined what he hasn't" (TC 251). It could not be otherwise, since her representation in *The Counterlife* (coinciding, for a reader, with the only accessible "truth" about her) irremediably blurs the boundaries between her fictionalized self and her "real"—if ever there was one—self. And yet, as stressed by her remark that her sense of disorientation is also familiar to authors, metafictional awareness can aptly mirror a writer's everyday perception of his own life, insofar as they both revolve around a constant questioning of the line between truth and imagination.

Having both Henry and Maria deny the actuality of the events represented in Draft #2—and in *The Counterlife*—as well as affirm their own existence and make a claim to a real life which Nathan's fiction has allegedly distorted, the text paradoxically prompts readers to question even the authority of Nathan's affirmation of the fictionality of his death and of the events following from it. Indeed, the options presented in "Gloucestershire" are mutually exclusive: if Nathan's death is merely a fiction symmetrical to the truth of Henry's decease, then Henry cannot be alive and deny his death as recounted in "Basel;" if Maria is nothing more than Nathan's character, as the writer seems to suggest, she cannot have a life outside of Nathan's fiction. As each character is, though only apparently, given the chance to voice his or her own version of the "truth," the three sections composing "Gloucestershire" engage readers in a constant process of "[r]etrospective repatterning" (Perry 60), repeatedly inducing them to replace an old frame with a new one "in order to reconcile a contradiction" (Perry 60) and be able to find a safe point of reference in a chaos of mutually negating scenarios. Thus, as Shostak observes, "[i]n eliciting

readers' assumptions that he will tell the 'truth,' Roth appeals to a kind of readerly eros, a desire to make a whole out of the disparate parts of the novel and to find a stable center of meaning" (*Philip Roth* 214). The retrospective repatterning, however, never leads readers to a final solution, frustrating their efforts to locate the textual actual world at the center of the textual system of *The Counterlife*. Thus, the "dynamic ontological hierarchy" (Dannenberg 121) projected by *The Counterlife* seems never to stabilize. We can reasonably affirm that, within the boundaries of Roth's fictional universe, Nathan is not "really" dead, but what about Henry? Can the narrative of "Basel" be believed or are those events just, in Henry's own words, "either an outright lie or a ridiculous travesty of the facts" (*TC* 230)? Taking to the extreme the metafictional game of deception and disorientation carried out throughout the novel, "Gloucestershire" eventually forces readers to realize that they should simply stop asking such questions. Once they are able to acknowledge the contradictions without striving to solve them, recognizing that all the narrative trajectories presented in *The Counterlife* are equally possible, not even Henry's and Maria's proleptic negations of the truthfulness of the "Christendom" chapter about to be presented can represent a serious disruption of their reading experience. After the aesthetic illusion has been shattered, what remains is another kind of game of make-believe,¹⁸ one in which "writer and reader become accomplices in 'maintaining together' two mutually conflicting versions of the present imaginatively" (Masiero, *Philip Roth* 105).

3.5 "Christendom": Abandoning the Search for the Truth

Due to the "recency effect" (Perry 57) exerted by the previous chapter, readers approach the beginning of "Christendom" acutely aware of its fictionality. At this point it has become clear that no assertion made by the characters of *The Counterlife* can be truly authoritative, since all voices are invariably "ventriloquized" by Zuckerman, yet both Henry's and Maria's claims that the facts depicted in "Christendom" are false proleptically bring into question the ontological status of the world projected by the last chapter, making it impossible for readers to expect from it a final trustworthy representation of the textual actual world. As Shostak notes, Roth thus denies both

¹⁸ The notion of "make-believe," as theorized by Kendall L. Walton, is pivotal both to a theory of aesthetic illusion (cf. Wolf, "Illusion (Aesthetic)" para. 8) and to many versions of possible worlds theory (cf. Ryan, "Possible Worlds").

the beginning and the ending of *The Counterlife* the conventional authority generally conferred to these textual positions (cf. *Philip Roth* 215). Not only do Henry's and Maria's statements in "Gloucestershire" frustrate every readerly hope that the narrative might be progressing towards an eventual disclosure of the truth, but "the self-referential marking of ['Christendom'] as an already existing document *before* it appears to us as readers also denies it the inevitability of a conclusion" (Shostak, *Philip Roth* 215), making it impossible for us to follow the general rule proposed by Peter J. Rabinowitz and "trust the last" (155; qtd. in Shostak, *Philip Roth* 215). Interestingly, however, Rabinowitz also acknowledges that this rule, according to which "[i]f [...] a text proffers a series of variations on the same story [...] we are generally to accept the final version [...] as the 'correct' one," does not always apply, as shown by many narratives which, on the contrary, "move from clarity to ambiguity" (155). Yet, according to Rabinowitz, even the "ambiguity" concluding such narratives usually sheds light on what has come before, precisely insofar as it highlights the falsity of their initial "clarity" (cf. 155). This seems, indeed, to be the case of *The Counterlife*, since it is exactly by showing the futility of every attempt to find a definite truth in the previous material that the final pages of "Christendom" provide readers with the key to grasp its underlying meaning.

Before those final revealing pages, however, readers are invited to recenter into Zuckerman's last counterlife. The task comes as a surprisingly easy one, as "Christendom" resumes a realistic narration, luring readers into its storyworld and prompting them to background their awareness of its fictionality. The power of *The Counterlife* to engage readers emotionally in the represented events despite repeatedly alerting them to their artificiality is aptly commented upon by Posnock, as he observes,

A reader's capacity to suspend disbelief in narrative while simultaneously knowing that deflation looms has the curious effect not of instilling distrust in the fictive but rather the opposite: it encourages pleasure in the story while knowing it is hedged by the precarious and temporary. [...] As if by exposing the backstage machinery of fiction making—a practice ubiquitous in daily life—our confidence in its power is reaffirmed. (132)

In a book stating that life and fiction are inextricably interlocked, metafictionality becomes a way to reflect not only on narrative but also on life itself and on the ways in which we all construct stories to account for our identities, since, in Zuckerman's words, "we all create imagined worlds, often green and breastlike, where we may finally be 'ourselves'" (TC 326). In "Christendom" Nathan powerfully asserts his own impossibility to distinguish those imagined worlds from reality when he finally reveals that not even his journals, which readers have been tricked, up to this point, to consider as the only reliable source of factual truths within an ontologically unstable universe—the only material unfiltered by Nathan's distortion—are in fact an "ever-enlarging storage plant for [his] narrative factory, where there is no clear demarcation dividing actual happenings eventually consigned to the imagination from imaginings that are treated as having actually occurred—memory as entwined with fantasy as it is in the brain" (TC 268). Once even that last source of authority has been discredited, readers can only abandon the search for truth and enjoy Zuckerman's fiction as such, recognizing its faithfulness to the incongruity of life.

Alive again, in "Christendom" Nathan resumes his first-person narration, presenting a narrative which follows directly from the events of "Judea" passing over the farcical interlude of "Aloft." At the opening of this last chapter, the writer has just arrived in England after a "quiet flight up from Tel Aviv" and finds himself, significantly, "seated in a church in London's West End" (TC 259) with his pregnant Christian wife Maria and her daughter Phoebe. It is in this alien environment chosen as the stage for his fantasy of domesticity that Zuckerman feels an unprecedented necessity to affirm his identity as a Jew, as he makes explicit from the beginning, stating, "I am never more a Jew than I am in a church when the organ begins" (TC 260). Because conflict represents for him the kernel of existence, as well as the origin of all narrative possibilities, his identity can only be defined negatively, by setting it in opposition to what it is not. Thus, while Henry has found his chance of self-definition in his assimilation into a group of people calling themselves "we," Nathan discovers his Jewish self when this is measured against the counternarrative professed by "them." Not by way of inclusion but by way of opposition can Zuckerman finally call himself a Jew, imaginatively engaging in the narratively interesting, if existentially vexing, struggle against the Other represented by Christian England. Therefore, although Nathan's marriage to Maria would embody a possible resolution of the very conflict

between Jewishness and Christianity, as well as a promise of synthesis of the two in their future offspring, it is impossible for the writer to imagine and represent a peace undisturbed by struggle. Rather than commit to the narration of that peace, Zuckerman seems to see his union with Maria as an enticing possibility precisely because it engenders a contradiction bearing in itself the seeds of conflict. It is in the implausibility of that marriage—similar to the unlikelihood of Henry’s conversion in “Judea”—that lies its narrative interest, an implausibility Nathan himself acknowledges early on in the chapter as he notes that his wife and he “must certainly have seemed [...] to be a strangely incongruous couple” (*TC* 261). He further observes, “Whenever our union seemed incongruous even to me, I wondered if it wasn’t a mutual taste for incongruity—for assimilating a slightly untenable arrangement, a shared inclination for the sort of unlikeness that does not, however, topple into absurdity—that accounted for our underlying harmony” (*TC* 261). In the light of Nathan’s attraction towards situations of strife, however, it is not difficult to infer that this alleged “harmony” originating from a “mutual taste for incongruity” can only be short-lived.

Hence, Zuckerman’s potential pastoral dream turns into a nightmare of anti-Semitic hostility as he is first confronted with Maria’s sister’s and mother’s prejudices and then becomes the target of an anti-Semitic remark at the restaurant where he is having dinner with his wife. However, since both Maria’s family’s resentment and the scene at the restaurant have already been declared to be mere fabrications by Maria in “Gloucestershire,” readers come to these episodes aware that Nathan is experiencing them only because he finds it fitting to include them in the fiction of his own counterlife. Indeed, as the narrative progressively shifts again into overt self-referentiality, the writer finds himself wondering “if [he] wasn’t *wanting* the anti-Semitism to be there” (*TC* 311), thus acknowledging that conflict must necessarily intrude even on the scenario he imagines as his dream life because it satisfies a deep-seated aesthetic (and epistemological) need. Repeatedly inciting himself—as well as the readers—to “imagine,” Zuckerman finally gives up the illusionistic trick and admits that his mind is the source of all projections. However, as the fictionality of the entire scenario is gradually disclosed, Zuckerman also betrays, quite surprisingly, his longing for a “real” peaceful life beyond fiction:

Imagine Maria gone, my life *without* all that, imagine no outer life of any meaning, myself completely otherness and reabsorbed within—all the voices once again only mine ventriloquizing, all the conflicts germinated by the tedious old clashing of contradictions within. Imagine—instead of a life inside something other than a skull, only the isolating unnaturalness of self-battling. No no—no, no, no, this chance may be my last and I’ve disfigured myself enough already. When I return, let me find in bed, beneath our blanket, all those beautiful undulations that are not syntactical, hips that are not words, soft living buttocks that are not my invention—let me find sleeping there what I’ve worked for and what I want, a woman with whom I am content, pregnant with our future, her lungs quietly billowing with life’s real air. For if she should be gone, should there be only a letter beside my pillow... (TC 315)

While Nathan knows that the harmony of married life simply does not suit him, he also needs Maria in order not to be “otherless.” It should be observed that not only is Maria “a figure of fantasy embodying a double otherness—she is both woman and a Christian” (Shostak, *Philip Roth* 208), but she is also an overtly fictionalized—if not entirely fictional—person. She thus comes to embody the perfect antithesis against which Nathan can measure himself as a man, a Jew, and an author, representing a final conflation of all the “forms of counterliving, of experiencing oneself as more than one self” (Cohen 88) the writer has explored throughout the novel. Indeed, it is as a fictional character metaleptically threatening to “leav[e] the book” (TC 316) that she reappears now for the final confrontation. Yet, once her existence has been acknowledged to be merely textual, she can only come back as a disembodied textual agency, by way of a letter addressed to her author.

Recognizing that the version of her to be found in Zuckerman’s fiction is nothing more than “somebody else’s invention” (TC 316), Maria eventually gives up her claims to an existence outside of that fiction. Hence, she acknowledges that even “Gloucestershire,” namely the chapter in which she advocated precisely that kind of existence, was in fact an imaginative projection of Nathan’s, by writing, “It was not fair to put me through your illness and the operation and your death” (TC 316), and even contradicts her previous assertion that “Maria” is her real name as she now states, “I think Maria is a nice enough name for other people, but not for me” (TC 323). Significantly, she also recapitulates all the counterfactual scenarios comprised in *The Counterlife*, unmistakably attributing their invention to Zuckerman: “You weren’t beyond killing your brother,

you weren't beyond killing yourself, or grandiosely amusing yourself on the plane up from Israel by staging a lunatic hijack attempt" (TC 317). Maria's reiterated accusations, directed at Nathan in the second person, offer new evidence that the writer's imagination is the radiating center of all narrative trajectories, enabling readers to naturalize the entire book as a receptacle for his fictional projections. The multiple incompatible narratives of *The Counterlife* can thus finally be reunited within the same universe, as a series of alternative possible worlds revolving around the textual actuality of Zuckerman's mind. However, it must be emphasized that the boundaries of the textual reference world in which Zuckerman resides remain blurred, precisely because, being at the same time both an author and a product of fiction, Zuckerman can conjure up fictional scenarios to inhabit and fellow fictional characters with whom to interact. Hence, Maria is the fictional companion Zuckerman creates for himself, metaleptically bringing a hypodiegetic narrative into the diegetic level of his own story, making her "not merely a character, or even a character, but the real living tissue of [his] life" (TC 323), mixing, in other words, his own reality with his own fiction.

In his answer to Maria the writer makes it clear that his fictional conjuring up of possibilities is not just a narrative game but actually reflects an existential condition, serving as a way to compensate for his "absence of a self" (TC 324) through "a variety of impersonations" (TC 325). Now it is his turn to sum up and justify the counterfactual scenarios of *The Counterlife*, showing how they all serve to mirror not only the constant self-reinvention everybody enacts, but also a universal need for escape from the burden of one's self as determined by "history's mold" and "the dirty, disfiguring reality of the piled-up years" (TC 326), envisaging in turn an idyllic alternative:

this is what Judea means to, of all people, that belligerent, unillusioned little band of Jews... also what Basel meant to claustrophobic Henry listlessly boxed-in back in Jersey... also—let's face it—something like what you and Gloucestershire once meant to me. Each has its own configuration, but whether set in the cratered moonscape of the Pentateuch, or in the charming medieval byways of orderly old Schweiz, or the mists and the meadows of Constable's England, at the core is the idyllic scenario of redemption through the recovery of a sanitized, confusionless life. (TC 326)

Yet, that kind of pastoral fantasy is neither tenable in real life nor sufficiently interesting from a narrative standpoint: “How moving and pathetic those pastorals are that cannot admit contradiction or conflict!” (*TC* 326). Even Zuckerman’s dream of a life with Maria must, therefore, eventually be given up.

3.6 *The Facts*: Disnarrating Maria

In an interview about *The Counterlife*, Roth has explained the intent driving his novel as follows: “I wanted to see what the intelligence I call Zuckerman could yield up unencumbered by the ordeal of his own development” (“Philip Roth” 199). This claim is relevant insofar as it confirms the readerly assumption that Zuckerman is indeed supposed to undergo a coherent “development” over the course of Roth’s works, and that the incongruous narrative strands comprised in *The Counterlife* are meant to represent his temporary escape from textual actuality into a number of virtual possible worlds. In this virtual space Nathan can embrace existential possibilities which would be implausible if concretized within the narrative trajectory set out for him by his author. Instead, “unencumbered by his own development,” Zuckerman is freed of the need to be consistent with his previous selves, able to declare himself “unwilling or unable to perpetrate upon [himself] the joke of a self” (*TC* 324) and to perform, instead, “a variety of impersonations” (*TC* 325). If we rationalize *The Counterlife* in these terms, however, we would expect Zuckerman’s consistent development to be resumed in the subsequent books featuring him, thus allowing us to regain access to the textual actual world of his life. It is therefore surprising to find the writer still living with his pregnant wife Maria—even though *The Counterlife* has made it possible to infer the non-actuality of that version of the events—when he reappears in Roth’s 1988 autobiography *The Facts*. The final pages of *The Facts* are, therefore, worth taking a closer look, as they offer a continuation and a further exploration of the issues raised at the end of *The Counterlife*.

In a new variation on the metaleptic letter exchange between author and character, Roth’s autobiography is framed by his own correspondence with Nathan Zuckerman. An initial letter from Roth to his character, in which the real author asks the fictional one for his opinion on the manuscript of his autobiography, opens the book, while Nathan’s answer, advising Roth against

publication, closes it. It is in these last pages that Maria makes her reappearance, as Zuckerman recapitulates his current circumstances, seemingly validating the events presented in the “Christendom” chapter of *The Counterlife*, and tells Roth what his wife and he think about his manuscript. Nonetheless, an attentive reading of this letter reveals that Maria’s presence in *The Facts*, far from reaffirming the necessity of her existence at Nathan’s side, actually paves the way for her eventual erasure from the narrative of Zuckerman’s life. It can therefore be shown that the hypothesis of Maria and Nathan’s peaceful marriage is presented again in *The Facts* only to rule it out for good.

Whereas at the end of *The Counterlife* Maria accused Nathan of being unable to imagine for them, and therefore to enable them to experience, a life without “irresolvable conflict” (*TC* 317), the responsibility for the contrasts threatening their marriage is now attributed to Roth himself, as both Maria and Zuckerman, after reading his autobiography, realize that they are in fact at the mercy of their author. Reproaching Roth for not being as honest in his latest book as he is in his fiction, Zuckerman notes that what is missing from Roth’s representation of his own life is precisely “the struggle, the *struggling* you” (Roth, *The Facts* 165).¹⁹ Stifled by “inhibition” and “self-censorship” (*TF* 191) the inquiring force of Roth’s narrative cannot, according to Nathan, express itself freely outside of his fiction. It is exactly for this reason that Roth needs Zuckerman, who indeed tells him, “Your medium for the really merciless self-evisceration, your medium for genuine self-confrontation, is me” (*TF* 185). Because it is only through fiction that Roth can, in his character’s view, be truthful to the inherent conflicts and contradictions of life, a fiction without struggle, a representation of a pastoral dream of married peace implying a resolution of the contrast between Jewishness and Christianity, simply cannot appeal to him, as it would be only “an implausible solution to an intractable conflict” (*TF* 195). Maria too, after reading Roth’s manuscript and seeing how preoccupied he still is with “that Jewish stuff” (*TF* 188), dreads the consequences that her author’s imperishable necessity to explore conflictual situations will have on his fiction, that is on her life: “Doesn’t bode well, does it?” (*TF* 188) she asks. What Maria desires above all is, instead, an “uninteresting” (*TF* 192) life: “But I don’t *want* to be interesting!” she exclaims, “I want to be left alone with the things that are of no great interest at all. Bringing

¹⁹ Future references to the book will be included in the text thus: (*TF* x).

up a child. Not neglecting an aging parent. Staying sane” (*TF* 192). As these are, however, exactly the things Roth *cannot* include in his fiction, Maria simply cannot stay in his representation of Zuckerman’s life.

Throughout *The Counterlife* the word “interesting” is repeatedly associated with contradiction and conflict, thus aptly mirroring Marie-Laure Ryan’s assertion that “[c]onflict between distinct domains is the most productive situation for narrative development. Narrative is a competitive game and cannot go on without opposition” (*Possible Worlds* 122). In Ryan’s view, conflict represents one of the fundamental elements that account for narrative tellability, which she defines according to the following principle: “*seek the diversification of possible worlds in the narrative universe*” (*Possible Worlds* 156). Because she wants a life without conflict, Maria dreams a narrative that is simply not tellable, as its characters’ model worlds would be in harmony with, rather than diverging from, the textual actual world. As she states, “Existence isn’t always crying out for the intervention of the novelist. Sometimes it’s crying out to be lived” (*TF* 191). While this is certainly true for real people, it cannot apply to fictional characters—or, at least, not to Roth’s characters.

In the above discussion of the “Basel” chapter of *The Counterlife* it has been observed that the counter-conversation between Carol and Nathan at Henry’s funeral showcases an evident example of the strategy Prince has termed the “disnarrated.” Interestingly, the ending of *The Facts* features Maria’s own explication of the same technique, which she refers to by the Latin term *occupatio*, and which she resents Roth for not employing in his autobiography:

“[...] I’m interested in the things an autobiographer like him does not put into his autobiography. The stuff people take for granted. Like how much you have to live on and what you eat, what your window looks out on and where you go for walks. Maybe there should, at least, be some of what Cicero calls *occupatio*. You know, ‘I’m not going to talk about this, so I can talk about that,’ and in that way you do talk about this.” “What’s it called?” I asked her. “*Occupatio*. It’s one of those Latin rhetorical figures. ‘Let us not speak of the wealth of the Roman Empire, let us not speak of the majesty of the invading troops, et cetera,’ and by not speaking about it you’re speaking about it. A rhetorical device whereby you mention something by saying you’re not going to mention it. [...]” (*TF* 190)

By being conjured up again at the end of *The Facts*, Maria herself is being disnarrated, as her last appearance shows that she represents what is not sufficiently interesting to be narrated extensively and yet is worth mentioning *en passant*, as a necessary counterargument to Zuckerman's life, a possibility of peace counterbalancing the ever-present contrast and struggle. Drawing on Prince's theorization, Ryan defines the "disnarrated" as consisting "of the surplus of what is told over what exists in TRW" (*Possible Worlds* 166). Assuming that Nathan's actual development indeed takes place within a consistent textual reference world that readers can reconstruct from its representations in the Zuckerman Books,²⁰ Maria appears to embody exactly the "surplus" which does not belong in it.

Hence, among the different types of disnarrated individuated by Ryan, both the situation presented at the end of *The Facts* and all the counterfactual scenarios of *The Counterlife* seem to fall into the one described as an "[o]utline of a narrative possibility not chosen by the creator of the textual universe" (*Possible Worlds* 167). Through this metafictional kind of "disnarrated" a number of universes are created which "are rejected, yet made visible within the semantic domain globally projected by the text," thus "explod[ing] the semantic domain from a system of worlds to a system of universes" (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 169). Because Ryan conceives tellability exclusively as a feature of plot rather than discourse (cf. *Possible Worlds* 149), this variant of the strategy described by Prince is, according to her, unrelated to tellability. Yet, she recognizes that even the types of "disnarrated" that pertain exclusively to the discourse level of a narrative "fulfill, within the global semantic domain, the same aesthetic purpose as does within the plot the principle calling for the multiplication of virtual narratives: they trace forking paths on the textual map, thereby increasing the size and diversity of the territory traveled in imagination" (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 169).

²⁰ According to Uri Margolin, "if original and version [of a fictional IND] occur in texts by the same author, and if they and their surrounding worlds can be seen as compatible, we are ready to construe each of these texts as a partial description of one and the same IND's life story" ("Fictional Individuals" 45). The inter-textual relation between the original individual and his or her versions becomes, in this case, a "relation of sameness" and the single texts in which he or she appears are not to be seen as separate storyworlds, but rather can be "combined or joined" (Margolin, "Fictional Individuals" 46). To what degree the worlds projected by each of the books featuring Zuckerman are "compatible" and can therefore be integrated in a single coherent storyworld is not so easy to determine, as the example of Maria's ambiguous status shows.

Interestingly, however, *The Counterlife* appears to complicate this clear-cut separation between actualized possibilities and narrative trajectories that are only contemplated but never actualized. As long as Zuckerman is made able to conjure up fictional scenarios for himself to explore and inhabit, showing how truth and fiction inevitably merge in the life of a fictional character who is also a writer, even the narrative hypotheses which are only temporarily concretized and subsequently discarded can be considered as no less relevant to his life story and to the construction of his identity than the ones reaffirmed over the course of the Zuckerman Books as belonging to the textual reference world in which the narrator is ideally located. Hence, while *The Counterlife* might easily be considered as a text having, in Ryan's terms, an "empty center," namely one that "limits its assertions to worlds at the periphery, avoiding the representation of an actual world" (*Possible Worlds* 39), once we acknowledge the performative force of Zuckerman's statements as he merges life and imagination, it seems more apt and less simplistic to regard the center of the textual universe as "unknowable" (*Possible Worlds* 40), since the narrative in fact "blurs the distinctions between TAW and the worlds at the periphery (i.e., the private worlds of characters)" (*Possible Worlds* 40). As Maria's (short-lived) existence beyond *The Counterlife* proves, Zuckerman's private worlds can indeed concretize and merge with the TAW, resulting in an indeterminacy which is not only epistemological but also ontological.

Yet, as Maria insightfully tells Zuckerman in her letter at the end of *The Counterlife*, the fictional writer's dream of a peaceful life with her is actually just a way "to rise in exuberant rebellion against *your* author" (*TC* 317). In *The Facts* Zuckerman makes it clear that his own authority is, indeed, inevitably subjected to Roth's authority and that his rebellion—envisaging a life of tranquillity—is, therefore, about to be suppressed. Accused by Maria of having grown a beard only to reaffirm his Jewishness even more blatantly, Nathan initially denies his wife's conviction that this change be meant as a provocation, but is then forced to acknowledge that, in fact, that could be precisely its function in Roth's plans. He thus admits that his agency is only delusional and that his author is the one responsible for planting the possibility of contrast in his fictional life with Maria. Hence, he asks Roth,

How can our harmonious contentment last much longer when the household's future *is* being determined by someone with your penchant for dramatic upheaval? How can we really believe that this beard means nothing when you, who have rabbinically bearded me, appear in even just your first few pages to be more preoccupied than ever in your life with the gulf between gentile and Jew? (*TF* 193-4)

Maria too, however, knows that Roth is the one to blame, even more than Nathan, for threatening their tranquillity. As much as it might be a fact of life, uninteresting peace cannot last in Roth's fiction, as Maria acknowledges when she exclaims, "To have spent all of this evening reading this book—and now I feel so defenseless against what I just know is coming!" (*TF* 193). It is as if, by writing his own life story, Roth had come to acknowledge an even stronger need to delve imaginatively into the struggle at the core of his reality, eventually resolving to heed Zuckerman's advice: "your talent for self-confrontation is best served by sticking with me—however much that argument, if persuasive to you, virtually guarantees the unfolding of the worst of our fears" (*TF* 195).

Roth's characters' fears will, indeed, be confirmed in *American Pastoral*, the next book featuring Nathan Zuckerman and published nine years after *The Facts*, as no trace either of Maria or of her child will be left as soon as Zuckerman is, again, encumbered with his own development. Whether Maria has actually been part of Zuckerman's life—and of his textual reference world—is left ambiguous, as the only possible acknowledgement of her existence is to be found in Jerry's inquiry as to whether Nathan is still "living in England with an aristocrat" (who might or might not be her) to which Nathan bluntly replies, "I live in New England now, without an aristocrat" (Roth, *American Pastoral* 63). Yet, in a new turn of events, Zuckerman's recapitulation of his past in the first volume of the American trilogy surprisingly includes "a quintuple bypass operation" (Roth, *American Pastoral* 62) occurred ten years before. The imaginative possibility that, in *The Counterlife*, had resulted in his death is therefore actualized but given a different outcome: Nathan (of course) survives. Deprived of the harmony of family life, he can now go back to narrate the struggle and contradictions intrinsic to existence, embodied, this time, by the story of Seymour "Swede" Levov.

4. “What if we had a chance to do it again and again [...]?”²¹:

Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life*

4.1 Preparatory Paratextual Elements and Narrative Structure

How a writer can transform life into fiction, a theme central both to *4 3 2 1* and *The Counterlife*, is only touched upon in Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life*. Yet, while never overtly venturing into the metafictional territory explored both by Paul Auster and Philip Roth, Atkinson’s novel features, nonetheless, a character with a Zuckerman-like tendency to deform the lives of others. The author in question is eccentric aunt Izzie, who writes children books inspired by her nephews. Hence, when young Teddy is given a novel loosely based on him and titled *The Adventures of Augustus* as a birthday gift, the following exchange between his mother Sylvie and his aunt ensues:

“Why is everything an ‘adventure’ with you?” Sylvie said irritably to Izzie.

“Because life is an adventure, of course.”

“I would say it was more of an endurance race,” Sylvie said. “Or an obstacle course.” (Atkinson, *Life After Life* 218-9)²²

The “obstacle course” metaphor is definitely a suitable one to describe Ursula Todd’s experience of her multiple lives in Atkinson’s novel, as well as a reader’s journey through them. The premise of *Life After Life* is easily summed up: each time Ursula Todd dies, her life starts over again. The circumstances into which she is born are always the same, as she repeatedly sees the light (when she does not die at birth) during a snowstorm on the night of 11 February 1910. Each time her story restarts, however, turns of chance and different choices produce divergent paths for her to walk down—paths which are, indeed, laden with obstacles to overcome. Every time one of these hindrances proves fatal to her, the loop begins again, offering her another chance to avoid as many dangers as possible and, thus, move on to the next stage of her life. “Practice makes perfect” is Ursula’s mother’s motto, frequently repeated throughout the novel as a catchphrase

²¹ Kate Atkinson, *Life After Life* 522.

²² Future references to the novel will be included in the text thus: (*LAL* x).

summarizing the goal of the entire narrative game. Through reiterated attempts, Ursula strives to make her life perfect, or at least as good as it can be—a task which requires finding a fine balance between what can be saved and what has to be sacrificed. Of course, there is a catch: Ursula is not fully aware of her power. Her endeavors are, therefore, flawed by her intermittent ignorance of her previous lives and deaths, as these only occasionally reveal themselves to her in sudden *deja-vu*-like glimpses. When she manages to survive childhood misadventures, her efforts to save herself and others are certainly not made easier by her having to endure the perils of World War II.

Hence, after dying at birth stifled by her own umbilical cord, Ursula is born again. As she survives suffocation, however, she can either meet death by drowning in the sea or be saved by a stranger but fall from a window just one year later. Finally managing, in one branch, to avoid the Spanish flu after no less than four deaths from that illness, in an alternate life she has to endure rape, an unwanted pregnancy and consequent abortion, and a disastrous marriage to a violent husband who eventually kills her. When all the previous dangers are successfully escaped, Ursula lives to see World War II, only to die (repeatedly) in the London Blitz. Another timeline, in which she settles in Germany and becomes friends with Hitler's mistress Eva Braun, is cut short when the misery of the post-war days forces her to choose suicide. Back in London, she does voluntary work among the bombed-out buildings as a member of a rescue squad. In this version she survives the Blitz and only dies many years later, but has to deal, instead, with the loss of her brother Teddy. Most remarkably, in a couple of timelines, Ursula dies as she tries to kill Hitler (whether successfully or not is left unclear).

As Ursula's many life journeys succeed each other, the narrative keeps readers engaged by moving progressively nearer the best possible world, yet never settling into a definitive version of the events. Therefore, as Janet H. Murray observes on her website, the structure of *Life After Life* is remarkably similar to a videogame played over and over again (cf. "Narrative Design Example"). Furthermore, Murray interestingly considers Atkinson's novel to be "a significant harbinger of an emerging interactive narrative genre—the Replay Story," which she defines as "an interactive digital story structure in which the same scenario is offered for replay with significant variations based on parameters that the interactor may control or merely witness in

action” (“Narrative Design Example”). Differently from videogame players, however, readers of *Life After Life* have no control over the protagonist’s moves, which they can only observe from the superior position granted to them by their global knowledge of all her previous attempts.

“What if we had a chance to do it again and again [...] until we finally did get it right? Wouldn’t that be wonderful?” (*LAL* 522-3) asks Edward “Teddy” Todd to her sister in one version of the story. Atkinson, however, anticipates this question—and, with it, the core concept of the book—by placing it at the entrance of its storyworld, together with two other telling epigraphs. The first of these is a well-known excerpt from Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*, evoking the notion of eternal return in the demon’s line: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live it once more and innumerable times more,” while the second one is a sentence from Plato’s *Cratylus*, reading, “Everything changes and nothing remains still.” All three epigraphs are, thus, clearly meant to prepare readers for the non-linear and repetitive narrative structure awaiting them. Before these quotations, however, the first paratextual hint at the premise of the novel is to be found, of course, in its title, which sets the readers’ expectations at first glance. The blurb on the back cover, moreover, confirms the multiple-life hypothesis invited by the title, disclosing the gist of Ursula’s story. The cover image, similarly contributing to the readers’ expectations, will be discussed in detail later on. Hence, when they start their journey into the narrative, readers of *Life After Life* are ideally already alerted to its unnaturalness.

A further interesting paratextual element in *Life After Life* is represented by the division into sections and chapters. While the dates used as chapter headings helpfully allow readers to keep track of the various moments in Ursula’s lives, regardless of the frequent jumps and gaps in their chronology, the section titles are not always as clarifying. Sometimes alternative versions of the same time span are presented in different sections sharing the same title; for example, all (eleven) variations on the events taking place on the night of Ursula’s birth are presented in sections titled “Snow.” In other cases, however, events from alternative timelines are grouped together within the same section. In the only section titled “Like a Fox in a Hole,” for instance, the narrative advances linearly from 1923 up to Ursula’s death over the course of six chapters titled “September 1923,” “December 1923,” “11 February 1926,” “May 1926,” “August 1926,” and “June 1932,” but is then wound back in two subsequent chapters titled, again, “11 February

1926” and “August 1926,” which offer a new version of those days as unfolding in Ursula’s new life. This alternate timeline, starting in the last two chapters of “Like a Fox in a Hole,” is then apparently carried on in the subsequent section, “A Lovely Day Tomorrow,” which ends with Ursula’s death in 1940. Alternatives to the events of “A Lovely Day Tomorrow” are presented in the two following sections of the same name. The third of these sections, however, similarly to “Like a Fox in a Hole,” continues after Ursula’s death to present a new alternative to the events of “August 1926.”

As it should be clear from this cursory overview, the narrative does not always restart from Ursula’s birth; rather, it repeatedly offers fragmentary variations on relevant moments of her life. Murray considers this strategy, whereby “the story does not include everything that happens in a particular timespan, only the most dramatically significant, character-expressive, thematically-relevant, and causally-connected moments” as one of the six crucial design strategies for replay stories, which she terms “Dramatic compression” (“Six key design strategies”).

It should be observed that, although the division into sections could have been usefully employed to demarcate the boundaries of each different timeline, *Life After Life* manifestly avoids providing readers with such a clear-cut separation. As a result, readers trying to establish chronological and causal links between different fragments will, at times, be confused as to which narrative branch is currently being presented. In fact, in Murray’s words, “[t]here are multiple ways in which Ursula can survive strangulation or the 1918 flu or the 1926 rape threat. We are made aware of all these possibilities, but we seem not to be expected to keep track of which exact timeline she is on, only the parameters most relevant to the current situation” (“Replay Story Structure”). Therefore, as opposed to Paul Auster’s *4 3 2 1*, in which the protagonist’s four lives are kept unmistakably distinct by their numbering and unfold in parallel through a regular alternation of chapters of similar length, the convoluted order of presentation of Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life* makes it hard for readers to navigate Ursula’s multiple lives without getting, at least occasionally, lost. Moreover, both chapters and sections in Atkinson’s novel vary considerably in length, endowing its narrative with an irregular rhythm which enhances its sense of fragmentation.

In what follows I will provide an analysis of *Life After Life*, first showing how the novel enables readers to familiarize with its unnatural textual system and internalize its rules, then moving on to the explanations suggested by the text to naturalize its plural realities, also taking into account the suitability of a “multiverse” interpretation. Successively, I will discuss the obstacles posed by the repetitive narrative structure to emotional immersion and aesthetic illusion, as well as the elements that, on the contrary, support an immersive experience of the story and motivate readers to read on. The protagonist’s progress towards a final goal through subsequent lives will be examined in detail, showing how this can give unity to an otherwise fragmented narrative, but also how the novel complicates its teleological unfolding. Finally, I will present the allegorical readings invited by the text and consider the possibility of a metafictional interpretation.

4.2 Setting the Readers’ Expectations and Establishing the Rules of the Fictional Universe

The first section in the novel, “Be Ye Men of Valour,” is composed of a single two-page chapter, set, as the heading makes clear, in November 1930. Readers make their entrance into the storyworld of Atkinson’s novel *in medias res*, as a third-person narrative presents them with an anonymous “she” going inside a Munich café. The woman, who is English, joins a group of Germans eating cake and talks to an unnamed “he.” Then, she secretly draws a gun from her bag and, in what the text enigmatically reveals to be “[a] move rehearsed a hundred of times” (*LAL* 20), aims it at the man’s chest. In case readers have not guessed it by the end of the chapter, the man’s identity is eventually disclosed:

“*Führer*,” she said, breaking the spell. “*Für Sie*.”

Around the table guns were jerked from holsters and pointed at her. One breath. One shot.

Ursula pulled the trigger.

Darkness fell. (*LAL* 20)

These concise last lines make it clear that the victim of the assassination attempt, carried out by a woman named Ursula, is none other than Adolph Hitler. Yet, a number of questions arise. Who is this woman, and how can she possibly be aware, as early as 1930, of the threat Hitler will come

to represent in a few years? Why does she already anachronistically call him *Führer*? Has her attempt on his life been successful and, if so, what will be the consequences of this historical subversion? Has the woman herself been killed? The laconic statement “Darkness fell” leaves these issues unsolved. *Life After Life* thus begins with a highly tellable situation of conflict and deception carrying within it the promise of an extremely interesting narrative outcome, since what appears to be at stake is no less than a counterfactual prevention of World War II. Moreover, setting the tone for a tale of constant chronological entanglement, this brief first chapter showcases quite clearly all three narrative universals individuated by Meir Sternberg, who considers narrativity “as the play of suspense/curiosity/surprise between represented and communicative time” (“Telling” 529). In Sternberg’s words,

Suspense arises from rival scenarios about the future: from the discrepancy between what the telling lets us readers know about the happening (e.g., a conflict) at any moment and what still lies ahead, ambiguous because yet unresolved in the world. Its fellow universals rather involve manipulations of the past, which the tale communicates in a sequence discontinuous with the happening. Perceptibly so, for *curiosity*: knowing that we do not know, we go forward with our mind on the gapped antecedents, trying to infer (bridge, compose) them in retrospect. For *surprise*, however, the narrative first unobtrusively gaps or twists its chronology, then unexpectedly discloses to us our misreading and enforces a corrective rereading in late recognition. (“How Narrativity” 117)

As the surprise generated by the deferred revelation of Hitler’s identity is combined with curiosity about the causes behind Ursula’s act, as well as a sense of suspense concerning its possible future results, the first chapter of *Life After Life* strongly compels us to read on in order to find answers to the questions raised.

The subsequent pages, however, are anything but clarifying. The second section of the novel, titled “Snow,” comprises, just like the first one, a single two-page chapter. This time the scene is set on 11 February 1910, possibly inviting readers to expect that they will be retrospectively informed about the course of events leading to the initial scene. However, this is apparently not the case. Highly lyrical and thick with natural imagery, the beginning of this second chapter presents a baby girl’s birth by way of a curious third-person narration focalized

through her own perspective. The use of the present tense and of short, elliptical sentences to depict the baby as she gasps for air conveys a sense of stasis and timelessness. After a graphic interruption, the narration resumes in the past tense, providing readers with a context for the initial cryptic passage. A laboring woman called Sylvie has been left alone with her housemaid Bridget, as the expected doctor has failed to arrive on time due to a snowstorm. Born with her umbilical cord around her neck, Sylvie's daughter has died from suffocation. Only in its final lines does this chapter hint at the previous one by way of repetition, as its ending reads,

A single shot.

Darkness fell. (*LAL* 24)

Echoing the final lines of the Munich scene, this time the phrase "Darkness fell" is unmistakably associated with death, thus enabling readers to interpret its first occurrence, in retrospect, in the same way. Alerted to the multiple-life premise of the novel by the paratextual elements already commented upon, readers are likely to be already able, at this point, to interpret this textual parallel as a clue that the woman of "November 1930" and the stillborn girl of "11 February 1910" are the same person, living a series of different lives.

The third section, again titled "Snow" and comprising a single short chapter, presents a variation on the previous scene. Again staging Sylvie's daughter's birth on 11 February 1910, this time the narrative informs us that Dr Fellows has arrived just in time to cut the baby girl's umbilical cord and save her from certain death. The first chapter of the next section, titled "Four Seasons Fill the Measure of the Year" continues the narrative of the latest scenario, as it is made explicit through allusions to persons and facts mentioned before. Thus, sentences such as "Sylvie idly wondered if Mrs Haddock was still stuck somewhere outside Chalfont St Peter" (*LAL* 34-5), referring to Dr Fellowes's statement in the previous section, "I called for Mrs Haddock, the midwife, but she is stuck somewhere outside Chalfont St Peter" (*LAL* 28), as well as Mrs Glover's remark "I hear the baby nearly died" (*LAL* 35), allow readers to infer that this new chapter follows chronologically from the previous one instead of offering a further alternate scenario. Shortly afterwards, a significant connection is also established with the scene opening the novel. "What are you going to call her?" asks Mrs Glover to the girl's mother, to which

question Sylvie answers, “Ursula [...] I shall call her Ursula. It means little she-bear” (*LAL* 38). Through this explicit act of naming, the text thus establishes a rigid designator (cf. Kripke) that enables readers to identify the little girl with the woman shooting Hitler in “Be Ye Men of Valour,” confirming their previous hypotheses and making it possible to recognize the protagonist in all versions of her life.

Having escaped death at birth, however, Ursula drowns in the sea only four years—and two chapters—later. “Four Seasons Fill the Measure of the Year,” thus, ends by detailing her new death through the same imagery employed before:

No one came. And there was only water. Water and more water. Her helpless little heart was beating wildly, a bird trapped in her chest. A thousand bees buzzed in the curled pear of her ear. No breath. A drowning child, a bird dropped from the sky.

Darkness fell. (*LAL* 47)

This passage condenses various images from the first “Snow” section, echoing previous lines such as “The little heart. A helpless little heart beating wildly. Stopped suddenly like a bird dropped from the sky” (*LAL* 24); “The buzzing of a thousand bees in the tiny curled pearl of an ear;” and “The drowning girl, the falling bird” (*LAL* 23). Together with the final phrase “Darkness fell,” again marking Ursula’s death, these reiterated images alert readers to a pattern which will inform the entire novel, as each of the protagonist’s deaths will be invariably signaled by a similar imagery. As Murray aptly observes, the introduction of such “ritualized expressions for repeated actions” (“Replay Story Structure”) enables readers to recognize the reiterated events without entering into detail each time they occur. Murray terms this strategy “Shorthand communication” (“Six Key Design Strategies”) and considers it as another key element of replay stories.

A long series of childhood deaths and new births follow each other before Ursula is finally able to reach adulthood. Thus, through its initial rapid succession of brief chapters, *Life After Life* clearly introduces the readers to its narrative structure, allowing them to become familiar with the rules of its textual universe from the beginning of their reading experience. Hence, the narrative fragmentation opening the novel, together with the establishment of a

recognizable set of images to mark the points at which the story restarts, allows readers to overcome the sense of disorientation initially caused by the juxtaposition of alternative scenarios and, in turn, to automatize their fictional recentering from each of Ursula's lives into the next.

Once they have understood how Ursula's peculiar condition informs the structure of the novel, readers can naturalize the unnaturalness of the textual universe through a process of "frame enrichment" (Alber, "Impossible Storyworlds" 82-3, 91), thus modifying their real-world cognitive frames to envision an ever-renewing universe in which, at least for one of its members, death is invariably followed by a new life. Despite this ontological instability, all versions of the universe inhabited by Ursula follow the same logical and physical laws that apply to our own. The textual system of *Life After Life* can, therefore, easily be rationalized by assuming what Marie-Laure Ryan terms a "Swiss cheese ontology," namely a situation in which "the irrational is contained in delimited areas that pierce the texture of the fictional world like the holes of a Swiss cheese, but the laws of logic remain applicable in the solid areas and the reader can make regular inferences" ("Impossible" 143-4). Having learned about Ursula's recursive existence, readers can therefore interpret the textual system of *Life After Life* according to its own rules, thus automatizing its recurrent disruptions of linear chronology and preserving a certain degree of aesthetic illusion regardless of its fragmentation and unnaturalness.

4.3 Naturalizing the Textual System and Assessing its Ontological Structure

4.3.1 Naturalizing Hypotheses Invited by the Text: Dr Kellet's Explanations

In the course of the novel a number of possible justifications for Ursula's condition are provided. Unable to believe her daughter, Sylvie is convinced that the previous existences she claims to have gone through are mere figments of her imagination. Because she considers the world she currently inhabits as the only actual one, Sylvie thus tries to naturalize the inherent incongruity of Ursula's experience by assuming that her alleged alternate lives are in fact virtual worlds, ensuing from some psychiatric problem. The psychiatrist taking care of ten-year-old Ursula, instead, does not rule out the possibility that his young patient might be telling the truth. Thus, he suggests various supernatural explanations for her peculiar situation, none of which, however, is fully convincing. In fact, through the figure of Dr Kellet, the text presents a number of naturalizing

possibilities without committing to any one of them, leaving the reasons behind Ursula's anomalous existence ultimately open to the readers' interpretation. When he brings up the notion of reincarnation, for example, the psychiatrist acknowledges that Ursula's personal experience cannot simply be explained in the light of traditional Buddhist doctrine, stating, "Perhaps you're remembering another life. Of course, the disciples of the Buddha don't believe that you keep coming back as the *same* person in the *same* circumstances, as you feel you do" (*LAL* 191). Keeping his argument as vague as it can be, Dr Kellet then informs young Ursula that "[m]ost ancient religions [...] adhered to an idea of circularity – the snake with its tail in its mouth, and so on" (*LAL* 192). The novel, therefore, clearly avoids exploiting the psychiatrist's authority to offer a definite solution, only providing the readers with a nebulous framework to make sense of the protagonist's situation.

Dr Kellet also takes into consideration the possibility that the child might suffer from a mental problem: "From a more scientific point of view,' he said, 'perhaps the part of your brain responsible for memory has a little flaw, a neurological problem that leads you to think that you are repeating experiences. As if something had got stuck.' She wasn't really dying and being reborn, he said, she just *thought* she was" (*LAL* 194). Ursula, however, does not see the point in trying to distinguish her mental life from objective reality, insightfully implying that, regardless of what the factual truth might be, the only truth accessible to her is the one she experiences through her own mind. As long as she perceives her life as endlessly repeating itself, its circularity is, to her, indisputably real. Similar remarks on the impossibility to separate the world as it is from our own perception of it are presented again a few chapters later, as the protagonist wonders,

What if she had thrown herself beneath the express train or had died after Belgravia, or, indeed, what if she were simply to open her bedroom window and throw herself out, head first? Would she really be able to come back and start again? Or was it, as everyone told her, and as she must believe, all in her head? And so what if it was – wasn't everything in her head real too? What if there was no demonstrable reality? What if there was nothing beyond the mind? (*LAL* 245-6)

It should be observed that, even though suggesting that Ursula's recursive experience of her existence might in fact be "all in her head," the novel clearly invites readers to believe in its actuality. Indeed, the narrative structure clearly endorses the protagonist's impressions, giving readers equal access to all versions of her life. These are presented by way of a third-person narration mainly focalized through the protagonist herself, but often shifting to include other characters' perspectives, thus seemingly authenticating all versions of the story through a reliable narrative situation. Hence, rather than make us feel deceived or keep us in the dark about relevant details, the text actually enables us to know more than the protagonist does, often making us witness episodes of which she retains only an indistinct memory, or even no memory at all.

4.3.2 The Many-Worlds Ontology and the Magical Interpretation

In order to naturalize the unnatural universe of *Life After Life*, readers are required to acknowledge the instability of the world at its center, which is subjected to constant revisions each time the protagonist is reborn. In other words, the endless time loop in which Ursula is trapped produces a series of worlds which are all to be considered as actual within the textual system, even though only one at a time can be physically inhabited, as each new reality only materializes once the previous one has ceased to exist. The alternate scenarios presented in the course of the novel cannot, therefore, be ordered hierarchically, as the text makes it clear that they are all experienced by the protagonist as real. Moreover, because Ursula frequently becomes aware, though only vaguely, of facts occurred in her previous lives, the boundaries between the different worlds she dwells in are evidently not impenetrable. The protagonist's glimpses of awareness of her transworld existence, thus, serve to provide the textual system with a unifying element, repeatedly confirming the actuality of scenarios alternative to the one she currently inhabits.

A many-worlds cosmology, as proposed by Ryan in her analysis of "multiverse" narratives (cf. "Parallel"), can provide a useful framework to interpret Ursula's experience. Yet, it must be observed that *Life After Life* never explicitly suggests a multiverse explanation of the kind that can be found in science-fiction narratives exploiting the same premise. Moreover, because Ursula's lives successively replace one another, each of them erasing the previous one every time

the protagonist is reborn, her impression seems to be, rather, of inhabiting a single universe which is constantly modified. The following exchange between Ursula and Dr Kellet thematizes this unresolved ontological ambiguity:

She had obscure memories of elation, of falling into darkness, but they belonged to that world of shadows and dreams that was ever-present and yet almost impossible to pin down.

“As if there is another world?” Dr Kellet said.

“Yes. But it’s this one as well.” (*LAL* 189)

The novel, thus, leaves it unclear whether Ursula’s many lives occur in multiple universes or in a single, unstable one. Among the possible strategies listed by Ryan to rationalize a narrative which features multiple versions of the events without necessarily assuming a many-worlds interpretation, the one she terms “Magic” (“Parallel” 670) seems, indeed, quite suitable to justify Ursula’s circumstances. According to Ryan, this can be applied to texts in which

what is true at one time becomes false at another through an unexplainable metamorphosis of the fictional world. The temporal distance between the two judgements of truth protects the fictional world from blatant contradiction, but the appeal to a magical change as “explanation” is a veiled admission of the irrational, or fantastic, nature of this world. For this interpretative strategy to remain compatible with the construction of a relatively coherent fictional world, the irrational must be limited to narrowly defined areas that pierce the texture of this world like the holes of a Swiss cheese. (“Parallel” 670)

Ryan considers this interpretation more useful than the postulation of a plurality of universes to explain, for example, the events of Emmanuel Carrère’s *La moustache*. In a footnote referring to this strategy, however, she also remarks that the difference between Carrère’s novel and Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven*, which can indeed be interpreted in the light of a many-worlds explanation, lies in the fact that the protagonist of the latter “has memories of many lives, which suggests lives in many worlds,” whereas “the hero of *La moustache* remembers only one life” (Ryan, “Parallel” 670). Because Ryan’s observation about the main character of Le Guin’s novel also applies to the protagonist of *Life After Life*, it seems possible to deduce that Ursula’s

multiple lives can indeed be conceived as taking place in alternate universes. At the same time, it can easily be seen that magic definitely provides a more convincing justification for her transworld existence than the assumption of an implicit scientific explanation.

Indeed, a magical interpretation of Ursula's gift is supported by a number of fairytale-like elements disseminated throughout the novel, seemingly endowed with an enchanted aura by their very constant reappearance. An example is represented by Sylvie's gold carriage clock, mentioned a great number of times over the course of Ursula's multiple lives and invariably sitting on her mother's mantelpiece on the night of her birth, suggesting a possible connection with the temporal oddities of her experience which, however, is never made explicit. A good number of animals, representing another typical element of fairytales, also play a part in the story. For instance, a dog Ursula names Lucky features in various scenarios, acting as an animal helper in two versions of the events of the Blitz. In one timeline, Ursula gets out of her house in Argyll Road to approach the terrier just before the building is bombed out, but dies nonetheless when a wall falls down on her shortly afterwards. Alive again, however, and this time working as a member of a rescue squad, Ursula spots the same dog while heading towards the WVS mobile canteen. Feeling irresistibly attracted to the animal, she deviates from her path. This time the detour happens to save her life, as she witnesses the canteen being hit by a collapsing building from a safe distance. Some cats also show up throughout the novel, generally bringing misfortune. Hence, in one scenario a malevolent feline almost kills little Ursula, whereas in various versions of the Blitz one of Ursula's neighbors, Lavinia Nesbit, repeatedly dies while wearing a brooch shaped like a black cat. Rabbits and foxes make recurrent appearances throughout the story as well, while a silver hare hanging from Ursula's pram is repeatedly evoked as part of the imagery accompanying her rebirths. It might be significant to notice that a fox and a hare are also represented on the cover of the Black Swan edition of *Life After Life*, as this choice seems meant precisely to emphasize the fairytale aspects of the story rather than its grimmer

realistic and historical elements.²³ Finally, this fantastical quality is also foregrounded in a conversation between Ursula's parents, occurring before her birth in an early version of the events. When Sylvie spots some foxes in the garden of their new house and suggests calling it "Fox Corner," Hugh remarks, "It's a little whimsical, isn't it? It sounds like a children's story. *The House at Fox Corner*" (*LAL* 37). Therefore, without need to rule out a many-worlds interpretation, magic seems, nonetheless, to provide the best explanation for the fantastic current underlying the otherwise realistic storyworld of *Life After Life*.

4.3.3 The Order of Presentation: Overall Teleological Progress and Occasional Disruptions

Life After Life presents its multiple actual worlds as materializing successively, each erasing the previous one every time the protagonist is reborn. Even though they all take place within the same historical period, Ursula's various lives appear, therefore, to occur one after another, seemingly staging a teleological progression towards an ideally perfect final version. The title itself of the book, *Life After Life*, evokes this idea of progressive improvement as opposed to simultaneity. "Time isn't circular [...] It's like a... palimpsest" (*LAL* 589), Ursula tells Dr Kellet towards the end of the novel, having gained a deeper awareness of her condition. To the circularity of the ouroboros proposed by the psychiatrist to explain her situation Ursula prefers the linearity of a progressive development through successive rewritings, as embodied by the image of the palimpsest. Dr Kellet seems to endorse his patient's interpretation of her own circumstances when he remarks that she is "an old soul" (*LAL* 589), indeed suggesting that the soul can age even though the body—and, with it, the world it inhabits—is repeatedly renewed.

Yet, the order of presentation of the events in *Life After Life* does not always clearly reflect this notion of a systematic progression. Instead of simply following each of the protagonist's existences from birth to death and then going back to birth, for example, the text

²³ The same can be said for other editions of the novel, whose cover images seem equally intended to stress the fairytale aspects of the narrative. Thus, for example, the cover of the Doubleday edition shows a little girl standing in the snow in front of a magical-looking portal, superimposed with the image of a clock dial. A red rose reflected upside down is, instead, featured on the cover of the Reagan Arthur Books edition. Interestingly, roses in the novel are said to be planted by the members of the Todd family on the graves of their dogs. In one version of the story this detail is also brought up in reference to Lucky's death, as it is stated that "[t]hey buried him at Fox Corner and Pamela bought a rose, a deep red, and planted it for his headstone" (*LAL* 544). Thus, the cover picture of a rose might be considered as emphasizing, by way of a metonymic association, the relevance of Ursula's animal helper.

presents her lives as fragmentary collections of selected moments. Therefore, in order to avoid excessive repetitions, successive versions of the story frequently feature allusions to facts already familiar to the readers from previous scenarios, confirming that these are left unchanged in the current timeline without having to retell them. This strategy, however, can often result in some confusion, as these ambiguous references to previous chapters can trick readers into assuming a causal connection between episodes belonging to different timelines. Thus, for example, when the fourth “Snow” section begins with the statement “The piccalilli was the lurid colour of jaundice” (*LAL* 87) and goes on to portray Dr Fellowes eating at the Todds’ kitchen table, readers might instinctively consider this scene as following from the second “Snow” section, which ended with the doctor asking, “Is there, by chance, any of Mrs Glover’s excellent piccalilli?” (*LAL* 29). Yet, in between these two passages two versions of Ursula’s life are presented, both resulting in her premature death, making it possible to infer that, in fact, the two mentions of the piccalilli occur in alternative timelines. The reference to the relish in the fourth “Snow” section should, hence, probably be intended as implying that the events omitted in this new version of Ursula’s life have happened just as in the one alluded to, thus enabling the narrative to restart from a point in time different from the protagonist’s birth. At times, however, transworld cross-references can be more subtle, as it is the case of two similar passages occurring in two different versions of the events of January 1915. While in the former Bridget alarms Pamela by revealing to her that the Germans “eat Belgian babies” (*LAL* 80), in the latter it is little Pamela herself who informs Ursula of this gruesome rumor. Where she got this piece of information from is not made explicit this time, so that readers can only acknowledge the repetition as an odd interference between two different narrative branches.

For the most part, the narrative of *Life After Life* can be easily divided into groups of sequentially connected chapters, often spanning more than one section, each progressing chronologically towards one of Ursula’s deaths. There is a single case, however, in which a narrative branch is interrupted without clarifying whether Ursula has died or not, thus making it particularly hard for readers to resist establishing a connection between two disjointed sections that seem to present events from the same timeline. The first section of this pair, titled “Peace” and set in 1947, ends with Ursula surrendering to the idea of dying gassed in her own house, and

its final lines offer an enigmatic variation on the usual “Darkness fell,” reading instead, “Darkness began to fall” (*LAL* 170). The narrative then goes back to February 1910, seemingly suggesting that the protagonist has died and is now reborn. Yet, a chapter from another version of Ursula’s life occurring much later in the novel and titled “A Long Hard War” comprises an almost exact textual repetition of part of the “Peace” section. This time, however, the previous ambiguity of its final passage is remarkably resolved by the introduction of a new paragraph after the statement “Darkness began to fall,” informing readers that Ursula “woke with a start” and that “[s]he hadn’t gassed herself after all then” (*LAL* 541). Whether this is an improved version of Ursula’s life, alternative to the one presented in “Peace,” or a continuation of the events ambiguously suspended in that previous section is, thus, left open to the readers’ interpretation. Put differently, it is left unclear whether the repetition of part of the “Peace” section in “A Long Hard War” showcases, in Gérard Genette’s terms, an instance of “*singulative* narrative” (114) in which what happens a number of times is narrated the same number of times, or of “*repeating* narrative” (116), in which a single event is told multiple times.

Moreover, it can be observed that the 1947 scenario depicted in “Peace” comes immediately after a chapter set in 1918, thus passing over a long time span which will later be explored in numerous variations and, in turn, proleptically mentioning people and events which will be featured in those subsequent versions. While many of the references in this chapter cannot, therefore, be grasped by a first-time reader, as they will only become clear after reading the version of Ursula’s life presented in “A Long Hard War,” they serve nonetheless to set the tone for the narrative to come, providing readers with some early clues of the kind of dramatic situations Ursula will face during the war. Noticeably, the very first chapter of the novel offers a similar anticipation, since Ursula’s attempt on Hitler’s life in 1930 only becomes explainable in the light of what readers learn over the course of her many lives. Thus, while, for the most part, *Life After Life* presents a gradual chronological disclosure of subsequent phases of Ursula’s life by having her live longer than before each time she is reborn, the two aforementioned chapters disrupt this orderly progression. In both cases, the early presentation of facts occurring in Ursula’s adulthood before readers have been allowed to learn how she has ended up in those

situations jumbles her otherwise progressive advancement from death at birth to death at an older age.

It seems, therefore, possible to consider this complex order of presentation as inviting readers to conceive the various scenarios projected by *Life After Life* as overlapping rather than simply replacing one another. Counteracting the sense of a linear progress, the novel's intricate chronology can be seen as conveying an impression that Ursula's multiple lives are in fact mutually interconnected and occurring simultaneously, thus arguably supporting a many-worlds interpretation of the textual system as comprising a (potentially infinite) number of parallel universes, each serving as the setting for one of the protagonist's alternate existences.

4.4 Moving Towards Awareness: Immersion, Tellability, and the Point in Reading on

4.4.1 Hindrances to Emotional Immersion and Emotional Adjustment to the Unnatural Textual System

The different versions of Ursula's life in *Life After Life* showcase a great variability in length, some of them being as short as a couple of pages (the one in which the protagonist dies at birth is the most obvious example) while others spanning several decades and being presented over long stretches of narrative. As a result, the various worlds conjured up by the novel allow for different degrees of aesthetic illusion, depending on how much time the protagonist—and, with her, the reader—is enabled to spend within them. Besides, while some timelines are presented as series of episodes closely succeeding one another, without considerable disruptions of narrative continuity, other branches offer highly fragmented narratives, jolting readers from one point in time to another and making it harder to achieve a consistent sense of immersion in the projected universe.

Not only is “temporal immersion,” to use Ryan's terms (*Narrative* 140-8, 258-60 *passim*), discontinuous in the course of the reading experience, but the text also prevents us from achieving a high level of “emotional immersion” (*Narrative* 148-57, 263 *passim*) in the protagonist's ordeals by presenting these as always provisional, hindering us from empathizing with her ephemeral joys and sufferings. Considering the degree of emotional immersion enabled by interactive narratives, Ryan endorses Murray's claim that the possibility to endlessly replay a

story fulfills a shared desire to deny death, thus embodying “a deeply comic vision of life, a vision of retrievable mistakes and open options” (*Hamlet* 175, qtd. in Ryan, *Narrative* 263). Ryan goes on to argue that

One of the trademarks of the spirit of comedy is a playful detachment from the characters that precludes an affective investment in their fate. This detachment is strengthened by the knowledge that a character’s life is simultaneously acted out in several possible worlds, and that if we do not like one of these worlds we can always jump to another. Emotional immersion requires a sense of the inexorable character of fate, of the finality of every event in the character’s life, but as Umberto Eco observed in a radio interview, this outlook is fundamentally incompatible with the multiple threads generated by interactive freedom. (*Narrative* 263)

Because *Life After Life* stages a great number of subsequent revisions of the narrated events, similar to a videogame being constantly replayed, Ryan’s considerations can evidently apply to a reader’s experience of Ursula’s trials as well. Since Ursula’s fate is never final, but rather always liable to successive rewritings, her multiple deaths are unlikely to trigger the same emotional response usually invited by the death of a beloved character in traditional linear narratives. Even when the text presents Ursula’s death scenes in harrowing detail, the readers’ grief can only be temporary, being inevitably dispelled as soon as the protagonist comes back to life. Therefore, the readers’ experience of loss during their permanence within the textual system of *Life After Life* also differs greatly from their real-world attitude towards death, as in recentering from their real-life context into the storyworld of Atkinson’s novel they also modify their reaction to the representation of death accordingly. Hence, interestingly, because the novel habituates them to see the protagonist’s death as an opportunity for new narrative developments rather than as conclusive, readers might, at times, even look forward to the end of Ursula’s current life, proving that the unnatural narrative context creates a new cognitive frame which is automatically applied once the new logic is set in place. When misfortunes start to accumulate without killing the protagonist, readers who have automatized the rules of her universe might, therefore, start wishing for the end of the current narrative branch in order to get a more satisfying version of the story. This response is likely to be elicited, for example, by the long section titled “Like a Fox in

a Hole,” which presents a terrible version of Ursula’s life. Raped at sixteen by her brother Maurice’s friend Howard, Ursula gets pregnant and, consequently, has to undergo a dangerous illegal abortion procedure resulting in an infection that nearly kills her. Scorned by her own mother and haunted by an irrational sense of guilt, she first attends a secretarial course run by a pervert and eventually ends up living alone in London, where she develops an alcohol addiction. Her life apparently takes a turn for the better when she meets a history professor called Derek Oliphant and decides to marry him straight away. Derek, however, immediately turns out to be a liar and a frustrated inept. Short-tempered and incapable of love, he often attacks his wife both verbally and physically, eventually killing her in a violent show of jealousy. Arguably, the length of this narrative branch and the troubling amount of misadventures Ursula is made to go through as its events unfold invite readers to long for the protagonist’s death, in the hope that she will achieve a happier life in the next timeline.

4.4.2 Getting Involved in the Whole: Global Immersion and Narrative Interest

Precisely because *Life After Life* reads like a potentially never-ending videogame being played over and over again, if its various timelines were completely independent from one another, readers would hardly feel involved in their alternation enough to be willing to read on for long. Local immersion in the single narrative branches would not, to put it differently, be sufficient to keep readers interested in the constant succession of conflicting narrative branches, as they could simply quit reading at any point in the text, deciding where the story should stop, without feeling the need to reach the actual end of the book. However, this is not the case, as *Life After Life* holds the readers’ attention throughout the unfolding of its many alternate timelines by providing Ursula with a goal that overarches their temporal fragmentation. Because, from the beginning of her narrative journey, the protagonist retains vague memories of her previous lives and because her consciousness of her recursive existence seems to increase as the novel progresses, making her able to rewrite her past in subsequent attempts, readers can feel motivated to read on by a desire to know whether the protagonist will eventually become completely aware of her gift and, consequently, be able to take full advantage of it. This, as the novel makes clear from its first

pages, could be exploited not only to make Ursula's own life as good as possible but even, most interestingly, to change the course of history.

According to Ryan,

The relations among the worlds of the narrative system are not static, but change from state to state. The plot is the trace left by the movement of these worlds within the textual universe.

From the viewpoint of its participants, the goal of the narrative game—which is for them the game of life—is to make the TAW coincide with as many as possible of their private worlds [...] The moves of the game are the actions through which characters attempt to alter relations between worlds. (*Possible Worlds* 119-20)

Sticking to Ryan's terminology, it can be observed that, in the course of *Life After Life*, Ursula makes a great number of moves to make the malleable and ever-changing textual actual world she inhabits coincide with her "model worlds" through "active goals and plans" ("Parallel" 649). At the same time, the narrative also presents her struggles to make her "K-world" (where K stands for knowledge) (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 114-6 *passim*) coincide with the actual state of affairs, namely to become fully aware of her multiple existences. It can thus be observed that the plot of *Life After Life* is driven not only by the prospected convergence of the protagonist's "wish-world" (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 117-8 *passim*) with (a version of) the actual world, but also, interestingly, by the progress of Ursula's knowledge-world towards awareness of the sum total of the worlds she inhabits. The multiple actual worlds of *Life After Life* can, therefore, be considered as integral elements of the same plot insofar as the protagonist needs to acknowledge them in their totality in order to be able to devise a plan which will allow her to produce a perfect version of her life. Because tellability is generated, according to Ryan, by the diversification of the worlds comprised in the textual system (cf. *Possible Worlds* 156), it can be argued that both Ursula's partial ignorance of her condition (and consequent efforts to understand it) and her reiterated attempts to modify the actual world to make it resemble her model world produce highly tellable narrative situations.

Life After Life cleverly sets the readers' expectations from the start, soon showing that little Ursula has occasional glimpses of her previous deaths and that these can enable her to avoid dangers in subsequent narrative branches. Hence, Ursula's initiation to the constant rewriting of her fate is presented, towards the beginning of the novel, in various groups of chapters revolving around minor tasks that she has to carry out in order to survive different life threats, thus allowing readers to familiarize with the mechanism driving the narrative. A clear example of this mechanism is offered by a series of sections titled "Armistice." In the first of these Ursula dies of Spanish flu, having contracted the illness from Bridget after the housemaid joined the 1918 victory celebrations in London. Vaguely aware of that danger in her following lives, Ursula strives to avoid contracting the disease. Thus, in the next version of the same episode, she feels "a great dread, as if something truly treacherous were about to happen" (*LAL* 119), which convinces her that her sister and she "mustn't go downstairs. They mustn't see Bridget" (*LAL* 119-20). Unfortunately, Teddy has been infected first and inevitably passes on the illness to his sisters. In three subsequent lives, however, Ursula devises various strategies to avoid getting ill. First, she locks the doors of her house and leaves a clumsy note meant to keep Bridget away, but contracts the infection nonetheless from her sister Pamela, who has been sent to fetch the housemaid by their mother. Ursula's next attempt proves equally unsuccessful. She pushes Bridget down the stairs to stop her from going to London, but the housemaid decides to go anyway, regardless of her sprained ankle, with the usual grim consequences. Pushing her harder in her next life, however, Ursula causes Bridget to break her arm, finally preventing her from participating in the London celebrations. "Practice makes perfect" (*LAL* 154) is the narrative comment marking her success, leaving it ambiguous whether this is Ursula's thought presented through free indirect discourse or simply an authorial remark. As this example shows, despite its fragmentation and the already mentioned limits this poses to aesthetic illusion, *Life After Life* interestingly allows readers to experience a continuous sense of immersion not only in each single narrative branch, but also in longer narrative spans comprising different branches. Because the boundaries between the various timelines are permeable to Ursula's consciousness, the readers' aesthetic illusion is not necessarily disrupted with each recentering in a new textual actual world; rather, the text invites them to follow the protagonist as she moves towards her current goal over the course of

subsequent lives, possibly allowing them to experience even a sense of global aesthetic illusion with regard to the whole textual system.

Minor tasks like the one just summarized serve to prepare both the protagonist and the readers for the more challenging endeavors awaiting Ursula in future branches. The main goal of Ursula's reiterated existences is foreshadowed in the very first chapter of the novel, in which she attempts to kill Hitler. Combined with the subsequent early sections showing how the protagonist can modify her present situation in the light of her dim memory of previous lives, the opening of the novel thus invites readers to expect a highly interesting development. In her analysis of the dynamics of plot, Ryan remarks that "[t]he focus of narrative interest is born by conflict-solving moves," by "move" intending "an action with a high-priority goal and a high risk of failure. The higher the risk, the greater the narrative appeal of the move" (*Possible Worlds* 130). The risk implicit in Ursula's attempt on Hitler's life, together with the import of its possible consequences, clearly endows her move with great narrative interest. The interest of the various obstacles Ursula has to overcome in the course of her lives is, in turn, enhanced by their being manifestly preparatory for a momentous final act.

4.4.3 Deferring the Final Achievement: Alternation Between Awareness and Unawareness

Although *Life After Life* motivates readers to read on by foreshadowing Ursula's eventual realization of her unnatural condition and achievement of a final goal, at the same time it also constantly frustrates their expectations by making the protagonist's progress towards full consciousness far from straightforward, as her glimpses of awareness invariably alternate with moments of complete unawareness up to the end of the novel. Hence, for example, while in a version of the story Ursula makes a series of choices apparently meant both to improve her own life and to lead her close to Hitler, such as deciding that she "need[s] more of an education" (*LAL* 291) and subsequently attending a German course, in another life in which she ends up in Germany she appears completely oblivious of whatever plan might have brought her there, as the narrative states, "Ursula was not intending to spend long in Munich. Germany was no more than a detour in her life, part of her adventurous year in Europe" (*LAL* 391).

This alternation between consciousness and ignorance becomes even more evident in the later section titled “A Long Hard War.” In this timeline, various moments from Ursula’s previous lives reveal themselves to her in a series of elusive flashes. Thus, as she goes through the remains of the bombed-out buildings with the other members of her rescue squad in 1940 London, Ursula suddenly has “an uncomfortable feeling, a premonition perhaps, that things were not going to go well tonight” (*LAL* 500), clearly resulting from her previous deaths in the Blitz. Shortly afterwards, she has a vision of one of her childhood death scenarios: “for an alarming hallucinatory second Ursula was on a beach somewhere, she didn’t know where, a hoop was bowling along beside her in a brisk breeze, seagulls squawking overhead, and then she was back, just as suddenly, in the cellar. Lack of sleep, she thought, it really was the devil” (*LAL* 504). This hallucination is followed by other glimpses of her past lives: “And again she was somewhere else, a little flicker in time. She was descending a staircase, wisteria was blooming, she was flying out of the window” (*LAL* 505). Her recollections become insistent as, a few pages later, readers are told that “for a second she was somewhere else, not in a cellar in Argyll Road, not in Izzie’s bedroom in Holland Park but some strange limbo. Falling, falling—” (*LAL* 516). However, despite all these clear manifestations of transworld memories, throughout this version of the events Ursula remains surprisingly convinced of the linearity of time. Thus, as she speculatively reflects on the idea of going back in time, she observes, “That was the problem with time travel (apart from the impossibility) – one would always be a Cassandra, spreading doom with one’s foreknowledge of events. It was quite wearingly relentless but the only way that one could go was forward” (*LAL* 515). Similarly, in a conversation with Teddy, she asserts that “[w]e only have one [life] after all, we should try and do our best. We can never get it *right*, but we must *try*” (*LAL* 522), and later on in the same timeline, having reached middle age, she finds herself regretting missed opportunities:

She thought often these days – if only she had had a child of her own... She had had affairs over the years, albeit nothing too thrilling [...] but she had never been pregnant, never been a mother or a wife and it was only when she realized that it was too late, that it could never be, that she understood what it was that she had lost. Pamela’s life would go on after she was dead, her

descendants spreading through the world like the waters of a delta, but when Ursula died she would simply end. A stream that ran dry. (*LAL* 549)

Yet, remarkably, whereas in this passage she demonstrates an evident unawareness of her previous as well as future existences, just a few pages later, in a conversation with her nephew Nigel, Ursula recalls a statement made by her German friend Klara during the time spent in Germany in one of her alternate lives, claiming, “I heard someone say once that hindsight was a wonderful thing, that without it there would be no history” (*LAL* 554). Because Ursula has never met Klara in the current timeline, this recollection clearly indicates an interference between two different narrative branches. The interference becomes even more evident when, in the discussion of counterfactual historical scenarios ensuing from that first remark, Ursula makes some comments on Hitler’s alleged charisma clearly informed by her encounter with him in her alternate life:

“He was extraordinarily charismatic. [...] I think it was the eyes, he had the *most* compelling eyes. If you looked in them you felt you were putting yourself in danger of believing—”

“You *met* him?” Nigel asked, astonished.

“Well,” Ursula said. “Not exactly. Would you like dessert dear?” (*LAL* 555)

Nonetheless, even when Ursula effectively takes action to avoid dangers she has already experienced or to improve past states of affairs in a new life, her decisions are, for the most part, dictated either by mere instinct or by an inexplicable sense of dread. Thus, for instance, when the seven-year-old protagonist manages to incapacitate Bridget from going to London, the narrative clearly informs us that she is not aware of the reasons behind her own act, presenting her thoughts as follows: “Ursula had done a wicked thing, she had pushed Bridget down the stairs. Bridget might have died and she would have been a murderer now. All she knew was that she *had* to do it. The great sense of dread had come over her and she had to do it” (*LAL* 155). This sudden sense of fear, evoked many times throughout the novel, is mentioned for the first time in an episode in which little Ursula, playing with her sister on the beach, finds herself in the same circumstances that proved fatal to her in the previous narrative branch. Thus, the second time she

is about to drown, readers learn that “[t]he closer she got to the water the more Ursula began to panic until she was swamped with fear but Pamela laughed and splashed her way into the water and she could only follow. She tried to think of something that would make Pamela want to return to the beach – a treasure map, a man with a puppy – but it was too late” (*LAL* 56). It should be noted that, by having a stranger save her just in time, this early episode already shows that Ursula’s survival does not always follow from her own actions, not even when she is aware that she should do something to avoid danger; rather, chance appears to play an equally relevant part in her various lives and deaths. Indeed, throughout the novel, Ursula’s conscious attempts to modify her destiny always alternate with lucky turns of events resulting from mere coincidence.

Hence, while at times Ursula effectively takes the reins of her own fate by listening to her instinct, in other cases she is shown to be completely unaware of the parallels between her current experience and a past life. These parallels are often highlighted by way of exact or nearly exact textual repetitions of previous excerpts, causing readers to experience a similar sense of *deja-vu* to that frequently acknowledged by the protagonist herself. By spotting similarities between alternative versions of the events, as well as near-misses and coincidentally escaped dangers of which Ursula is unaware, readers can enjoy a sense of dramatic irony resulting from their superior knowledge of the protagonist’s past existences. The various versions of the London Blitz offer a number of clear parallels of this kind, as Ursula is presented first as she repeatedly dies in the bombing of her house in Argyll Road and then, in an alternate timeline, as she works to rescue the other residents of that same building. Extracting a young lady called Renee from the rubble, her co-worker Mr Emslie even addresses the injured woman with the same words he used to comfort dying Ursula in one of her past lives (and almost the same words he used in yet another one): “Get you a nice cup of tea, eh? How does that sound? Lovely, eh? Fancy one myself” (*LAL* 340, 503-4).

Only towards the end of the novel, in a section titled “The End of the Beginning,” does Ursula explicitly achieve full awareness of the possibility to rewrite her life. This section offers a condensed version of the protagonist’s main life events, in which she manages to avoid almost all the dangers which have threatened her in her past existences, ticking off one successful survival after another, and also makes decisions meant to bring her closer to her final goal of killing

Hitler. Thus, for example, when her mother asks her what she wants to study at university, Ursula answers, “I might do Modern Languages. I don’t know. I’m not sure, I haven’t quite worked out a plan,” in an enigmatic statement which leaves Sylvie confused: “A plan?” (*LAL* 582). Shortly afterwards, the protagonist asks her brother Maurice to teach her to shoot, proving to be surprisingly good at it “for a novice” (*LAL* 583).

Incidentally, it must be observed that Ursula’s “plan” can be better understood in the light of the events occurring in two previous timelines. In the section coming just before this one and titled “A Long Hard War,” Ursula’s brother Teddy goes missing while serving in the RAF in 1943. Constantly mourning Teddy’s loss, towards the end of that branch Ursula reflects on how things might have developed “if Hitler had been killed, before he became Chancellor” (*LAL* 553), in a passage echoing a previous conversation she had with her lover Ralph in yet another timeline. When she had hypothetically envisaged the possibility of kidnapping Hitler as a child, Ralph had answered, “You might have to kill him instead of kidnapping him. Could you do that? Could you kill a baby? With a gun? Or what if you had no gun, how about with your bare hands? In cold blood,” to which question the following answer had been provided: “If I thought it would save Teddy, Ursula thought. Not just Teddy, of course, the rest of the world too” (*LAL* 328). Combined with the later version of the events in which Ursula actually has to deal with her brother’s loss in the war, this allusion makes it possible for readers to infer that her plan to kill Hitler, representing the final goal of her transworld mission, is, indeed, in part dictated by her desire to save Teddy.

Despite her enhanced awareness, even in “The End of the Beginning” Ursula continues to experience the usual oscillation between remembrance and oblivion, becoming especially manifest in the contradictory pairs of sentences: “She had been here before. She had never been here before” and “She knew that voice. She didn’t know that voice” (*LAL* 588). Finally acknowledging her peculiar condition, however, Ursula eventually manages to remember enough of her past lives to be able to devise a proper “plan”:

She had wasted so much precious time but she had a plan now, she thought, as she lay awake in the dark, in her own bed at Fox Corner. The plan would involve snow, no doubt. The silver hare, the dancing green leaves. And so on. German, not the Classics, and afterwards a course in

shorthand and typing and perhaps the study of Esperanto on the side, just in case utopia should come to pass. The membership of a local shooting club and an application for an office job somewhere, working for a while, salting money away – nothing untoward. [...] And then, when she was ready, she would have enough to live on while she embedded herself deep in the heart of the beast, from whence she would pluck out the black tumour that was growing there, larger every day. (*LAL* 591)

Her realization is crowned by a final extreme act. Recognizing that she has made some of the old mistakes again, failing for example to save her childhood friend and Teddy's alternate-life girlfriend Nancy, Ursula opts for suicide, willingly throwing herself from the attic window, confident that she will soon be born again and able to make a new attempt: "She opened her arms to the black bat and they flew to each other, embracing in the air like long-lost souls. This is love, Ursula thought. And the practice of it makes it perfect" (*LAL* 592).

Before this episode, Ursula had only committed suicide once, killing both herself and her daughter to break free from the poverty and desolation of post-war Germany. A comparison between her two self-inflicted deaths makes it evident that Ursula's consciousness undergoes a progressive development in the course of the novel. Thus, as opposed to the confidence she displays in the passage quoted above, her previous suicide, occurring at the end of the section titled "The Land of Begin Again," is presented as distinctly tragic, making it clear that the protagonist is still unaware that she will be able to come back after her death. Yet, readers are invited to infer that some sort of change is already occurring in Ursula's consciousness at that point, as her thoughts just before dying are presented as follows:

She held tightly on to Frieda and soon they were both wrapped in the velvet wings of the black bat and this life was already unreal and gone.

She had never chosen death over life before and as she was leaving she knew something had cracked and broken and the order of things had changed. Then the dark obliterated all thoughts. (*LAL* 445)

Although it is left ambiguous whether the statement "She had never chosen death over life before" is to be attributed to Ursula, who would thus already display a clear consciousness of her

previous lives, or to an authorial narrator, the demonstrative “this” in the sentence “this life was already unreal and gone” unmistakably belongs to the protagonist’s deictic field, suggesting that the text is reporting Ursula’s thoughts through free indirect discourse and, thus, apparently confirming the hypothesis of her enhanced awareness. Hence, the transition from this flicker of consciousness while she commits suicide for the first time to her self-assurance in choosing death at the end of “The End of the Beginning” clearly invites readers to see her journey through subsequent lives as an overall teleological progression towards a final recognition of her condition.

Yet, as already observed above, the novel also counteracts this sense of progression by placing Ursula’s attempt to kill Hitler at the very beginning of her multiple lives. If, as the section “The End of the Beginning” suggests, the protagonist only manages to gain awareness of her gift—and, consequently, to devise a plan to prevent World War II—after having experienced many different lives, how is it possible that she has already tried to kill Hitler when her soul was—as long as we consider the order of presentation as reflecting the actual order of her lives—still “young”? On the other hand, if we suppose that her first failure has prompted her to devise a more elaborate plan in her next lives, then her apparent inexperience, repeatedly resulting in fatal childhood misadventures, in the sections following the first one shows her progress towards her final goal to be far from linear. Thus, precisely by presenting the Munich scene at the start of Ursula’s journey, the novel alerts us to the possibility that, no matter how many times the protagonist might achieve full awareness and come near her goal, her hard-earned wisdom will always be bound to be erased, or at least put into question, in her next life.

4.5 Practice Makes Perfect (Or Does It?): Avoiding Closure

After Ursula’s fatal leap closes “The End of the Beginning,” readers are presented with a new section titled, like the one opening the novel, “Be Ye Men of Valour.” The scene presented here, again set in 1930, is almost identical to the one we are already familiar with. Ursula enters the Munich café, sits at Hitler’s table, draws a gun from her bag and aims it at him. In turn, a number of guns are immediately pointed at her. She shoots Hitler, with the usual result: “Darkness fell” (*LAL* 598). The repetition of the initial chapter is almost literal, and yet a close comparison

between the two reveals a number of differences, proving that the latest version of Ursula's attempt to kill the *Führer* is a new, and possibly improved, one. Thus, while in the first chapter of the novel Hitler is sitting with "a woman [Ursula] had never seen before – a permed, platinum blonde with heavy make-up – an actress by the look of her" (LAL 19), this new scenario opens by informing us that "Ursula knew all about Eva. She knew how much she liked fashion and make-up and gossip" (LAL 595). Whereas in the previous version Hitler "was eating a slice of *Kirschtorte*" (LAL 19), in this one he is enjoying *Palatschinken*. This time, it is Ursula's turn to order *Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte*, instead of her previous *Pflaumen Streusel*. Finally, just before pulling the trigger, the protagonist delivers an unprecedented theatrical line from Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Apart from these minor differences, however, the scene remains mostly unchanged, up to the outcome of Ursula's risky action: she dies again, restarting the time loop. Whether she has actually succeeded in killing Hitler, thus triggering a chain of events which might result in the prevention of World War II and, consequently, in Teddy's survival, is irrelevant, since, as long as she dies in the attempt, the narrative is inevitably bound to start again, thus nullifying her efforts. Indeed, the novel never explores the possibility of an alternate universe where the protagonist is dead and her dear ones live on. Because the only scenarios we as readers can access are those in which Ursula is still alive, everything that might happen after Hitler's death simply remains unactualized within the textual system.

Reborn in a new "Snow" section, this time Ursula is saved from suffocation by her mother rather than Dr Fellowes, who once again has been prevented from arriving on time by the snowstorm. Instead of helplessly witnessing her daughter's death like in a previous timeline, Sylvie surprisingly seizes a pair of surgical scissors and performs the same timely operation that was carried out by the doctor in yet another branch. "One must be prepared" (LAL 602), she tells Bridget, in a startling reference to the early "Snow" section in which, observing the doctor, she "made a mental note [...] to buy just such a pair of scissors, in case of similar emergency" (LAL 27). Hence, the text suggests that Ursula's mother, just like her daughter, might be able to remember previous lives and make choices inspired by those memories. However, rather than delve into the implications of this possibility (and the narrative complexities that could ensue

from it), the text only slightly hints at it, simply closing the scene with the usual comment: “Practice makes perfect” (*LAL* 602).

After this new birth scenario, the narrative jumps forward in time to May 1945. Remarkably, this section titled “The Broad Sunlit Uplands” opens with Teddy and a fellow airman sitting together in a pub after the end of the war. As the text soon informs us, in this version of the story Teddy did not die when his plane went on fire back in 1943, but rather managed to escape at the last minute. Interestingly, this account of the events does not contradict the one presented in “A Long Hard War,” but rather confirms Ursula’s guess, as presented in that previous section, that her brother “bailed out, and he’s been taken captive” (*LAL* 530). However, while in “A Long Hard War” Ursula lives until 1967 without ever seeing her brother again, eventually convincing herself that he must be dead, in this latest scenario Teddy comes back as soon as the war is over to reunite with his sister and his girlfriend Nancy. Nancy’s presence in this new timeline indicates that Ursula has successfully achieved one of her recurrent goals, namely saving her childhood friend from the suspicious man who, in two previous versions of the events, had killed her back in 1926. Readers have already been shown how Ursula can save Nancy simply by walking her home, as it happens by chance in the final chapter of “Like a Fox in a Hole” and as the protagonist herself realizes too late in “The End of the Beginning.” In the latter section, when Pamela had asked her why she was acting as though she were responsible for Nancy’s death, Ursula had thought, “Because she was. She knew it now” (*LAL* 587). Through a comparison of “The Broad Sunlit Uplands” with the previous narrative branches, readers can therefore infer that, in the latest timeline, Ursula’s awareness must have played a part in Nancy’s survival, even though the text does not make explicit how the events exactly played out this time. Contrary to readerly expectations, instead, the narrative does not present Teddy’s survival as directly resulting from the protagonist’s intervention, but rather, apparently, from mere chance. Thus,

death didn’t come because his Aussie wireless operator crawled to the cockpit and clipped Teddy’s parachute on his back and said, “Get out, you stupid bastard.” [...] He jumped at the last minute, his parachute had barely opened when he hit the ground and he was lucky to fracture only an ankle and a wrist. He was taken to a hospital and the local Gestapo came and arrested him on the

ward with the immortal words, “For you the war is over,” which was the greeting that nearly every airman had heard when he was taken prisoner. (*LAL* 606)

By preventing readers from establishing a causal connection between Ursula’s actions and Teddy’s survival, *Life After Life* ultimately highlights the inescapable role of chance in life, suggesting that the protagonist’s control over the events can never be complete, as luck will always play a fundamental part in all possible worlds. Yet, even though the degree of Ursula’s contribution to this (temporary) happy ending is not made explicit, the text suggests that at least part of the credit must go to her when Teddy shouts something that his sister cannot grasp, but that she believes to be “Thank you” (*LAL* 608).

While “The Broad Sunlit Uplands” clearly does not stage the absolute best scenario, since Hitler has not been stopped in time to prevent World War II, it offers nonetheless an undeniably satisfying one insofar as Ursula, her brother, and his girlfriend are all alive. Thus, readers are faced with an interesting problem, as the novel implicitly prompts them to wonder which version of the story is more desirable as an ending—the one in which Hitler is killed, but Ursula dies too, or the one in which the war still occurs, but all the main characters survive and are eventually able to meet again. As the authorial narrator of John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* observes when providing two different endings for his novel, “I cannot give both versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the ‘real’ version” (409)—a statement Peter J. Rabinowitz also quotes to present his “trust-the-last rule” (155). Yet, *Life After Life* does not simply end by juxtaposing the two alternative endings represented by the shooting of Hitler and Teddy’s return. If that was the case, the last scenario to be presented would indeed appear as the stable point of arrival of Ursula’s teleological progress. Instead, the novel closes with a final “Snow” section, comprising a single one-page chapter. Offering a word-by-word repetition of a previous “Snow” scenario, this last page presents Dr Fellowes’s assistant, Mrs Haddock, drinking rum in a pub, cut off by the usual heavy snowstorm on the night of Ursula’s birth. Hence, even though the previous section has not ended with the protagonist’s death, by returning to 1910 the text shows that no ending can possibly be a definitive one, as death will eventually occur and the time loop of Ursula’s life will always be due

to restart. Far from providing closure, not only does the end of *Life After Life* go back to the beginning of the story, but also presents an exact textual repetition of an episode readers are already familiar with. Thus, the novel cleverly avoids the danger envisaged by John Fowles by offering, in its last chapter, a final scene which is actually both a new opening and a reiteration of a previous passage, and therefore not conclusive at all. Moreover, by shifting the narrative perspective to Mrs Haddock, in its last—and therefore likely to be perceived as most authoritative—scenario, *Life After Life* leaves all possibilities open to the readers' imagination, even refusing to present Ursula's survival at birth as certain, as readers well know that the baby might die as soon as she sees the light. Precisely because the narrative ends by stressing its own recursiveness rather than settling on one ending, *Life After Life* ultimately grants readers an active role, allowing them to choose, or imagine, the best possible version of the story, even though making it clear that even perfection, once achieved, can only be provisional.

4.6 Allegorical Readings and Metafictional Aspects

As in the case of the two previously discussed novels, the multiple realities of *Life After Life* can also be rationalized by way of an allegorical interpretation. Thus, it can be observed that, in the unfolding of its unnatural structure, Atkinson's novel enacts a narrative fulfillment of our deep-seated desire to be able to reverse time, put our hindsight to use, and amend past mistakes, besides offering a reflection on the infinite possible outcomes virtually originating at every moment in our lives. Considerations of this kind are frequently thematized throughout the narrative, inviting readers to establish a parallel between its structure and the very themes often discussed by its characters. Thus, for example, the premise of the novel is condensed in Teddy's already quoted question to his sister: "What if we had a chance to do it again and again [...] until we finally did get it right? Wouldn't that be wonderful?" (*LAL* 522-3). In the two conversations Ursula has respectively with Ralph in one timeline and Nigel in another, such counterfactual reflections shift from the personal plan to embrace a historical dimension. Hence, the protagonist asks her lover, "Don't you wonder sometimes [...] If just one small thing had been changed, in the past, I mean. If Hitler had died at birth, or if someone had kidnapped him as a baby and brought him up in – say, a Quaker household – surely things would be different" (*LAL* 328).

Carrying her argument further, in another life Ursula has the following exchange with her nephew:

“But if Hitler had been killed, before he became Chancellor, it would have stopped all this conflict between the Arabs and the Israelis, wouldn’t it? [...] if Hitler had been unable to implement the Holocaust—”

“Because he was dead?”

“Yes, because he was dead. Then, support for a Jewish homeland would have been weak at best...”

“History is all about ‘what ifs’,” Nigel said. (*LAL* 553)

Ursula then goes on to envisage “how different things would be,” imagining that “[t]he Iron Curtain would probably not have fallen and Russia wouldn’t have been able to gobble up Eastern Europe” (*LAL* 554), that “the Americans might not have recovered from the Depression so quickly without a war economy and consequently not exerted so much influence on the post-war world” (*LAL* 554-5), that “the whole cultural face of Europe would be different because of the Jews,” that “Britain would still have an empire” (*LAL* 555), and so on. Yet, she also insightfully acknowledges that “perhaps Goering or Himmler would have stepped in. And everything would have happened in just the same way” (*LAL* 555). In other words, counterfactual reasoning has its limits and, as Ursula’s experience of her multiple lives teaches her, it is impossible to exert total control over the innumerable possible directions life, and history, might take.

As Atkinson writes in the “Author Note” providing a coda to the novel, “We are all intrigued by ‘What if?’ scenarios, and one of the most potent and familiar is ‘What would have happened if Hitler had been prevented from coming to power?’ I’ve long harboured a desire to write something around the topic; worried, too, that it would simply turn into a cliché, as the over-familiar usually does” (*LAL* 616). *Life After Life* avoids this danger by suggesting the possibility of counterfactual historical developments without actually committing to exploring them. Hence, every time Ursula shoots Hitler, she dies, leaving the outcome of her subversive action unknowable (and unactualized), thus sparing the author the tricky task of providing an account of its consequences and, in turn, offering the readers the opportunity to imagine them.

Moreover, in staging Ursula's journey towards awareness, *Life After Life* makes it clear that the ontological instability of its textual system provides the protagonist with an opportunity of self-knowledge, enabling her to experiment with her own life until she becomes able to "get it right" (*LAL* 523) and, at the same time, to discover what her role in the world is. "[B]ecome such as you are, having learned what that is" (*LAL* 198) is the quote from Pindar Dr Kellet translates for little Ursula in one of her existences and which she recalls towards the end of the novel, as she gains full consciousness of her power, this time adding that "[s]he knew what that was now. She was Ursula Beresford Todd and she was a witness" (*LAL* 592). Thus, as in Roth's and Auster's novels, in *Life After Life* too ontological plurality is depicted as offering a chance to grasp the complexity of reality and the self rather than a hindrance to knowledge. Knowledge can be achieved by Ursula precisely by crossing the boundaries between one world and the next, as each world provides her with a new way of access to the essence of life and a new opportunity to define her identity, each existential experience ultimately adding up to compose a multifaceted picture of the infinite aspects of her reality.

Whereas both Auster's *4 3 2 1* and Roth's *The Counterlife* explicitly invite readers to naturalize their multiple versions of the events by way of a metafictional explanation, in *Life After Life* none of the alternate realities is ever self-referentially disclosed to be fictional and the readers are, therefore, never required to suspend their disbelief in the (textual) actual existence of any of them. While both Ferguson-4 and Nathan Zuckerman are self-declared creators of alternative fictional versions of their own lives, Ursula's experiences of her multiple existences are all equally real, as every rewriting of her fate concretizes for her in a new actual world. Yet, even though backgrounded and never explicitly thematized, a metafictional aspect is also implied in the proliferation of alternate scenarios of Atkinson's novel, which can therefore be rationalized in the light of a reflection on the infinite possibilities open to a writer's imagination. By refusing to choose a single narrative path for her heroine's life journey, Atkinson revels in those infinite possibilities, laying bare the very process whereby narrative branches are contemplated, discarded, or selected in order to construct an engaging plot. Thus, as a reviewer has observed,

“Life After Life” [sic] makes the reader acutely conscious of an author’s power: how much the novelist can do. Kill a character, bring her back. Start a world war or prevent one. Bomb London, destroy Berlin. Write a scene from one point of view, then rewrite it from another. Try it this way, then that. Make your character perish in a bombed-out building during the blitz, then make her part of the rescue team that (in a scene with the same telling details) tries unsuccessfully to save her. (Prose para. 13)

While *Life After Life* never breaks the illusionistic spell by thematizing its own construction, interestingly this metanarrative interpretation is indeed brought to the fore in *A God in Ruins*, the novel about Ursula’s brother Teddy described by Atkinson as “a ‘companion’ piece” (*A God in Ruins* 539) to *Life After Life*. Although, differently from his sister, Teddy only lives one life in Atkinson’s 2015 book, the end of *A God in Ruins* surprisingly declares his one life, or at least part of it, to be merely a product of fiction. Thus, towards the end of the novel, the narrative suddenly starts to be punctuated by enigmatic allusions to four walls subsequently collapsing, culminating in the final revelation: “And with a massive roar the fifth wall comes down and the house of fiction falls, taking Viola and Sunny and Bertie with it. They melt into thin air and disappear. Pouf!” (Atkinson, *A God in Ruins* 524-5). Quickly erasing the events that have been unfolding in the course of the story, in what follows the narrator sketches out a completely different narrative, contradicting what readers have previously learned about a good number of characters. Eventually, even Teddy’s fate is reversed, as he is revealed to have tragically died in the war. Thus, though clearly returning to the game of multiplying alternatives first explored in *Life After Life*, this time Atkinson does not try to persuade readers to believe in the impossible, but rather prompts them to disbelieve, forcing them to acknowledge that, in the end, it is all just fiction. This metafictional game is possibly carried even further in the very last chapter of *A God in Ruins*, which presents an excerpt from Izzie’s own fictionalization of her nephew’s life, *The Adventures of Augustus*. In retrospect, it is therefore easy to see how a similar metanarrative reading can provide a suitable naturalizing strategy for Ursula’s many lives as well. And yet, as unreal as the protagonist’s condition might appear to be, her impression of living not just one but many lives essentially remains a very real and relatable one.

Conclusions

Over the course of this thesis, possible worlds theory has been employed as a framework to highlight the ontological peculiarities of the fictional universes projected by Paul Auster's *4 3 2 1*, Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*, and Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*. Moreover, a cognitive approach and, specifically, the application of concepts drawn from unnatural narratology have made it possible to outline the reading experiences invited by these "multiform" novels (Murray, *Hamlet* 30-38 *passim*) and show what kind of naturalizing strategies are likely to be activated in order to deal with their strange textual systems. As it has been observed, all three texts present a plurality of incompatible scenarios, compelling us to suspend our tendency to order their worlds according to an ontological hierarchy—that is, to distinguish a single factual version of the story, taking place in the textual actual world, from counterfactual versions set in nonactual alternative worlds. Hence, in the case of Auster's *4 3 2 1*, we are tricked into believing in the equal actuality of four different worlds; in Roth's *The Counterlife* we are faced with a series of irreconcilable scenarios whose ontological status remains undecidable; and in Atkinson's *Life After Life* we are prompted to acknowledge a multiplicity of worlds as actual. A process of "frame enrichment" (Alber, "Impossible Storyworlds" 82-3, 91), enabling us to naturalize systems of reality that clash with our ordinary real-world experience, is often involved in the reading of such novels, along with interpretative inferences aimed to understand their underlying allegorical or symbolical implications. Furthermore, the reading experience of these non-linear narratives is likely to be characterized by an oscillation between an effort to preserve the aesthetic illusion and a strong awareness of the artificiality of their structures. Before moving on to further considerations, I will briefly summarize the main aspects emerged from the analysis of each novel, in order to emphasize their divergences and analogies.

In Auster's *4 3 2 1* four alternative versions of the protagonist's life are deceitfully presented as equally actual until the final metafictional twist, which retrospectively reestablishes a natural ontological order. Hence, only one version of the story is confirmed to be real—even though a twilight zone between truth and fiction remains—while the other three are revealed to represent virtual alternative worlds ensuing from Ferguson-4's writerly imagination. Roth's *The*

Counterlife, on the contrary, makes it impossible to distinguish truth from fiction within its textual system, forcing readers to recognize that all its scenarios are in fact to be considered as “equally real or equally false” (Roth, “An Interview” 253). Yet, we may try assessing the ontological status of the represented events by situating this novel within the wider context offered by the other books belonging to the Zuckerman macrotext. While this comparison shows that none among the scenarios comprised in *The Counterlife* can be considered as entirely actual within Zuckerman’s biographical narrative, the line between facts and counterfactual events belonging to the fictional writer’s story remains often blurred. As for *Life After Life*, all versions of Ursula Todd’s life appear to be, in fact, actual. Atkinson’s novel is, therefore, the only one among the three discussed here that could be considered as effectively projecting multiple universes, each centered around its own actual world.

The analysis of these texts has made it possible to observe the relevance of a unifying element enabling readers to conceive their multiple branches as integral parts of a coherent whole rather than as a mere juxtaposition of independent narratives. As Marie-Laure Ryan remarks, “[j]ust as it takes an entanglement of destinies to turn the lives of distinct individuals into a plot, it takes interference between its constituent worlds to turn a fiction with a multiverse cosmology into a cohesive narrative” (“Parallel” 655). This is, indeed, the case of Atkinson’s *Life After Life*, in which cohesion between different worlds is provided on the story level of the narrative by the protagonist’s awareness of her multiple lives. As the narrative fragments are linked together by Ursula’s faltering progress towards an understanding of her condition and ability to take advantage of it, this intradiegetic interference between the different actual worlds projected by the text allows readers to experience them as parts of a unified—though unnatural—textual system and, possibly, to preserve the aesthetic illusion not only within each of them separately, but also with regard to their global arrangement.

Both in the case of *4 3 2 1* and *The Counterlife*, instead, the unifying element is a metanarrative one, as the multiple realities are held together by the mind of a fictional writer, from which they originate. While Ursula actually *experiences* numerous alternate worlds, both Ferguson-4 and Nathan Zuckerman *create* alternate worlds for themselves—even though the outcomes of such a creative act often turn out to be hardly distinguishable from reality. Thus,

both in Auster's and Roth's novels a metatextual aspect is ultimately brought to the fore to the detriment of (global) aesthetic illusion. However, *4 3 2 1* invites an engaging immersive experience of each of its four branches, which never intersect until the ending. Then, as the four realities are finally revealed to stem from Ferguson-4's mind, their discursive juxtaposition is retrospectively integrated in the story. Similarly, in *The Counterlife* the coexistence of incompatible scenarios can be rationalized by acknowledging Nathan Zuckerman's agency behind their narration. Yet, as an author of fiction, Zuckerman seems able to interfere—if only temporarily—with the very texture of his (fictional) existence, so that the realities he conjures up appear to concretize as part of his textual actual world. Therefore, it might seem reductive to see the ontological plurality of *The Counterlife* simply as a discursive feature. Rather, it may be observed that Roth's novel considerably complicates the traditional distinction between story and discourse.

In recent years, the narrative possibilities offered by multi-path structures have been frequently and diversely exploited in fiction. As this thesis has attempted to show, a common project taken up by some of these narratives has been the exploration of a fluid concept of truth with regard to life stories, aiming to destabilize the fixity of a single unambiguous version of the events and to account, in turn, for the multiplicity and incoherence inherent in our contemporary conception of the self. Significantly, however, despite their proliferation of alternative scenarios, the three novels analyzed here do not merely engage in an endless Derridean deferral of meaning; the obstacles they present to readers searching for a stable center of truth do not simply translate into postmodern skepticism towards the very notion of truth. On the contrary, all three texts seem concerned precisely with finding a creative solution to the epistemological problems posed by the elusiveness of identity and the enormity of the task of telling a life.

In his 1986 novel Roth already distanced himself from postmodernism, turning postmodern tropes such as metafictional experimentalism and ontological destabilization into an opportunity to capture an author's real-life experience of truth and imagination as tightly interwoven, emphasizing that fiction can actually serve to gain a deeper understanding of reality. Likewise, Auster's latest work does not undermine our deep-rooted ontological assumptions just to revel in textual self-reflexivity; on the contrary, the multiple truths of *4 3 2 1* seem to be motivated by an

urge to be true to the multiplicity of life itself. Yet, as opposed to *The Counterlife*, Auster's novel does not just face readers with a series of irreconcilable realities, but actually provides them, in the end, with a solution to the riddle of its protagonist's four lives, surprisingly disclosing that a realistic intent underlies its entire narrative game. Only one Ferguson is "real;" imagining alternative worlds is his way to gain a more thorough knowledge of his actual self and his actual existence. Hence, *4 3 2 1* appears to suggest that imaginatively acknowledging the endless possibilities of life might represent, in fact, an essential step towards understanding the one real life we have. In an age in which "post-truth" has become a word of common usage, a narrative conveying this perspective regardless of its seemingly postmodern proliferation of truths can actually feel quite refreshing.

In Atkinson's novel Ursula Todd actually goes through multiple lives, and yet the implications of her experience seem not so different. Because the protagonist's journey through constant rewritings of her fate is invariably directed towards self-knowledge and self-improvement, *Life After Life* appears to imply, like *4 3 2 1*, that awareness of the infinite forking paths comprised in one's existence can be essential to define oneself and find one's purpose. Thus, even if the ambiguity between truth and fiction is not entirely resolved at the end of *4 3 2 1*, and even if there is no definite point of arrival for Ursula's endeavors in *Life After Life*, both novels ultimately present alternate lives—whether imagined or real—as a creative way for their protagonists to understand and shape their one actual (in the case of Ferguson) or current (in the case of Ursula) existence. Indeed, there seems to be a stable core to Ferguson's, Zuckerman's, and Ursula's identity which is not undermined over the course of their contradictory experiences. Rather, it is precisely by acknowledging that not only the objective facts but also what goes on in the mind represents an essential piece in the puzzle of life that these characters seem able to access some essential, though complex and multilayered, truth about themselves.

In the context of the ongoing debate on whether genre fiction should be considered as distinct from literary fiction, it has been noted that the two categories have often, especially in the last years, overlapped (cf. Grossman). This intersection seems, indeed, showcased by the novels analyzed here, which employ the many-worlds premise—a frequent feature both of "genre" science fiction and "literary" postmodernist fiction—neither just as an engaging plot device nor

to voice an irreducible epistemological pessimism. Rather, Paul Auster's *4 3 2 1*, Philip Roth's *The Counterlife*, and Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life* show that multiple realities can offer a framework for an inquiry into the very essence of life and identity, as well as an opportunity for a metafictional reflection on the nature of stories. As all three novels demonstrate, when it comes to narrating a life these two aspects almost inevitably merge. This is because, even in our ordinary experience, telling a life invariably entails a degree of reinvention, so that the possible narrative outcomes of such a task always project, in a sense, alternative worlds. Moreover, in directing our lives, just like authors structuring a fictional plot, we are constantly faced with creative decisions whose virtual consequences branch out, each time, like forking paths. Thus, it can finally be observed that, by inviting us to follow their main characters through multiple existences, Auster's *4 3 2 1*, Roth's *The Counterlife*, and Atkinson's *Life After Life* expand the domain of the familiar without making it too strange, as they offer us an experience which, though impossible from the standpoint of objective reality, is definitely in tune with our imaginative understanding of our selves.

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