Against the Dominant Fiction:

Seeking Alternatives to Hegemonic

Fatherhood in Contemporary U.S. Literature

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El Dr. JOSÉ LISTE NOYA, Titular de Universidad, perteneciente al departamento de
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INFORMA

Que la tesis doctoral titulada "Against the Dominant Fiction: Seeking Alternatives to
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Freire para optar al grado de Doctora con Mención Internacional, ha sido realizada bajo su
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AUTORIZA

Su presentación.

Y para que así conste, firma la presente en A Coruña, a 18 de enero de 2022.

El director de tesis   La doctoranda

Fdo. José Liste Noya   Fdo. Sara Villamarín Freire

Para papá.

(Siento que me haya llevado tanto terminar "aquello" que me mandaste escribir hace tanto tiempo. Como no aguanto a Fernando Savater, he hablado de otras cosas—pero es ética de todos modos, así que espero que te guste. No podría haberlo hecho sin ti.)

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Phew! I made it *at last*! It took me so long that I had time to become a pole dancer, a skincare expert, grow tomato plants in my kitchen, bake my own bread, learn how to knit, perfect my fingerpicking abilities, buy a banjo and learn how to play it, watch the entire *South Park* series (more than once), and even win the prestigious ATF competition (2017 edition).

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Resumo

Contra a ficción dominante: unha búsqueda de alternativas á paternidade hexemónica na literatura estadounidense contemporánea

A miña tese doutoral analiza o papel da literatura na construcción de modelos de paternidade non patriarcais, e plantéxase até que punto é posible repensar a figura paterna fóra dos límites da masculinidade tradicional a través do uso da imaxinación narrativa. Partendo da base de que tanto a masculinidade como a paternidade poden ser concebidas como narrativas no sentido proposto por Hanna Meretoja (2018), esta investigación aborda a transformación sufrida polos paradigmas de paternidade nos últimos trinta anos en diversas disciplinas, desde a psicoanálise até os estudos de masculinidade. Polo tanto, esta investigación pretende arroxar luz sobre estas alternativas, e preguntarse se é posible concebir modelos de paternidade que non fosen conformados en base ao modelo patriarcal. Arguméntase, aplicando a noción de imaxinación narrativa, que o potencial ético da literatura pode promover modelos de representación paterna que van alén dos límites do ideario hexemónico actual. En particular, examínanse as figuras paternas que aparecen nas obras *The Invention of Solitude* (Paul Auster, 1982), *Fun Home* (Alison Bechdel, 2006), *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy, 2006) e *The Father* (Sharon Olds, 1992). A miña intención é demostrar que cada un destes textos emprega distintos mechanismos para repensar a paternidade e o vínculo paterno-filial de maneira non patriarcal, e por ende dun xeito verdadeiramente ético.

Palabras chave: paternidade; figuras paternas; masculinidade hexemónica; literatura estadounidense contemporánea; hermenéutica narrativa; psicoanálise.

Resumen

Contra la ficción dominante: una búsqueda de alternativas a la paternidad hegemónica en la literatura estadounidense contemporánea

Mi tesis doctoral analiza el papel de la literatura en la construcción de modelos de paternidad no patriarcales, y se pregunta hasta qué punto es posible repensar la figura paterna fuera de los límites de la masculinidad tradicional a través del uso de la imaginación narrativa. Partiendo de la base de que tanto la masculinidad como la paternidad pueden ser concebidas como narrativas en el sentido propuesto por Hanna Meretoja (2018), esta investigación aborda la transformación sufrida por los paradigmas de paternidad en los últimos treinta años en diversas disciplinas, desde el psicoanálisis a los estudios de masculinidad. Esta investigación pretende arrojar luz sobre estas alternativas, y preguntarse si es posible concebir modelos de paternidad que no hayan sido conformados en base a modelos patriarcales de masculinidad o paternidad. Se argumenta, aplicando la noción de imaginación narrativa, que el potencial ético de la literatura puede promover modelos de representación paterna que van más allá de los límites del ideal hegemónico actual. En particular, se examinan las figuras paternas que aparecen en las obras *The Invention of Solitude* (Paul Auster, 1982), *Fun Home* (Alison Bechdel, 2006), *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy, 2006) y *The Father* (Sharon Olds, 1992). Mi intención es demostrar que cada uno de estos textos emplea distintos mecanismos para repensar la paternidad y el vínculo paterno-filial de manera no patriarcal, y por ende de un modo verdaderamente ético.

Palabras clave: paternidad; figuras paternas; masculinidad hegemónica; literatura estadounidense contemporánea; hermenéutica narrativa; psicoanálisis.

Abstract

Against the Dominant Fiction: Seeking Alternatives to Hegemonic Fatherhood in Contemporary U.S. Literature

My dissertation analyzes the role of literature in the alternative construction of models of non-patriarchal paternity, and questions whether it is possible to rethink father figures outside the limits of traditional masculinity through the use of narrative imagination. Departing from the assumption that both masculinity and fatherhood can be conceived as narratives in the sense proposed by Hanna Meretoja (2018), this investigation addresses the transformation endured by fatherhood paradigms throughout the past thirty years in diverse disciplines ranging from psychoanalysis to masculinity studies. I contend that the ethical potential of literature can foster models of paternal representation that go beyond the limits of the hegemonic ideal. In particular, I examine the father figures featured in *The Invention of Solitude* (Paul Auster, 1982), *Fun Home* (Alison Bechdel, 2006), *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy, 2006), and *The Father* (Sharon Olds, 1992). I aim to demonstrate that each of these texts employs different mechanisms to rethink fatherhood and the father-child bond in a non-patriarchal and hence truly ethical manner.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The study of the ethical potential of literature has a remarkably long trajectory. As is often the case in long-running debates, an agreement has never been reached. When I first decided to focus on the subject of literature and ethics, I was convinced, rather naïvely, that I could produce an ethics modeled after the paternal figure and the father-child bond. After some time, I figured that I could at least sketch some directions for an ethical project to be fully developed in a not so distant future. For the moment, I only hope that my observations can shed some light on whether literature can lend us a hand and contribute to rethink the world we live in.

The present dissertation began as an attempt to identify and typify the diverse representations of fatherhood in contemporary literature produced in the United States, beginning with the assumption that a new paradigm shift had taken place. This shift, explored by Italian psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati in *The Telemachus Complex* (2014), made it possible to understand the paternal role in terms of ethical engagement. I initially devoted my master's dissertation to examine Recalcati's ideas and concluded that his arguments were as compelling as they were exciting.

Unlike the Lacanian paternal function from which it originated, this new father was an individual who chose to be a father in the real world. Choice was a central element in Recalcati's vision, since it was through a conscious decision that one embraced the father role. Commitment was likewise central to this emerging paradigm. This shift enabled a different vision of fatherhood by replacing authority and generational confrontation with a father-child bond based on mutual respect and responsibility. Children benefited from this change the most. By accepting to participate in the bond, they were able to subjectivize their legacy through what Recalcati called the inheritance process, whereby an individual could

incorporate their past into their own subjectivity. Accepting the past without being subdued by it was the outcome of completing the inheritance process.

The arguments in *The Telemachus Complex* are representative of a trend that has spread significantly over the past few years. In both popular literature and academia, in fiction as well as in non-fiction works, there has been a fatherhood boom. Amidst the recurrent public debates on gender identity and performativity, many have seen in fatherhood a new and suitable blueprint for masculinity, confident that a model of masculinity based on a new, more nurturing version of fatherhood may lead us to reconceptualize masculinity altogether.

Recalcati's version of fatherhood, which stems from a particularization of the symbolic father of Lacanian psychoanalysis, foregrounds paternal presence and responsibility towards others. In general terms, this and other so-called "new fatherhood" models put great emphasis on nurture, care, and emotional bonding—qualities that have long been regarded as so-called feminine traits that men were either incapable of cultivating or not prone to display. To have fatherhood assimilate and display these features would be good, it is often argued, since it would contribute to deconstruct traditional gender stereotypes and would free men from the dangers of toxic masculinity. In addition, it would make men better parents for their children.

At first sight, there appears to be nothing wrong with such a shift. Nevertheless, throughout these past few years, I have revisited those same arguments over and over again and found cracks and gaps here and there. I then began to re-examine my own certainties and came to wonder whether an ethics of fatherhood is possible in the first place; that is, whether father figures have the potential to elicit the kind of ethical response that this shift would demand from them. This research represents my attempt to answer that question.

The idea that fatherhood can become a model for masculinity is not new at all; in fact, it has been the norm throughout the history of U.S. masculinity ideals. In particular, it is the breadwinner role which has been the backbone of American men and fathers for over two centuries. The pervasiveness of this concept and the extent to which it has shaped male identity in the U.S. make breadwinning a key notion in any research about fatherhood and masculinity ideals. To be able to succeed as a breadwinner has affected—and still does— men's self-image enormously. Despite repeated claims that breadwinning, and hence masculinity, are in crisis or on the brink of extinction, it is still paramount in American men's lives.

Given that fatherhood and masculinity already have a history, it might seem as if it is just a matter of replacing one fatherhood model with *another*; for instance, by devising a new model of fatherhood that would replace breadwinning for good, something that could be accomplished by the new fatherhood trend. However, this is not the first time that the so-called "new fatherhood" has been hailed as an alternative to breadwinning. Ever since the turn of the century, diverse new fatherhoods have been promoted in popular literature, magazines, advertising, and so on. Experts have advocated the need to replace the old ways as a way of reaffirming men's involvement with their families and thus their self-worth, too. In the event of a crisis of masculinity, calls to reinvent the father role have often responded to men's perceived lack of purpose in life. Taking into account that male identity in the U.S. is closely intertwined with performance in the workplace, fatherhood has historically provided an alternative when men felt under siege.

Is that the case nowadays? Many authors have identified an increasing malaise among American men. There have been calls to repair American manhood through the most diverse methods for the past three or four decades: going to the woods with the Mythopoetic men, taking part in rallies with the Promise Keepers and other responsible men's movements,

signing up for a militia, or writing on online forums about the injustice men have to face in today's America. Some of these methods have been capitalized by the alt-right. In talkshows across the country, men are hearing that this is a hard time to be a white male in America. It could be argued that there is indeed a feeling of pending crisis, at least from their perspective.

Early in my investigations, a series of readings from myriad fields (most notably, sociology, social psychology, and gender studies) oriented my interest towards the so-called postfeminist trend and new formulations of fatherhood, as well as to the concept of hegemonic masculinity. In particular, Hannah Hamad's arguments on the reactionary underside of the new father roles in film, discussed at length in *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary U.S. Film* (2014), warned against the uses of fatherhood not to reinvent old masculinity models, but to reinforce them instead (1). Hamad's book made me question whether a similar pattern was recognizable in literature. I had assumed that it was possible for fatherhood to be the basis for an ethical system. Now I began to wonder whether it was possible that this point of origin was fundamentally flawed; after all, hegemonic masculinity has managed to survive more or less unchanged at its core by adapting to changing social and cultural standards.

This reorientation of my research led me to interrogate the ways in which cultural productions, and literature in particular, can perpetuate old patterns of domination under a guise of novelty. Psychoanalysis (in particular, the Lacanian strand practiced by Recalcati) had hitherto been my primary methodological tool, but it lacked the malleability that this issue required. Though undeniably useful for my research, I realized that psychoanalysis lacked the unifying component that would allow me to account for the interaction between social forces and their literary representation, given that most of its postulates assume an ahistorical stance. It soon became apparent to me that the alleged ahistoricity of some of the concepts I was dealing with, including the paternal role, was precisely the cause behind the

naturalization, and therefore perpetuation, of some practices that were preventing an actual shift from taking place within paternity models.

At this point, I became increasingly interested in exploring different viewpoints on the relation of literature and ethics, and found an extremely valuable tool in narrative hermeneutics as developed by Hanna Meretoja. Meretoja posits that we are constituted through dialogic social interaction with other people, through internalizing subject positions and voices, and through a dialogue with cultural narrative models of sense-making ("Dialogics" 34). This framework presents human interaction as seminal to subjectivity, likewise foregrounding the relational nature of identity formation, and emphasizes that human understanding follows the structure of a hermeneutic circle. Thus, we are perpetually surrounded by cultural narratives which we constantly interpret and that shape us—and, in turn, can also be shaped by us.

One of my main concerns from a methodological viewpoint was being able to integrate the social and historical transformations undergone by paternity, as well as its relation to masculinity ideals and particular fathering practices in a given context, alongside the literary analysis of the texts. Narrative hermeneutics provided me with a much-needed overarching framework that acknowledges "the different functions that narratives have in our lives, the significance of narratives for human existence, or the entwinement of narrative with ethical agency" (Meretoja and Davis 3). At the same time, by being rooted in the acknowledgment that human beings are "situated beings whose life-world is shaped by historical processes and their configuration and reconfiguration through narrative imagination" (Meretoja and Davis 2), narrative hermeneutics granted me deeper insight into the intertwinement of storytelling practices and social realities.

Furthermore, narrative hermeneutics emphasizes the sense-making potential of storytelling practices while rejecting the reductionist view that stories are neutral from an

19

ethical standpoint. The narrative webs surrounding us are comprised of master and counter-narratives that can be explicit (i.e., particular narrative artifacts) or implicit (i.e., models of sense-making that underlie specific narratives) (Meretoja, "Dialogics" 37). In the words of Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis:

> Storytelling practices may help define who we are, refine our moral sensibilities and open new possibilities of experience, action and self-invention, but, at the same time, they may be the vehicle of simplifications, obfuscations or plain lies that corrupt our moral standing. (1)

Upon enlarging my theoretical repertoire, other questions began to arise that I had not been able to formulate before. For instance, if an ethics based on fatherhood is likely flawed from the start due to its confluence with hegemonic masculinity, one might wonder whether that flaw is intrinsic to father figures or whether it is located elsewhere. Is there any particular feature preventing fathers from being sound ethical models? Is the problem rooted in the notion of paternity at large? My readings on the parallel evolution of paternity roles and masculinity ideals suggested that far from being ahistorical and static, father figures had acquired and lost a number of traits over time; some of these traits had become reified precisely by means of discursive practices. In particular, the problem seemed to lie in the consolidation of a narrative which perpetuates certain associations that equal father figures to representatives of the patriarchal order.

In my view, the main reason to doubt these new models of fatherhood stems from the implicit narrative undergirding them. They might appear changed on the outside, but the sense-making practices through which we read them have often been left unaddressed, at least explicitly. The problem thus emerges that the (seemingly) changing narratives on fatherhood are nothing but prosthetic devices that mask deeper issues. For instance, in most of the cases analyzed by Hamad, plots that revolve around paternally-marked characters are

20

used to stage a process of male rehabilitation which often ends with the reunification of the heteronormative nuclear family. Sometimes, father figures acquire their nurturing, ethically-engaged role following the death or disappearance of the maternal figure. Overall, the sense-making practices on which these narratives of paternal improvement rest remain unchallenged, and ultimately this results in the perpetuation of old models under a new guise.

It must be noted that narratives are performative "in their ability to not only represent but also create and shape inter-subjective reality" (Meretoja, "Dialogics" 32), and we as "narrative agents" can use them and therefore reinforce or question them, through acts of narrative imagination:

> The action and experience narrated in a narrative implies a certain understanding of what is possible for subjects of action and experience in a particular world. Narratives provide different subject positions, and in narrative worlds agents seize certain possibilities that are open to them and dismiss others. Narratives explore these possibilities, and through this exploration, they can provide us with new perspectives on our own world and on how we orient ourselves to our present and future possibilities. ("Dialogics" 32)

Our agential power to access and use narratives is determined by our status within social hierarchies. In the case of fatherhood narratives, some discourses are ubiquitous whereas others are scarce or nonexistent. One might wonder whether a change in hegemonic discourses, however positive it might be, will be enough to transform our conception of fatherhood in a profound manner. In other words, it would be necessary to assess to what extent the hegemonic discourse can be effectively dissociated from the patriarchal order that fosters and fuels it. Personally, I am not too optimistic about this. No matter how much the hegemonic form of paternity changes, it will still be hegemonic—hence conditioned by the patriarchal values underpinning it. And no form of discourse emanating from patriarchal

order in one way or another would ever be truly ethical, because it denies agential power to any subject that falls outside the category of cisheterosexual white male.

A similar conclusion has been reached by Kaja Silverman, whose concept of "the dominant fiction" is seminal to my own work. Drawing from Lacan and Althusser, Silverman offers a compelling re-reading of a notion used by Jacques Rancière. For Rancière, the dominant fiction "consists of the images and stories through which a society figures consensus," including "images and stories which cinema, fiction, popular culture, and other forms of mass representation presumably both draw upon and help to shape" (Silverman 30). Silverman builds on this concept against the backdrop of ideological recognition/misrecognition, and redefines the dominant fiction as "a 'bank' of representations for inducing a *méconnaissance* of the Law, or . . . for establishing an imaginary relation to it" (31).

Silverman goes on to theorize the dominant fiction as "the representational system by means of which the subject typically assumes a sexual identity, and takes on the desires commensurate with that identity" as well as the system that "forms the stable core around which a nation's and a period's 'reality' coheres" (41). In our society, she posits, our dominant fiction is "the representational system through which the subject is accommodated to the Name-of-the-Father. Its most central signifier of unity is the (paternal) family, and its primary signifier of privilege the phallus" (34). In her account, the symbolic order is governed by two fundamental laws: the Law of Language, or the universally applicable principle that any individual must be castrated in order to enter the symbolic order that precedes us all; and the Law of Kinship Structure, or the patriarchal rule that puts women in the position of tokens that men exchange, and "equates the father with the Law, and hence exempts him from it" (Silverman 42). The fundamental discrepancy between these two laws is solved as follows: the dominant fiction imposes an "imaginary resolution" (hence fictive)

that consists in the belief in "the commensurability of penis and phallus, actual and symbolic father" (Silverman 42). Since the dominant fiction "imparts the illusion of reality to whatever comes into close proximity with it" (Silverman 42), it is far easier to produce narratives that contribute to buttress it rather than the contrary.

Nevertheless, if the association between paternity and patriarchy has its origins in a discursive practice, perhaps it could be countered by another discursive practice. The present dissertation departs from the assumption that the notion of patriarchy-marked fatherhood can be altered and shaped through strategies of narrative resistance. If the ethical function of literature lies in its capacity to enlarge and modify our sense of the possible, as Meretoja suggests (*Ethics* 20), then by turning to literature we might find a way to articulate fatherhood in a truly alternative manner.

Thus, the main objective of my dissertation is to evaluate whether it is possible to conceive fatherhood as separate from the dominant fiction and the patriarchal order it represents. In order to test my hypothesis, I analyze a series of contemporary literary works from a narratological and ethical viewpoint. I contend that it might be possible to devise an ethics based on the ethical nature of the father-child bond, but only after undoing the conflation between paternity and patriarchy. I aim to demonstrate that it is possible to begin untangling this reified association through individual acts of storytelling that expose and challenge the dominant fiction, that is, the unconscious narrative fantasy that presents fathers as metaphors for patriarchal authority and control. In addition to this primary goal, I would like to offer an overview of the parallel evolution of masculinity and fatherhood in the United States in order to provide a better idea of the myriad intersecting issues at play that affect and may interfere with individual sense-making practices. I address this issue in chapter 1, "Postfeminist Fatherhood, Hegemonic Masculinities, and the Rise of the New Fatherhood Model in the U.S."

Fatherhood is already complex in its hegemonic variant, but it gets even more complex when it intersects with forms of non-hegemonic masculinity with their own history and evolution. Due to time and space limitations, I have decided to orient my discussion to the question of hegemonic forms of paternity, i.e., white, heteronormative paternity. This leaves out the ideals of masculinity and paternity as enacted and experienced by many communities in the United States, including African Americans, Latinxs, Asian Americans, or Native Americans. The reason I have proceeded in this manner has to do with the fact that all those non-hegemonic, albeit perfectly valid, forms of masculinity and therefore paternity are constructed in opposition to the hegemonic norm. I think it risky to try to understand all manifestations of paternity under the same logic that applies to the hegemonic version, lest it becomes a shallow, simplistic, and reductive analysis. In sum, they all deserve an in-depth study on their own terms. Furthermore, by studying paternity in its hegemonic form, I seek to lay the foundations for future comparative analyses that explore different ways of being a father in the United States.

Next, I seek to offer a succinct review of the theoretical underpinnings of paternal representation predominant in Westernculture, paying special attention to the problems raised by the father's body—or lack thereof. Drawing from Julia Kristeva and Kelly Oliver's views on the paternal body and the imaginary father, I seek to address the status of the father as an abstract, disembodied principle that may be an object of love for his children, but not an agent of love. Then I move on to examine the flaws in the examples of ethical paternity devised by Massimo Recalcati and Emmanuel Levinas. I argue that these formulations fail to address the fundamental question of the paternal body and jeopardize the possibility of ethics by theorizing a type of filiation marked by gender. Subsequently, drawing from Hanna Meretoja's vision of narrative hermeneutics, Adriana Cavarero's reciprocal narration, and Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity, I propose to understand fatherhood as orienting the

subjectivity formation process through an act of individual and mutual storytelling. I contend that my relational, embodied, and narrating version of fatherhood may serve to counter reified sense-making practices by altering key elements in the dominant hegemonic narrative. I develop my alternative to patriarchal fatherhood in chapter 2, "Notes for an Ethics of Fatherhood."

Moving on to the literary dimension of my research, I also aim to survey the ways in which father figures have been represented in contemporary American literature. In a tradition so marked by orphanhood and the resulting ideas of self-generation (especially regarding the myth of the self-made man), I am profoundly interested in examining how paternal portraits come to life through close readings of the texts. These include *The Invention of Solitude*, by Paul Auster (chapter 3), *Fun Home*, by Alison Bechdel (chapter 4), *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy (chapter 5), and *The Father*, by Sharon Olds (chapter 6). In choosing to survey such a heterodox group of literary artifacts (memoir, comics/autography, novel, and poetry collection) I intend to locate any crucial differences, if any, in the ways father figures are represented across diverse literary genres. Furthermore, by analyzing these books individually and against the theoretical backdrop provided in chapter 2, I seek to demonstrate that literature contributes to reimagine father figures outside the constraints set by the implicit patriarchal narrative in which we have all been socialized.

CHAPTER 1 – Postfeminist Fatherhood, Hegemonic Masculinities, and the Rise of the New Fatherhood Model in the U.S.

It has been a while since popular culture embraced the father frenzy. Beginning in the late 1970s, male characters in mainstream Hollywood films have increasingly embodied a new sensibility that places fatherhood at the center of their lives. These men are more prone to express their emotions, more caring, and, above all, their manliness and appeal stems precisely from their commitment to fatherly duties. It is generally agreed that this path-breaking stereotype was inaugurated with the 1979 film *Kramer vs Kramer*, in which Dustin Hoffman portrayed the transformation of a man from workaholic breadwinner to nurturing, loving father to his son after his wife abandons them both (Hamad 12–3). *Kramer vs Kramer* provided the blueprint for subsequent films that adapted this narrative. Even though the number of fatherhood-themed movies continued to grow throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it was not until the turn of the century that it peaked.

Fatherhood-themed mainstream films—and later TV shows as well—generally relied on common tropes and spaces, most notably presenting fatherhood as a redemptive journey that male characters ought to undertake in order to become better men. In its simplest form, this redemptive fatherhood plot presents a male character's journey from a position of dissatisfaction—either due to his own immaturity, emotional incompetence, or lack of meaningful bonds with others—to the assimilation of his role as father, which transforms him into a new man that is "sensitive, loving and adept in the daily practicalities of parenthood" (Hamad 13). In the meantime, the character's masculine identity may have been challenged only to be recuperated after successfully completing his journey. It is likewise frequent that the resolution of the plot involves the male character's sacrifice, hence completing his redemption. Classical examples of this plot have proliferated regardless of the film's genre:

examples range from *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1991) to Adam Sandler's *Big Daddy* (Dennis Dugan, 1999) to *Finding Nemo* (Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich, 2003).[1]

However, the redemptive fatherhood plot has already come a long way since the late 1970s. Current variations of this plot include the more traditional hero's journey with a paternally-marked character, either the protagonist or a secondary character that becomes a father figure to the hero. Examples of this include several films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, such as *Ant-Man* (Peyton Reed, 2015), *Guardians of the Galaxy 2* (James Gunn, 2017), and *Spiderman: Homecoming* (2017). A more recent twist of the fatherhood theme explores alleged cases of good, involved fathering and interrogates the adequacy of such practices. An example of this is the 2016 film *Captain Fantastic*, where the character portrayed by Viggo Mortensen must learn to adapt his paternal practice to his children's actual needs following his wife's death. Another tell-tale sign that paternally signified characters have become pervasive is the frequency with which father figures appear in coming-of-age movies. Namely, in *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016) and *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017), paternal figures might not profit from a lot of onscreen time, yet their benevolent influence and understanding demeanor provide a much-needed anchorage to main characters.[2]

It is worth stressing that the undeniable success of paternity-centered films has not been limited to the sphere of cultural production. A common and prevalent argument on both the scholarly plane and in popular culture posits that American men are now more prone to assuming fathering tasks, especially when compared with other generations of post-Industrial fathers (Marks and Palkovitz 115). According to Michael E. Lamb, the interest in fathers and their influence on child development has only increased ever since the nineteen seventies, giving way to an "era of paternal rediscovery" that now spans decades (6). In particular, Lamb contextualizes the emergence of this interest in paternity amid a series of sweeping

social changes triggered by second wave feminism (6). As will become clear throughout this chapter, both second wave feminism and its critics have rediscovered father figures—only with different agendas.

At first, however, the "new man" type that became fashionable following the success of *Kramer vs Kramer* was undoubtedly influenced by feminist tenets. New men were sensitive, caring, open about their emotions, and considered household chores and family duties their responsibility as much as their wives'. The shift toward what was seen as greater equality was advocated on the grounds that rigid divisions of labor based on gender were harmful for both men and women in the long run. In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow argues that these divisions only created "heterosexual asymmetries" that left "women with needs that lead them to care for children, and men with capacities for participation in the alienated work world" (219). Co-parenting and greater male involvement in the domestic sphere were encouraged by feminist women as much as by pro-feminist men associated with the men's liberation movement.

So far, it might appear that there is an almost genealogical connection between the co-parent, or new father, model that originated in the late 1970s and the paternally-marked characters in Hollywood films. Even though there is a common origin, insofar as feminist ideals of masculinity have been effectively assimilated by paternity-themed mainstream Hollywood films, the critical potential of these films has been questioned. For example, Hamad contends that, even though paternity may have become the privileged vehicle for presenting masculinities in these films, this particular model of fatherhood fails to "challenge the vested interests of patriarchy" (135). She argues that this model, which she names "postfeminist fatherhood," has become "the new hegemonic masculinity" (Hamad 1):

Since the 1990s, films in which the protagonist's fatherhood is the defining characteristic of his masculinity and/or causally linked to the narrative have proliferated across a much broader range of cinematic forms and genres. . . . [I]n the twenty-first century, postfeminist fatherhood has become normalized as the default position from which to negotiate hegemonic masculinity. . . . [P]ostfeminist fatherhood has become a structuring theme of contemporary movie masculinity to a near totalizing extent. (Hamad 15–6)

In Hamad's view, the predominance of postfeminist fatherhood raises important questions with regard to "what is at stake for feminism in configuring ideal masculinity in this way," especially taking into account that the normalization of postfeminist fatherhood frequently entails the appropriation and/or marginalization of motherhood (17). It is worth noting that one of the most widespread types of postfeminist father is the divorcé, or more often, the widower father. Obliterating the mother figure from the narrative seems like a prerequisite for this (frequently) ailing man's transformation, as he becomes a postfeminist father by assimilating traditional motherly traits—either throughout the film or prior to the film's beginning. Hamad points out that this strategy "conveniently sidesteps the problem of representing motherhood in scenarios contrived to foreground fatherhood, enables postfeminist fatherhood to be articulated through a melancholic affective register, and accounts for the otherwise unlikely proliferation of male melodramas and tragi-comedies of widowed single fatherhood" (19).[3] In addition, it may be used as the starting point toward the rehabilitation of the nuclear family. After his transformation/redemption through fatherhood, the otherwise single man finds himself ready to extend his commitment from his children to a suitable (female) partner with whom he will create a heteronormative family unit.

Hamad's assessment of the "new father" type in popular cinema is significant for various reasons. Namely, the connection existing between fatherhood and hegemonic masculinity is not exactly novel. Over past decades, and even centuries, diverse masculinity

ideals have highlighted the paternal role as a key component of masculine identity. What is striking is that the intertwinement of masculinity and fatherhood becomes even tighter during periods when masculinity is felt to be in crisis. I will address the relation between hegemonic masculinity and paternity, as well as their parallel evolution in U.S. history, in section 1, "Hegemonic masculinity and… hegemonic fatherhood?".

Moreover, Hamad's account sheds light on another crucial aspect, that is, the characterization of contemporary paternity in film as "postfeminist." It is generally agreed that the transformations brought by second wave feminism represented a seismic change in the workplace, and by extension contributed to reshape the public sphere—especially insofar as the labor force is concerned—as well as the private, domestic sphere (Kimmel, *Gendered* 157). These transformations did nonetheless generate successive waves of backlash that blamed feminism for the ills that besieged American society. Among these, there are two connected phenomena that stand out: the proliferation of discourses about fatherlessness and the emergence of fathers' rights movements from all sides of the ideological spectrum. While these discourses reached the peak of their popularity in the 1990s, their influence is still felt in more recent phenomena such as the "angry white men" (Kimmel, *Angry* 18). I will explore the sociohistorical context of postfeminist fatherhood in section 2, "Masculinity and fatherhood at a crossroads: old solutions, same problems."

Finally, the response of academia to this renewed interest in father figures has been likewise remarkable. Despite the sheer diversity of fields that have addressed the current problematic associated with fatherhood, there seems to be a common element that undergirds them all. Besides denominations such as "new fatherhood," the perceived novelty of this shift in paternal figures lies in the central place conceded to responsibility, commitment, and involvement, all terms frequently applied to the father-child relation. I will review some of

these theories and paradigms in section 3, "New fatherhood in academia: the case of psychoanalysis."

Hegemonic masculinity and… hegemonic fatherhood?

Far from being an understudied subject, as often believed, fatherhood has gathered considerable scholarly attention at least since the 1970s. Among the host of topics that have been tackled since then, we find cultural representations of fatherhood, conceptual and empirical analyses of father involvement, father-child relationships in relation to child well-being and development, or the social psychology of paternal identity, among others (Marsiglio et al. 1173–4). Authors such as Joseph H. Pleck, Elizabeth H. Pleck, Ralph LaRossa, and Robert L. Griswold have addressed the historical transformation of fatherhood and its connection to similarly changing masculinity ideals.

Due to my interest in literary representations of fatherhood, the scope of the present research is concerned with what Ralph LaRossa has defined as the culture of fatherhood ("Historical" 39). In sum, the culture of fatherhood refers to the socio-cultural coordinates that help to define fatherhood and father roles at the level of "symbolic interactions," including norms, attitudes, sentiments, values, beliefs, knowledge, and expressive symbols (LaRossa, "Historical" 39). By contrast, the conduct of fatherhood refers to "the routine activities of men when they are trying to act 'fatherly'" and is often an object of study for disciplines such as sociology or social psychology (LaRossa, "Historical" 39); as such, it will not be addressed here.[4] Therefore, although I henceforth use 'fatherhood' or 'paternity' to avoid cumbersome expressions, by this I will be referring to 'the culture of fatherhood' unless stated otherwise.

Inasmuch as it describes a phenomenon within the sphere of symbolic interactions, fatherhood ought to be understood as a "social construction" that is transformed / changes

"over time in response to economic, political, cultural, and social change" (Griswold, "Introduction" 252). Fatherhood has endured noteworthy transformations lately as a consequence of changing social, political, and economic realities in the United States. However, it appears that it has not exactly "evolved," but instead has "moved 'up' and 'down' (modernizing at one point, traditionalizing at another)" in its response to these changes (LaRossa, "Historical" 42). It is important to bear this in mind, as there is a widespread tendency to assume that fatherhood follows a positive linear progression. As will become apparent later on, fatherhood has partly changed for the better—as more men now get more involved in childrearing and domestic duties traditionally regarded as female-marked—but in many other aspects, it has not changed at all.

It is likewise important to understand that fatherhood and masculinity ideals are closely intertwined. William Marsiglio and Joseph H. Pleck argue that fathering can be studied in connection to hegemonic masculinity as well as alternative constructions of masculinity (250). For Robert L. Griswold:

> To understand fatherhood historically, or at least to begin to grasp its multiple, changing meanings, is to explore a major part of what it means to be a man, to define a key part of masculine identity, to uncover the shifting boundaries between manhood and womanhood. . . . Historically, men have exerted power over women and children, and we call this power patriarchy. . . . I would suggest that the study of fatherhood cannot be divorced from the study of power. . . . [I]t is not a simple story of unchanging male domination. . . . But the study of fatherhood does take us into the realm of men's power at both the personal and social levels. ("Introduction" 251–4)

It is worth stressing that there are multiple masculinities, and also multiple fatherhoods—both in terms of culture and conduct (Hobbs 384). However, fatherhood and masculinity will be studied here in their respective hegemonic forms.

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the most honored and idealized way of being a man, even though this model tends not to be representative of the lives of the majority of men (Connell 90; Connell and Messerschmidt 832). Hegemonic forms of masculinity can "express ideals, fantasies and desires, provide models of relations with women and solutions to gender problems and above all 'naturalize' gender difference and gender hierarchy" (Connell, "Violence" 90). Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity is "a relational concept" insofar as it requires men—and women—to position themselves in relation to it, thereby establishing a hierarchy that shows "how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance" (Connell and Messerschmidt 832; Carrigan, Connell, and Lee qtd. in Reeser 20).[5]

It must also be noted that non-hegemonic or alternative masculinities can, and indeed do, coexist with hegemonic varieties to which they are subordinated; the hegemonic strain, in turn, requires the existence of these weaker counterparts for validation (Hobbs 386). Besides using violence and coercion, hegemony is achieved through consent, participation, persuasion, and the dissemination of privileged norms through both culture and institutions (Connell and Messerschmidt 832; 841). The borders separating hegemonic from non-hegemonic positions are porous and malleable. For instance, "older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones" (Connell and Messerschmidt 832–3). These new forms often incorporate elements taken from subordinated or marginalized masculinities, even if that implies rejecting features that were hitherto considered hegemonic.[6] This ability to adapt is what ultimately grants it its survival over time.

In Hamad's description of postfeminist fatherhood, this model is conflated with a feminist ideal of masculinity (135). It can be posited that postfeminist fatherhood represents an evolution from previous positions of traditional masculinity. And at least in some aspects, it does. Postfeminist fatherhood is arguably a synthesis of "traditional masculinity ideology" with pro-feminist values. Traditional masculinity ideology in the United States, according to Ronald F. Levant, includes "the requirement to avoid all things feminine; the injunction to restrict one's emotional life; the emphasis on achieving status above all else; the injunction to be completely self-reliant; the emphasis on toughness and aggression; nonrelational, objectifying attitudes toward sexuality; and fear and hatred of homosexuals" (722). Some of these traits, albeit pervasive, have been displaced by fundamentally opposite values. Namely, contemporary forms of hegemonic masculinity have incorporated "many elements of a generalized new man-ism (men as more caring, sensitive, domesticated and expressive)" that would have been considered anti-hegemonic before (Beynon 17). I will come back to this in the following section, where I elaborate on the particular features of new "man-ism."

At first sight, there is nothing that makes us think of hegemonic masculinity in negative terms *per se*. One could argue that hegemonic masculinity is not inherently toxic, but simply a moving framework that has its perks; namely, it absorbs, and adapts to, social changes. Given that traditional masculinity is conceived as damaging insofar as it normalizes toxic patterns of behavior and emotional distress, a new model of masculinity that emphasizes care may feel like a change for the better. Nevertheless, hegemonic masculinity will always tend to stabilize rather than deconstruct the gender order, whatever its attributes might be (Hobbs 387). Consequently, the affirmation that postfeminist fatherhood has become the new form of hegemonic masculinity needs to be handled with care. In other words, despite seeming transformations, any masculinity ideal that becomes hegemonic will tend to reinforce patriarchal structures rather than subvert them.

Let us now consider a practical case. In what follows, I would like to assess the evolution of hegemonic ideals of fatherhood in the United States through the recursive tensions between breadwinning ideology and diverse modes of what Robert L. Griswold has termed "generative fathering" ("Generative" 72). By shedding light on the way in which generative fathering has been incorporated into the hegemonic ideal, I seek to demonstrate two things. First, in spite of its progressive spirit, generative fathering represented a shift toward conservative family policies in the twentieth century once it became embedded in the hegemonic ideal (Griswold, "Generative" 81); secondly, new fatherhood and new "man-ism" may not be as novel as they are often deemed, but rather a further manifestation of this generative fathering strand.

As in the case of masculinity, the culture of fatherhood also presents hegemonic and non-hegemonic versions. Among the former, the breadwinning ideology has traditionally been considered "the great unifying element in fathers' lives," shaping their sense of self, manhood, and gender (Griswold, *Fatherhood* 2). Elizabeth H. Pleck also agrees that "[t]he most important aspect of the father's role throughout American history has been his role as provider and protector" (52). Even though this ideology was "largely white and middle class" when it first appeared in nineteenth-century America, it later came to be "imposed on others as the norm, as the 'American' family form" (Kimmel, *Gendered* 121).[7] It has managed to resist at the core of the hegemonic ideal of fatherhood in the U.S. ever since (J. Pleck, "American" 351).[8]

Breadwinning is closely connected to the self-made man, probably the most pervasive masculinity ideal in U.S. history. In a way, breadwinning emerged as the fathering practice of the self-made man. Self-made manhood derives "identity entirely from men's activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth and status, by geographic and social mobility" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 13). It grounds men's identities on their success in the public

sphere, particularly in the workplace (Kimmel, *Manhood* 20). Furthermore, men's inability to fulfill the good provider role has long been attributed to personal failure, and barely regarded as a structural social effect (Shostak, *Fictive* 12). Consequently, both self-made manhood and breadwinning impose unrealizable standards on men regardless of their class, race, ethnicity or age, and blames them for not trying hard enough if they fail to live up to those standards.

Breadwinning ideology and self-made manhood are so closely intertwined that from breadwinning "grew men's legal and political status and, more fundamentally, their masculine identity" (Griswold, *Fatherhood* 45). As the public arena became the testing ground for manhood in the nineteenth century, women's presence in it was progressively curtailed. This gave way to all kinds of theories that sought to justify this separation on the basis of fundamental social and biological differences, namely, the theory of separate spheres and the cult of True Womanhood (Kimmel, *Manhood* 40).[9] This had another effect on men's roles. Since women were not deemed fit for the public sphere, breadwinning came to be perceived as men's exclusive responsibility. In cases where men were not able to provide for their families and women were forced to work—especially among the working classes—the breadwinner became a "breadloser," what we would call nowadays a deadbeat dad. This idea, as Elizabeth H. Pleck affirms, is not exactly new:

> Just as many people mistakenly assume that the idea that fathers should be involved with their children is a new demand, so, too, do they assume, as [Frank] Furstenberg did, that the deadbeat dad is a relatively recent phenomenon, the product of high divorce rates, single motherhood, and moral declines in family commitment since the 1960s. In fact, not only have there always been deadbeat dads, but they have always been a source of social concern and condemnation as well. . . . If men failed to support their families, charities, religious institutions, and governments provided aid, especially when the numbers of children were

large and women's wages were low. The goal of public and private policy was to reduce

welfare costs by forcing fathers to support their families. (43)

The struggle over welfare costs was particularly harsh in times of economic hardship. For

men who failed to live up to the breadwinner ideal, the foundations of their twofold

identity—as men and fathers—were constantly jeopardized by their own inability to be

successful providers. Elizabeth H. Pleck and Joseph H. Pleck argue that "the abandonment of

the breadwinning responsibility was in many ways the most central flaw" among Victorian

fathers, yet this perception already existed in colonial times (39). Even nowadays, men often

experience "gender role strain as they try to enact the traditional fathering role" (Silverstein

et. al 361–2).[10]

This gap between men's performance and social expectations has frequently

developed into a deeper malaise, resulting in several crises of masculinity throughout U.S.

history.[11] During these periods of crisis alternatives to breadwinning were sought and

promoted. Griswold groups these alternatives under the term "generative fathering"

("Generative" 72). Although these models did not replace breadwinning altogether, they

nonetheless represented a conscious attempt to improve father-child ties beyond the limiting

definition of the father-as-provider role. Some examples of generative fathering after the

emergence of breadwinning include so-called "masculine domesticity" at the turn of the

century, new fatherhood in the 1920s, and the male-sex role model in the 1950s.[12] All these

paradigms tried to compensate for paternal absence by underscoring the fundamental role that

only a father can carry out, precisely in virtue of his gender. It was believed that closer father-

child ties led to healthier psychological development (Griswold, "Generative" 83).

Psychologists and family experts proposed that fathers were entrusted with "important

affective and psychological responsibilities" as a means to overcome their role as mere

breadwinners (Griswold, *Fatherhood* 93).

This idea eventually developed into what Joseph H. Pleck calls the "essential father hypothesis" or EF hypothesis, which advocates that fathers' contribution to children's development is both essential and unique "specifically because fathers are males and have masculine characteristics" ("Fatherhood" 27). The uniqueness of the father's influence is such that it is not "substitutable or replaceable by mothers," given that "mothers' providing it will not have the same effect" on the child (J. Pleck, "Fatherhood" 44).[13]

At each economic downturn and/or social crisis, men realized that "the workplace was too unreliable to enable [them] to prove their manhood" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 146). Generative fathering, on the other hand, allowed men to found their sense of manhood on their capacity to contribute to child upbringing. It emphasized responsibility and commitment as desirable paternal virtues, yet instead of putting emphasis on the economic element—as in the case of breadwinning—it promoted another type of responsibility that connected with the child's psychological and emotional needs. In other words, paternal responsibility shifted from providing economically to encompass greater paternal involvement in childrearing. It is worth stressing that the responsibilities entailed by breadwinning were not replaced by generative fathering, but simply piled up.

Overall, it is considered that generative fathering had a conservative impact on twentieth-century family life, as it ultimately contributed to "modernize, redefine, and legitimate male dominance" (Griswold, "Generative" 81). Breadwinning originated as a fathering practice that buttressed the gender-based division of labor. And, albeit seemingly progressive, generative fathering never addressed this fundamental inequality. Rather, it contributed to perpetuate it by underscoring the linkage between men's unique ability to father and their gender.

Moreover, paternal involvement under generative fathering was mostly restricted to play and companionship, but did not contemplate fathers' equal collaboration in household

chores. As Kimmel has it, fathers were told to get involved—but not too involved (*Manhood* 177). In spite of increasing paternal involvement in aspects other than the purely economic, the fundamental gender divisions at the core of breadwinning remained unchallenged until the advent of second-wave feminism (Griswold, *Fatherhood* 5). Generative fathering thus became hegemonic, and even though it represented an advance regarding breadwinning, it cannot be said it represented a step forward in absolute terms.

Masculinity and fatherhood at a crossroads: old solutions, same problems

Regardless of the proliferation of concepts such as "new men" or "new fatherhood," Hannah Hamad chooses the label "postfeminist fatherhood" to refer to the current hegemonic ideal for male representation in popular cinema. But what exactly is postfeminism? Sarah Gamble explains that the term "originated from within the media in the early nineteen eighties, and has always tended to be used in this context as indicative of joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement" (36). That is, in postfeminist culture feminism is still relevant but has been emptied of much of its critical power. It is commonly recognized that this label has been used to mask the reactionary backlash against the conquests of second wave feminism. For Gamble, "postfeminism *is* the backlash, and its triumph lies in its ability to define itself as an ironic, pseudo-intellectual critique on the feminist movement, rather than an overtly hostile response to it" (38; original emphasis).

This section aims to contextualize the rise of postfeminist discourses beginning in the 1980s, as well as the complex entwinement of postfeminism and the current crisis of masculinity in the United States. I will refer briefly to the socio-historical and economic transformations that led to the constitution of men's movements in the late 1970s, as well as the parallel proliferation of pro-family groups denouncing the problem of fatherlessness. We

will see that, after a series of shifts, these elements came to converge in a short-lived, albeit widely popular, host of diverse fathers' rights movements that soared in the 1990s. Despite their vindication of greater paternal responsibility and commitment, part of these movements later veered toward an openly hostile, misogynistic message that Michael Kimmel has registered as being part of the "angry white men" phenomenon (*Angry* 137–8).

Let us begin this overview in the late 1970s. In these years, the exploration of manhood started to gain attention. This was in part sparked by the scathing critiques of traditional (white) masculinity that had their origin in the diverse social movements of the 1960s and 1970s—including the women's movement, the civil rights movement, and the gay liberation movement (Kimmel, *Manhood* 196). In the academic field, groundbreaking studies were conducted that unveiled men's struggles with gender roles and expectations. For instance, in *The Myth of Masculinity* (1981) Joseph H. Pleck theorized about the Male Sex Role Identity (MSRI) and the subsequent gender role strain from which most male identity anxieties stemmed. Applying the lens of gender criticism to the study of masculinity allowed scholars to expose the internally contradictory role demands of traditional manhood, as well as the impossibility of living up to those demands (Kimmel, *Manhood* 206).

Theorization about manhood and the male experience led in turn to the development of new theories and paradigms for male behavior. Among them, the "new man" ideal gained visibility. New manhood, as John Beynon points out, referred to "a new and improved version of masculinity cleared of some, if not all, of the less endearing attributes of traditional, patriarchal masculinity" (99). "New men" of the 1970s were mostly pro-feminist, middle-class, well-educated intellectuals who "willingly supported the women's movement" and fostered "a more caring, sharing, nurturing" type of man (Beynon 100). According to Beynon, new men were "the riposte to vilified 'old man,' his father, and a refugee from the hardline masculinity epitomized by the paranoid, macho men with stifled emotions" (100).

41

These advances on the theoretical plane soon found a correspondence in the field of social activism.

These new paradigms thus coexisted with the men's movement, a social movement that supported both women's rights and alternative forms of masculinity (Shiffman 295). Men's movement goals included personal transformation but also structural change, thereby seeking to redefine the personal as political (Shiffman 299).[14] During these early stages the men's movement supported the renegotiation of gendered roles in the domestic and public spheres demanded by second-wave feminism. Both movements agreed on the need to abolish the clear-cut separation of spheres, which, incidentally, were at the core of breadwinning. Let us bear in mind that breadwinning was founded on the perception that men were fitter for the public world, whereas women's characters were deemed appropriate for childrearing and housekeeping. By questioning the validity of traditional gender roles, (pro)feminist men's movements were also tapping into the very foundations of traditional fathering practices.[15] Even though this might seem obvious, it is important to stress that previous alternatives to breadwinning such as generative fathering models had not even begun to address these fundamental divisions.

In spite of its perks, new man-ism has been subject to criticism by different, and often opposed, groups. Beynon remarks that this model was widely criticized for being "middle-class, elitist, western-centric and remote from the lived experiences of most men" in either of its versions (101).[16] The preppy, liberal background of the new man offers a sharp contrast with the tribulations of many lower-middle-class and working-class men. It must be recalled that during the 1980s, following a series of economic recessions, millions of men in the advanced economies lost their jobs, hence their economic authority (Beynon 107). In addition to economic hardships, men had to confront profound changes in almost all areas of social life—family breakdowns, increasing crime rates, diverse health issues derived from constant

stress, and many others. And, on top of that, feminist critiques of traditional masculinity challenged the very foundations of their identity.

Deindustrialization, downsizing, outsourcing, structural unemployment, and dwindling welfare protection nets all had a massive impact on men's self-image and self-esteem. Michael Messner points out that this setting led many young men to perceive "the image of the male family breadwinner" as "increasingly unattainable for them" (xiv). It is no wonder, then, that a host of men's movements in the 1980s and 1990s placed paternity at the center of their vindications (Kimmel, *Angry* 155). Commentators often regard these broader social changes as a major catalyst of the current focus on the practice of fatherhood (Russell 57). As had been the case with previous crises, the emphasis on father involvement offered an alternative to the bleak social and economic prospects of men's increasingly precarious lives (Clare qtd. in Beynon 79–80). Many men who felt relegated to the position of the deadbeat dad sought to renegotiate their role, and thereby their relationship with their children.[17] Appeals to individual responsibility and commitment became widespread among different men's movements.

Meanwhile, a range of conservative social commentators, scholars, and pundits began to grant attention to the father question, more specifically to the problem of fatherlessness. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, fatherlessness became a nationwide concern in the United States. It was argued that "the most disturbing problems" plaguing society—including crime, juvenile delinquency, premature sexuality, out-of-wedlock births, substance abuse, and many others—had their origin in fatherlessness (Popenoe 33). Although many of those problems had their origin in rampant inequality and poverty, many among these pundits discouraged such a reading by stressing that this was a crisis of values in the American family (Hamad 10; see also Kimmel, *Angry* 150–4).

Generally speaking, it was perceived that an individual lack of responsibility had prompted this crisis. That is, men were targeted for avoiding their paternal duties; consequently, their chronic irresponsibility had somehow led society at large into a state of moral decay. According to this perspective, young boys without a father who can provide a secure foundation for their manhood will eventually become criminals (Kimmel, *Angry* 150). Even though they might be part of a familial arrangement other than a stereotypical nuclear family, growing without a father figure was denounced as having everlasting consequences in child development.

For David Popenoe, fathers have a "special parenting style" that differs from that of mothers: they are protectors and role models, but also display special prowess at playing with their kids (38–9). Moreover, they provide male role models for their daughters, accustoming them "to male-female relationships" (Popenoe 42).[18] In fact, many of the critiques directed against the pro-feminist new man/new father type denounced the blurring of these fundamental gender differences:

> The New Father model is based precisely on the rejection of 'characteristics of sex and gender' in parenthood. . . . To replace gender differentiation, the New Father offers a model of androgynous parenthood—fatherhood without gender. . . . [T]he New Father model is a mirage. It purports to be about fatherhood, but it is not. There is no father there. The New Father is a missing father. For as a cultural model—a set of cultural cues for paternal behavior—the New Father reflects the puerile desire for human omnipotentiality in the form of genderless parenthood, a direct repudiation of fatherhood as a gendered social role for men. (Blankenhorn 102)

Furthermore, if men were required to be responsible fathers, then they should also be able to take back their role as head of the household. This was the main tenet among certain men's

rights movements, most notably the Promise Keepers.[19] This and other similar groups represent an outlook that Michael Kimmel describes as "besieged traditionalists" who "prescribed a biologically or theologically based separation of spheres as the cure-all for men's malaise" (*Manhood* 218). In particular, the Promise Keepers denounced that men had been avoiding their responsibilities, which had led women to step up and take over the role of leader in the family. It was the resulting entanglement of male and female roles which was at the root of social upheaval (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 4). They advocated the restoration of the nuclear family, with its corresponding father-as-provider and mother-as-nurturer figures, so that the moral crisis could be brought to an end. By mending individuals, "the torn moral fibers of the country," the collective social fabric would eventually become stronger (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 4–5).

Interestingly enough, the Promise Keepers called for a "new man" defined by his sensitivity as well as his sense of duty: "real men are responsible men. Real men take responsibility, which brings with it paternal authority ordained by God, because real men are also godly men" (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 6). Of course, this new man had virtually nothing to do with the pro-feminist new man. However, it is interesting to remark that both progressive and conservative groups shared a common rhetoric of paternal responsibility. Conservative groups nonetheless advocated a nostalgic vision. They equated personal failure with faulty character, and argued that maintaining traditional familial arrangements and gender roles would grant social order. On the other hand, pro-feminist groups invoked male/paternal responsibility as a general condition for attaining equality. As Kimmel has it:

> Involved fatherhood—a fatherhood based on shared family responsibilities as a foundation for the rights to experience the transcendent joys of parenthood—has actually always been a *feminist* issue. Feminist women have urged, pleaded, insisted, and demanded that men share housework and child care, because they know that women can't 'have it all' as long as men

do—that is, as long as women alone are responsible for the second shift, the housework, and the child care. . . . You want your rights to be a father? It's simple: take your share of the responsibility. (*Angry* 124; original emphasis)

Responsible fatherhood in conservative discourses is not really concerned with attaining gender equality. On the contrary, it appears that, in order to be able to be responsible, men first require the security of traditional gender roles at home. Drucilla Cornell contends that "[a]ccording to the fathers' movement, rigid gender division in the family is necessary to make the father's role manly and dominant enough for men to want to play it" (134). The divergences between pro-feminist and reactionary discourses concerning paternal responsibility demonstrate that, as Kimmel denounces, "[d]iscussions of fatherlessness are a distraction for the fathers' rights movement, because they reassert traditional patriarchal arrangements" (*Angry* 154).[20]

It is precisely in their attitude toward feminism that the two strands of fathers' rights, the progressive and the reactionary, differ the most. Even though men's movements had been either pro-feminist in origin, and then (purportedly) apolitical, some of them began to assume a more confrontational and overtly anti-feminist discourse beginning in the 1990s, amid a climate of "backlash against second-wave feminism" (Nagle 85). For these groups, "women have already achieved equality and that programs that favor women now served to discriminate against men" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 218). In addition to this, other disenfranchised minorities were likewise perceived as benefitting from schemes of positive discrimination. In contrast, white men increasingly felt they were being divested of their rights (Beynon 83–4).

According to Kenneth Clatterbaugh, men's rights movements have been weakened lately by the resurgence of Republican neoconservatism: "Why should one join a men's movement to oppose feminism, affirmative action, abortion rights, and women's growing authority in the workplace when one can do the same thing by joining the Republican party or

46

calling up Rush Limbaugh to complain about 'feminazis'?" (891).[21] This shift has coincided with the rise of the "angry white men," a phenomenon described as the "response of some men" to the "erosion of male power" promoted in the current social and political scenario (Levant 720). Instead of taking the opportunity to reexamine the code of behavior of traditional masculinity, these men respond "very defensively" and "aggressively" (Levant 720).

The rhetoric of the angry white man is undergirded by the perception that racial and gender equality has put them at risk: "if 'they' gain, 'we' lose" (Kimmel, *Angry* 16). Kimmel eloquently summarizes this coping mechanism as follows:

> Generations of men had staked their claim for manhood on being good family providers, reliable breadwinners. It has been the defining feature of American manhood since the early nineteenth century. . . . There's a painful sense of betrayal from their government, from the companies to whom we give our lives, from the unions. There was a *moral* contract, that if we fulfill our duty to society, society will fulfill its duty to us in our retirement, taking care of those who served so loyally. . . . Many white men feel they have played by the rules and expected to reap the rewards of that obedient responsibility. It's pretty infuriating not to get what you feel you deserve. (*Angry* 202–3; original emphasis)

American white men are, according to Kimmel, experiencing something called "aggrieved entitlement" that lies at the very core of the current crisis of masculinity (*Angry* 18). Contemporary masculinity is held to be in crisis because the central tenets upon which previous masculinity was based (including patriarchy, breadwinning, and others) have been eroded (Beynon 159). The insistence of some men to adhere to traditional ideas of masculinity in a world that increasingly questions white male hegemony has left them feeling betrayed: "American white men bought the promise of self-made masculinity . . . The game

has changed, but instead of questioning the rules, they want to eliminate the other players" (Beynon 15).

In the case of fatherhood and fathers' rights groups, many have protested post-divorce conditions and arrangements on the basis that they are involved "new fathers." Kimmel concedes that men are more involved in their families than ever, to the extent that "they are the most involved fathers in American history" (*Angry* 139–40). Nevertheless, some fathers' rights groups—and, by and large, men's rights activism—use their status as fathers as an excuse to channel their aggrieved entitlement against the target of their anger: women. For Kimmel, men in these groups are fed discourses that focus all their anger on their (ex-)wives and women in general, while exonerating them of all responsibility for the situation in which they find themselves (*Angry* 138). Kimmel repeatedly denounces that aggrieved men do not seek to reinforce (or simply establish) a closer connection with their children. They just want to have an excuse to pester women, minorities, and anybody who is perceived as threatening to their status and life conditions so far.

It would be unfair, however, to end my survey on this note. It does seem that there has been a shift towards conservative positions in white hegemonic models of "new fatherhood," responsible fatherhood and the like during the past three or four decades. This does not imply that pro-feminist, progressive discourses on paternity have weakened or disappeared. Some examples of progressive discourses nowadays include the fathers' responsibility movement among African American men in the sphere of social activism, and the rise of masculinity studies in academia. The fathers' responsibility movement fosters all sorts of initiatives to alleviate the "crushing poverty and racism" endured by young African Americans (Kimmel, *Angry* 155).

In academia, disciplines such as masculinity studies continue to critically assess the current status and transformations of manhood and paternity from a predominantly feminist-

inspired theoretical framework. Stefan Horlacher argues that this field "would be the most likely heir to the original profeminist outlook of men's liberation movement," and therefore opposed to "the more conservative and reactionary perspectives" such as "the men's rights perspective, the mythopoetic perspective, morally and socio-biologically conservative perspectives, or the Evangelical Christian Men's Movement (Promise Keepers)" (3).

New fatherhood in academia: the case of psychoanalysis

So far, I have addressed the increasing interest in fathers and its impact in both popular culture and social activism; in what follows, I turn to consider its implications for academic research. More specifically, I would like to assess some of the theories that try to delineate a new fatherhood paradigm, paying special attention to the central role occupied by responsibility and commitment in many of these theories. It is worth stressing that, although responsibility has been seminal to all fathering models in the U.S. in the past, it appears that a conscious ethical shift has taken place recently. I will try to summarize some of the landmarks and evaluate their implications.

This shift has been manifested in the social sciences, particularly in the fields of social and developmental psychology, and sociology, but also in psychoanalysis.[22] I will comment briefly on the former, and delve further into the latter. Psychoanalysis is especially relevant to the scope of the present research, mainly because of the widespread applications it has had in literary criticism.[23] Even though my subsequent textual analyses have not been conducted from a strictly psychoanalytic framework, some of the concepts and ideas I have applied did originate under the umbrella of analytic theory. This is the main reason why I have decided to assess this new psychoanalytic theory about fatherhood here, but also because, as will become apparent later on, it potentially intersects with the study of father figures in literary and cultural studies.

The previous section has made clear that "new fathers" purport to be characterized by their emotional investment and ethical compromise, as well as by their greater involvement in childrearing and domestic tasks. In this regard, responsibility may refer mainly to the desire to strike a balance between the public and private spheres, privileges as well as obligations. A well-known model to measure fatherhood involvement in the field of developmental psychology was elaborated by Michael E. Lamb and Joseph H. Pleck, and proposes that "father involvement is determined by motivation, skills and self-confidence, social support, and institutional practices" (Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson 285). These parameters "may be viewed as additive, building on one another, and as interactive, with some factors being necessary prior to others" (Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson 285). Multiple analyses of fathers' engagement with their children and family life have likewise emphasized the centrality of motivation, skills and confidence, social supports, institutional policies, and cultural ideologies (Lamb and Tamis-LeMonda 15).

Although fatherhood maintains its connection to economic matters in this model, a great deal of attention is likewise drawn to issues of personal responsibility. New fathers, whatever their backgrounds might be like, are expected to prove their responsibility through their actions. The definition of paternal responsibility is nonetheless complex and difficult to pin down, as the overview of fathers' movements featured in the previous section demonstrates. The case of the Promise Keepers illustrates a belief in personal responsibility grounded in theological/biological-based views of gender roles as emanating directly from God. Other reactionary perspectives emphasize personal responsibility in connection to ideas of meritocracy and self-made manhood: a responsible man is morally righteous, whereas an irresponsible man is lazy, untrustworthy, and morally corrupt. Conversely, the idea of responsibility advocated by pro-feminist new men/fathers is attuned to the vindication of

greater gender equality: "A father was expected to carry his share of the load because it was the fair thing to do . . . fathering was work, not simply play" (E. Pleck 42).

Multiple theories have been formulated that pivot around paternal responsibility in the social sciences, particularly in social and developmental psychology. Some examples include generative fathering (Hawkins and Dollahite); responsible fathering (Doherty et al.); new, involved fathers (Marks and Palkovitz), and positively involved fathering (J. Pleck), among others. These models all have in common a desire to account for transformations in the conduct of fatherhood as well as the culture of fatherhood, hence focusing on individual performance of fathering duties. In addition to this, they all appear to be undergirded by the same shift "away from value-free language and toward a more explicit value-advocacy approach" among academics and professionals (Doherty et al. 278).

"Generative fathering" is defined by Hawkins and Dollahite as a model of fathering "that meets the needs of children by working to create and maintain a developing ethical relationship with them" and that is grounded in the Levinasian ethical imperative to respond to the needs of 'the other' (18–9).[24] On the other hand, the broader category "responsible fathering" aims to encompass the description of fathering practices "across all social classes and racial groups" that in one way or another incorporate value advocacy to the study of fatherhood (Doherty et al. 278–9). A responsible father establishes legal paternity of his child, and then actively shares the emotional, physical, and financial care of the child with the child's mother (Doherty et al. 279). Ethical guidance, mentoring, role modeling, and consistency are likewise commonly underscored in the array of new fathering models available (Morman and Floyd 117).

These models, albeit rich and varied, are more concerned with individual practices and relationships; conversely, they barely shed any light on the cultural representations of paternal figures. Psychoanalytic theories, on the other hand, have a long, fruitful history of

51

exchanges with literary criticism and cultural studies, by and large, that has yielded many compelling interpretations and analyses. The linkage between fatherhood and literature, including the influence of psychoanalysis in readings of literary paternal figures, will be explored in depth in the following chapter. In the meantime, I would like to examine a recent theory formulated by Italian psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati that aligns with the aforementioned theories of paternal involvement. Indeed, in *The Telemachus Complex* (2014) Recalcati proposes a transformation of the paternal function that ultimately seeks to foreground values such as paternal responsibility, ethical commitment, and symbolic/moral mentoring.

Before we move on, it is important to point out that the paternal function has become an important focus of study in psychoanalysis these days, to the extent that Nick Davies and Gill Eagle speak of a purported "paternal turn" in the early 2000s (560). And yet, in spite of the "assumed common consensual understanding" of what is meant by the paternal function in psychoanalytic literature, the theoretical elaboration of the concept is still "rather fragmented and lacking in clarity" (Davies and Eagle 561). Since Recalcati is a Lacanian psychoanalyst, let us take a quick glance at the paternal function in Lacanian thinking first, so that Recalcati's shift can be conveniently contextualized.

The paternal function in Lacanian thinking is rooted in the social dimension, as both an agent of prohibition and an enabler—and founder—of the social contract.[25] Unlike Freud, Lacan differentiates the actual individuals from "the maternal and paternal Oedipal personas"; the latter "are psychical-subjective positions, namely, socio-cultural (i.e., non-natural, non-biological) roles that potentially can be played by any number of possible persons of various sexes/genders" (Johnston n.p.; see also León 118 and Recalcati, *Complejo* 160).[26] This idea is highly relevant for Recalcati's reformulation of the paternal function, as will become apparent later on.

There are two distinct phases in Lacan's development of the paternal function (Zafiropoulos qtd. in Pombo 453).[27] The first, influenced by Émile Durkheim, is characterized by the affirmation that the father is shaped by social and historical factors, and hence may be subject to change. Later on, influenced by Claude Lévi-Strauss' structures of kinship, Lacan rearticulated his theory around the concept of the Name-of-the-father (*Nom-du-père*) and the paternal function, which are ahistorical and universal structures (Pombo 453–4).[28] A considerable number of authors have either failed to grasp this distinction or deliberately ignored them to justify their views.

Between the two, the latter structuralist version is the most widely known and accepted. In it, the paternal function is equivalent to the symbolic father.[29] Dylan Evans explains that:

> In opposition to [object-relations theory], Lacan continually stresses the role of the father as a third term who, by mediating the imaginary dual relation between the mother and the child, saves the child from psychosis and makes possible an entry into social existence. *The father is thus more than a mere rival with whom the subject competes for the mother's love; he is the representative of the social order as such, and only by identifying with the father in the Oedipus complex can the subject gain entry into this order.* (62; emphasis added)

The Symbolic is "essentially a linguistic dimension," since the concept of law is unthinkable without language (Evans 203). It is likewise the realm of radical alterity, since it is there where individuals come into being and continues to exist once they are no longer there (Evans 203; Johnston n.p.).[30] Moreover, the Symbolic or big Other is the third term that mediates every intersubjective relationship (Evans 204). Thus, when we affirm that the father is the third term that separates mother and child, we are identifying father and language, father and culture, father and radical alterity.[31] This association, far from being exclusive to

Lacanian thinking, is pervasive in Western cultures. For example, Kelly Oliver argues that "[i]nsofar as the body with its passions has been opposed to rationality and has been relegated to the domestic sphere of women, to enter the public sphere of citizens, men disassociate themselves from the body" (*Subjectivity* 88).

In the preoedipal stage, the child discovers that the mother desires something other than him-/herself, what Lacan names the imaginary phallus. The child wants to become the sole object of the mother's desire, which is why s/he tries to identify with the phallus. However, since this desire is incestuous, the symbolic father intervenes to separate mother and child. The separation marks the passage from the Imaginary into the Symbolic order of culture through the Oedipus complex.[32] In the Lacanian version of the Oedipus complex, the (symbolic) father stands for the Law of prohibition that forbids incest.[33] The satisfactory resolution of the Oedipus complex halts the child's *jouissance*, that is, the raw, inassimilable force that leads to masochistic repetition and psychic imbalance, and enables desire instead.

Whilst *jouissance* relates to the death drive, desire stems from lack. By accepting the fundamental lack that results from symbolic castration, that is, by accepting the limits imposed by the Law of the Father, the subject can enter the Symbolic order of culture and live a life articulated by desire—which is a productive force—instead of being subject to *jouissance*—a barren drive. When incapable of generating desire, the individual falls prey to the endless masochistic repetition of *jouissance*. In other words, if the Oedipus complex is disrupted or left unresolved, the articulation of desire by the subject will be hindered.

Now I would like to refer briefly to the historical/ahistorical conundrum that has conditioned much of the ongoing debate around the paternal function. Some scholars, such as Michel Tort or Silvia Tubert, have repeatedly argued that the paternal function is founded on the sociocultural order, including symbolic representations, models, and images, and on subjectivity construction (Tubert 7–8). In turn, the sociocultural order is inscribed into a

social, political, and ideological system anchored in its corresponding historical context (Tubert 8). This implies that paternity is a cultural construction bound to historical change, and that different representations of paternity can only be understood when situated within the symbolic universe of the particular culture in which they occur (Tubert 9).

Other authors have nonetheless argued that the paternal function is a symbolic structure, hence ahistorical and universal, that should remain unchanged. In this regard, the historical changes taking place represent a deviation from the ideal framework within which the paternal function ought to be understood. This is partly motivated by the coexistence of the two conceptions of the paternal function in Lacan mentioned above. However, this conflation is often used to mask a conservative reaction against changes in familial structures, marriage, and other features of the current period which are deemed dangerous for a correct subjectivity formation.

In other words, rather than defending a truly ahistorical version of the paternal function, many reactionary theories present a decidedly historical version, a sort of snapshot from a particular time and place, and then claim it is ahistorical and hence unchangeable. Let us look at some examples. Mariana Pombo observes a trend in the French analytic scene that sees the paternal function as an ahistorical structure in crisis due to certain historical and social transformations (450). The evaporation of the paternal function would stem from the weakening of the patriarchy as a system that legitimated the father's authority by placing it above the mother's (Pombo 450). For authors like Jean-Pierre Lebrun and Charles Melman, it is liberalism and its progressive policies that are to blame for the decline of the paternal function (Plá 62). Being divested of his capacity to mediate between mother and child, nowadays the father can no longer guarantee the integration of the individual within the symbolic order. Thus, this trend maintains that the current malaise in Western societies can be traced back directly to the disappearance of the paternal function—only that in this

outlook the paternal function appears conflated with the role of the father in a patriarchal society. In fact, Ignacio Plá denounces that these authors have developed a sort of isomorphism between the father of the patriarchy and the symbolic Father (63). A similar claim has been held by Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace on the grounds that the Lacanian father, being an essentially bodiless entity, agglutinates individual fathers, paternal metaphor, and patriarchal authority (xiv). Due to this conflation, it is hard to distinguish the power of an individual father from the power of patriarchy, which may lead us to "lose sight of the complexities of paternity" (Yaeger and Kowaleski-Wallace xi).

Furthermore, the increasing diminishment of the paternal role has led to a purported horizontality in contemporary societies that erodes the generational divide between fathers and sons (Recalcati, *Secreto* 12; *Complejo* 117). For Lebrun, horizontality is a symptom of the feminization of our societies, in contrast with the patriarchal notions of verticality and hierarchy (qtd. in Pombo 458).[34] The increasing symmetry between the maternal and the paternal function, otherwise neatly differentiated, is signaled as another cause for an incorrect formation of the individual's psyche. In fact, it is likewise argued that the lack of separation between the maternal and the paternal function can lead to a sort of genderless parenting in which the original mission of each of these functions disintegrates, jeopardizing the subject's psychic formation (Recalcati, *Manos* 14). Lebrun affirms that the prevalence of the maternal over the paternal extends the pre-oedipal scenario and can prevent the individual from being exposed to the ideas of prohibition and limit (qtd. in Pombo 457–8). The father's absence would inevitably prompt the child's turning into the object of its mother's desire (Lebrun qtd. in Pombo 458). Some even speak with concern about an alleged patriarchal decline and its substitution by a matriarchy (Melman qtd. in Pombo 460–1).

The accusations of feminization and the distrust of new family configurations, together with the suspicion against a genderless parental function, inevitably point back to the

reactionary discourse of conservative pundits and scholars that were referenced in the previous section. The apocalyptic tone that undergirds all these discourses appears to stem from a nostalgic vision of the past. As Pombo suggests, historical change always entails degradation (463). Contemporary configurations of family structures, sexuality, parenthood, and filiation are inadequate because they represent historical variation regarding their ahistorical versions. In turn, these allegedly ahistorical versions are not ahistorical at all, but simply correspond to a moment and time when patriarchal structures of domination remained unchallenged.

In this context, Massimo Recalcati's reformulation of the paternal function provides a somewhat different take on the historical/ahistorical debate. It is true that in his works, most notably *The Telemachus Complex* (2014), Recalcati depicts a bleak landscape derived from the decline of the paternal function in Western societies.[35] He argues that, as a direct consequence of paternal absence, we have fallen prey to exacerbated individualism and narcissism which pose a threat to the humanization of life (*Complejo* 34). In particular, he denounces the relevance that has been bestowed on the self's autonomy, self-worship, and the myth of self-generation nowadays (*Complejo* 49; see also 61, 120, 143). In Lacanian terms, individuals are no longer capable of articulating desire due to the evaporation of the father, and are thus stuck in unproductive *jouissance*.

Nevertheless, despite the decadence of the paternal function—or precisely because of it—there is an unprecedented longing for the paternal figure in our time that stems from the urge to find examples that life is worth living (Recalcati, *Complejo* 12–4). The solution to counteract the excess of *jouissance* is to recuperate the paternal function and thereby desire. Human life needs the Other to become human: we seek the Other's recognition, desire, and love (Recalcati, *Complejo* 35; 40–3). However, this recuperation does not entail the reconstitution of the old *paterfamilias* model (Recalcati, *Qué Queda* 55). After the

evaporation of the paternal function, it is up to individual fathers to assume the particular responsibility of transmitting the Law.[36] Therefore, the rehabilitation of the father does not entail the restoration of the symbolic function *per se*, but is founded on an individual act of responsibility instead (Recalcati, *Qué Queda* 16). By proposing this solution, Recalcati distances himself from other reactionary formulas that advocate the restitution of the paternal principle.[37]

According to this formulation, fathers transmit a legacy or testimony and also enable the inheritance process. Through the transmission of his own particular testimony, the individual father can prove that life is worth living under the conditions of absence and lack that are seminal to desire. This testimony is a story of personal experience that the father passes on to his child, in which he integrates interdiction (i.e., the experience of limit) into donation (i.e., the gift of desire as a productive force) (Recalcati, *Qué Queda* 50). Its transmission is what allows the child to be introduced to the experiences of desire, absence, loss, and love (Recalcati, *Manos* 78). Fathers are not obliged to embody a normative model of perfection, yet they need to assume the consequences of their acts, thereby showing that it is possible to live under the terms of the symbolic Law (Recalcati, *Complejo* 80–1).

In addition to this, the inheritance process represents a revalidation of the Symbolic debt to the Other in which both father and child take part (Recalcati, *Complejo* 149).[38] It is paramount that both parties, father and child, actively choose to engage in this process. Symbolic filiation is never a given, but instead presupposes individual agency. The inheritance process is structured according to a dialectical scheme. It begins with the father's absence, a necessary condition for the child to become an orphan (Recalcati, *Complejo* 150). It is through orphanhood, or uprooting, that the child can work toward recuperating their legacy. This legacy is the Law of desire, contained in the father's testimony (Recalcati, *Complejo* 152–5). I will come back to this. For now, it suffices to say that the Law of desire

that ought to be inherited, that is, assimilated by one's subjectivity, represents a reminder of our (inter)dependence with respect to others, as well as to the Other of language. This is why, for the inheritance process to be complete, the subject can neither engage in a passive repetition of the Other's memory, nor reject the symbolic debt by embracing the myth of self-generation (Recalcati, *Complejo* 135).

In sum, besides transmitting the Law of desire, symbolic filiation enhances commitment and responsibility toward each other. Since filiation only occurs when both father and child actively assume these roles, the process carries profound ethical implications. The father's testimony is comparable to the Levinasian "here I am!" insofar as it is an invitation that endlessly renews the commitment toward the Other (Recalcati, *Qué Queda* 105). Throughout the whole process, the relational nature of human subjectivity is acknowledged and showcased. In the end, what remains of the father is a singular version of the Law, that is, a reduction of the Law to the ethical dimension of responsibility (Recalcati, *Qué Queda* 15).

Overall, Recalcati's theory of the new paternal function includes myriad enticing aspects. In harmony with Lacan, Recalcati posits that anything or anyone can be a father, as long as it enables the encounter between Law and desire (*Complejo* 160; *Qué Queda* 57). In an era where familial configurations are rapidly changing, such an affirmation appears more grounded in reality than other models leaning towards the reactionary that seek to reinstate the nuclear family type. This theory also stresses the benefits of paternal involvement, yet its ample scope makes it possible to apply it to cultural analysis as much as individual patterns of behavior. In fact, Recalcati offers compelling examples of its potential application through his analysis of several works of fiction, including Philip Roth's memoir *Patrimony: A True Story* (1991), Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006), and the films *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and *Gran Torino* (2008), both directed by Clint Eastwood (see *Qué Queda*).

Nevertheless, the most appealing notions proposed by Recalcati correspond to the explicitness of the ethical dimension as the backbone of fatherhood, on one hand, and the incorporation of the paternal function, on the other hand. Although the details of this process raise some important questions—which will be appropriately addressed in the following chapter—these two aspects indicate a significant improvement with regard to other conservative theories that maintain the conflation of paternal figure and patriarchal rule.

* * *

Is postfeminist fatherhood the new hegemonic masculinity beyond popular cinema? I am inclined to say yes, it is. At least on the level of the culture of fatherhood, the notion that fathers ought to assume greater involvement in performing paternal duties is all-pervasive in an array of sources, as has become apparent throughout this chapter. Even though Hamad's definition of postfeminist fatherhood is not transferrable to other planes in every aspect, the convergence of fatherhood and hegemonic masculinity nowadays does seem unavoidable. This new paradigm known as "new fatherhood" has been seen as an opportunity to rethink non-toxic models of masculinity. Nevertheless, the conflation of pro-feminist and reactionary models of new fatherhood, along with their shared rhetoric of responsibility-and-commitment, makes it extremely difficult to discern which discourses actually promote the renovation of masculinity models away from patriarchal rule.

By the same token, many discourses centered on the joys of new fatherhood merely perpetuate the idle adulation of fathers without actually posing a challenge to the traditional understanding of father roles. Still today, "sentimental dads get a lot of cultural cachet" as they proclaim themselves feminist allies: "A 'hands-on' mother is a mother—the statement is a tautology—while a 'hands-on' father is a saint" (Angel 26–7). This scenario is not too

different from the successive incarnations of generative fathering addressed earlier in this chapter. Cosmetic arrangements seldom impel real change, and there is nothing in these new fatherhood models to suggest that they can offer anything else than a marketable ideal to accompany the likewise marketable mainstream liberal feminism that has become ubiquitous lately.

Yet just like pro-feminist new fatherhood distanced itself from the new fatherhood of the 1920s or the male sexual role model of the 1950s insofar as it advocated for real equality, some of the current discourses on new father models can also make a difference regarding their mainstream versions. If the mainstream version, incarnated by Hamad's postfeminist fatherhood among others, offers little or no substantial criticism of the conflation of patriarchy and paternity, other versions do. In fact, Katherine Angel observes that, while post-feminism "further dented the ubiquity of patriarchy as a concept" in the 1990s, contemporary feminism appears to have "re-embraced thinking about the big ideas," patriarchy among them (23). This rehabilitation of "the big ideas" can make a noteworthy difference.

In the end, it all comes down to whether fatherhood and patriarchy can be understood as separate from each other and, if so, whether it is possible to imagine a non-patriarchal fatherhood. Is it ever possible to get rid of the father, Angel wonders, or is he forever internalized? (71). I believe this is an ill-formed question. We cannot get rid of the father, but perhaps we can get rid of the patriarchal father. With this premise in mind, we now turn to discuss the relation between literature, fatherhood, and ethics.

Notes

1. These examples are taken from Hannah Hamad's *Postfeminist Paternity in Contemporary U.S. Film* (2014). For further examples of the sheer number of paternity-oriented movies in the past decades, see Hamad.

2. More recent examples include films such as *Boyhood* (Richard Linklater, 2014), *Chef* (John Favreau, 2014), *Manchester by the Sea* (Kenneth Lonergan, 2016), *Leave No Trace* (Debra Granik, 2018), and *Ad Astra* (James Gray, 2019). In television shows and VOD platforms, we find quite groundbreaking examples in series such as *Undone* (Raphael Bob-Waksberg and Kate Purdy, 2019) or *Upright* (Chris Taylor, 2019).

3. This strategy permeated other formats that had started to incorporate paternally signified characters and fatherhood-centered plots on a regular basis. Susan Faludi observed in 1991 that one out of five new sitcoms exploited the "old 'Odd Couple' format" in which "bachelor buddies took up house together without adult women," including "'Everything's Relative,' 'My Two Dads,' 'Trial and Error,' and 'Full House.'" (155). She further added that "[i]n the single-parent household sitcoms that took over prime time that year, two-thirds of the children lived with dad or a male guardian—compared with 11 percent in the real world," and also pointed out that the mother was dead in most of these shows (Faludi 155–6).

4. According to LaRossa, it is almost impossible to empirically distinguish between what is culture and what is conduct, but he nonetheless insists that it is a necessary exercise of abstraction ("Historical" 40). He argues that making this distinction is fundamental given that they tend not to move in synchrony, even though it is usually taken for granted that they do ("Fatherhood" 451). In general, the culture tends to change at a faster pace than the conduct ("Fatherhood" 451). Furthermore, he clarifies that despite his use of "culture" and "conduct" in the singular, there are multiple and coexisting cultures of fatherhood and conducts of fatherhood in any given society ("Historical" 40).

5. Connell distinguishes four categories of interacting masculinities: hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization (qtd. in Reeser 22). In turn, each of these categories may foster new hierarchies within themselves and in relation to others. For instance, gay masculinities are subordinated (i.e., non-hegemonic) with regard to heterosexual masculinities, but within that category white gay masculinities might be still more hegemonic than black gay masculinities. For more on the overlapping and intersecting of different masculinities, see Reeser.

6. Exchanges between hegemonic and non-hegemonic forms often alternate between patterns of assimilation and discredit and/or violence: "Hegemony may be accomplished by the incorporation of such [non-hegemonic] masculinities into a functioning gender order rather than by active oppression in the form of discredit or violence. In practice, both incorporation and oppression can occur together" (Connell and Messerschmidt 848). In addition, forms of non-hegemonic masculinity can either be in collusion with hegemonic forms, or pose a challenge to those same forms (Connell and Messerschmidt 847; 852). The latter

have received the name "protest masculinities," and refer to the "pattern of masculinity constructed in local working-class settings, sometimes among ethnically-marginalized men, which embodies the claim to power typical of regional hegemonic masculinities in Western countries, but which lacks the economic resources and institutional authority that underpins the regional and global patterns" (Connell and Messerschmidt 847–8). For more on the relational character of conflicting masculinities, see Connell and Messerschmidt.

7. There have been multiple alternative configurations to the white middle-class breadwinning standard, and also infinite variations of the breadwinning standard itself. See, for example, Griswold's *Fatherhood in America*, in particular chapter 3 (34–67).

8. Generally speaking, the relation between fatherhood and the work environment is heavily influenced by the notion of the father-as-provider: the terms whereby men's social and political identities are shaped include their "gaining capacities to head households," which is often "more significant than their status as worker–citizens" (Orloff and Monson 62−3). However, at the institutional level fathers are still "expected to contribute cash rather than care" (Orloff and Monson 69), and this is reflected in social policies and access to certain benefits. It is assumed that men acquire their capacity to head households through their market work. As a result, income maintenance programs are mostly conceived as "backups" for those cases where men lose their wage-earning capacities, either temporarily or permanently (Orloff and Monson 68). Most social policies still take for granted that men will assume a breadwinner role, and what is more, that they will obtain and retain a position whereby they will earn enough to provide for their family. Failing to meet any of the former criteria not only puts families at risk in economic terms, but can also inflict tremendous damage to men's self-image.

9. The theory of separate spheres and the cult of True Womanhood are analyzed thoroughly in relation to self-made manhood in Kimmel's *Manhood in America* (38–43).

10. In psychology, "gender role strain" refers to the experience of psychological stress, instead of psychological well-being, that stems from the attempts to conform to gender role norms (Silverstein, Auerbach, and Levant 362). For further reading on the gender role strain paradigm, see Pleck ("Update") and Levant and Richmond.

11. The reasons behind these successive crises of masculinity vary from one another, but nonetheless replicate certain common patterns. Thus, for Kimmel the constant feeling of impending crisis comes from the fact that men's identities have long been based on their economic success (*Manhood* 7). Yet "success must be earned, manhood must be proved—and proved constantly" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 18). Moreover, American men "have been afraid that others will see us as less than manly, as weak, timid, frightened" (Kimmel, *Manhood* 5).

Men's fear of others dominating them has also been a great instigator of crisis: those "others" have included women, African Americans, immigrants, homosexuals, and pretty much every collective against which white, native-born, upper- and middle-class men have set the defining parameters that sustain their masculine identity. For further information on past crises of masculinity, see Kimmel (*Manhood in America*).

12. Colonial fatherhood, which existed prior to breadwinning, is generally considered a mode of generative fathering. For more information on masculine domesticity and the surrounding crisis at the turn of the century, see Kimmel's *Manhood in America*, chapters 4 and 5 (87–136). For more on the new fatherhood and crisis of the 1920sand 1930s, see Griswold's *Fatherhood in America*, chapters 5, 6, and 7 (88–160). For more on the male-sex role model, see J. Pleck's "Theory of Male Sex Role Identity."

13. Although the evidence drawn from studies applying the EF hypothesis does not support the correlation between fathers' unique contribution and fathers' male gender, the essential father hypothesis remains firmly rooted in the public discourse about paternity, as well as in the manner in which individual fathers conceive their fathering practices (Pleck, "Fatherhood" 51). For a thorough critique of the EF hypothesis, see Pleck's "Fatherhood and Masculinity."

14. For a snapshot of men's movements in the late 1970s and most of the 1980s, see Shiffman.

15. The relation between mothering/fathering practices and gendered conceptions of labor is made explicit by Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering*.

16. Beynon distinguishes between two strands upon which the notion of the new man is based: the nurturer and the narcissist (119). The former arose out of gender politics, as a response to feminist claims, whereas the latter is said to be "a direct result of the commercial image-ing of masculinity in the 1980s" (Beynon 119). Either way, both models were best identified with upper-middle class masculine types, and generally detached from the plights of working-class men. For further reading, see Beynon (especially 98–121).

17. For further information on the deadbeat type, see Furstenberg and E. Pleck.

18. This perspective aligns with the "essential father hypothesis" or EF hypothesis, which maintains that fathers' contribution to children's development is both essential and unique "specifically because fathers are males and have masculine characteristics" (Pleck, "Fatherhood" 27). It likewise affirms that the uniqueness of the father's influence is such that it is not "substitutable or replaceable by mothers," given that "mothers' providing it will not have the same effect" on the child (Pleck, "Fatherhood" 44). Although the evidence drawn from studies applying the EF hypothesis does not support the correlation between fathers' unique contribution and fathers' male gender, the essential father hypothesis remains firmly rooted in the public discourse about

paternity, as well as in the manner in which individual fathers conceive their fathering practices (Pleck, "Fatherhood" 51).

19. In the U.S., the reinvigoration of paternity is inextricably tied to the emergence of men's rights movements. The earliest example is perhaps that of the Mythopoetic men's movement, which emerged in the 1980s. It was a movement that sought to help men regain their lost sense of masculine identity and autonomy; men were encouraged to get in touch with their "true masculine natures" so that their "authentic manhood" could be restored (Keith 98). It was claimed that modern society's toxic influence had created generations of "feminized men" (Keith 98). The movement's leading figure Robert Bly identified "the decline in traditional fathering" as a problem that would only perpetuate feminization among men (Hamad 10). For further reading on men's movements in the U.S., see Keith and Messner.

20. For instance, David Popenoe considered that "[m]en are not biologically as attuned to being committed fathers as women are to being committed mothers" (36). Another frequent claim was that men needed to undergo some sort of acculturation so that they may become well-adjusted members of society: "Left *culturally unregulated*, men's sexual behavior can be promiscuous, their paternity casual, their commitment to families weak" (Popenoe 36; emphasis added).

21. In fact, one of the last incarnations of the men's movement is to be found in certain sectors of the alt-right movement. Social media and all kinds of online platforms have become battlefields in which discontent has turned into hate speech. Angela Nagle argues that "even the most militantly anti-feminist forms of pre-Internet men's rights activism now seem supremely reasonable and mild compared with the anti-feminism that emerged online in the 2010s" (86). These discourses came together in what is sometimes called "the manosphere" (Keith 103; see also Nagle, chapter 6). Nagle defines the manosphere as the many subcultures, websites, and discussion forums in which one can find "everything from progressive men's issues activists . . . to the nastier corners of the Internet, filled with involuntary celibacy-obsessed, hate-filled, resentment-fueled cultures of quite chilling levels of misogyny" (84). For further information, see also Kimmel's *Angry White Men*, especially pp. 99–134.

22. For a remarkably informative, yet succinct, survey of the main trends in the study of fatherhood, see Morman and Floyd.

23. Some noteworthy examples that illustrate the intersection of psychoanalysis and literary criticism include *The Fictional Father* (ed. Robert Con Davis, 1981), *Refiguring the Father* (eds. Patricia Yaeger and

Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, 1989), *Naming the Father* (eds. Paulino Bueno et al., 2000), and *Drawing the Line.*
The Father Reimagined in Faulkner, Wright, O'Connor, and Morrison (Doreen Fowler, 2013).

24. This should not be confused with Robert L. Griswold's definition of "generative fathering," which is much more encompassing and identifies the historical variation of diverse modes of fathering based on greater male involvement in the private domain ("Generative" 72). According to Dollahite and Hawkins, generative fathering considers that "(a) fathers are under the obligations of an ethical call from their child(ren) and communities to meet their child(ren)'s needs; (b) the needs of the next generation are preeminent over the needs of adults; (c) fathers have "contextual agency," that is, fathers make choices, within a context of constraints, in relation to the next generation; and (d) fathers can and should connect with and care for their children in meaningful ways" (3).

25. The Lacanian body of theory is full of overlapping and cross-referencing concepts, which fall beyond the scope of this dissertation. For further reading, I recommend Dylan Evans's *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (1996), a clear and concise handbook of Lacanian terminology.

26. This idea, developed in the 1958 essay "The Meaning of the Phallus," has often been used to support the view that Lacan, unlike Freud, was capable of formulating a version of psychoanalysis that avoids gender essentialism. However, this call to the symbolic nature of the signifier does not necessarily entail that it is, or ought to be, completely genderless. This issue has been central in feminist criticism of Lacan. For a comprehensive overview of such criticism, see Luepnitz.

27. The first phase is sometimes called "the Lacan of '38," in reference to the year in which *Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual*, the most defining of his works in this stage, was published. The latter is known as "the Lacan of '53" in reference to the year in which he presented the Rome report.

28. For a comprehensive account of the evolution of the paternal function in Lacan, see Plá.

29. Lacan uses different terms to convey the same notion. The paternal function is roughly equivalent to the symbolic (hence, dead) father and also to the Name-of-the-father (Evans 63).

30. In addition, the Imaginary register encompasses the ego and its activities: namely, who and what one imagines oneself and other persons to be (Johnston n.p.). Finally, the register of the Real encompasses everything that is foreign to Imaginary-Symbolic reality, that is, everything that is not apprehensible or communicable, "resisting by nature capture in the comprehensibly meaningful formulations of concatenations of Imaginary-Symbolic signs" (Johnston n.p.). The definitions of the three registers varied substantially throughout

Lacan's life. For more on the evolution of these concepts and the different stages of Lacanian thinking, see Johnston.

31. This father-as-third-term is the symbolic father, the dead father of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. Lacan also distinguishes two other fathers, each corresponding to a different register. The imaginary father "is an imago, the composite of all the imaginary constructs that the subject builds up in fantasy around the figure of the father" (Evans 63). The real father, on the other hand, is a rather obscure concept; Evans observes that Lacan's only unequivocal definition of the term establishes the real father as "the agent of castration, the one who performs the operation of symbolic castration" (Evans 63).

32. For Lacan, the Oedipus complex is divided into three phases or "times": "In the first time, the child perceives that the mother desires something beyond the child himself—namely, the imaginary phallus—and then tries to be the phallus for the mother. In the second time, the imaginary father intervenes to deprive the mother of her object by promulgating the incest taboo; properly speaking, this is not castration but privation. Castration is only realised in the third and final time, which represents the 'dissolution' of the Oedipus complex. It is then that the real father intervenes by showing that he really possesses the phallus, in such a way that the child is forced to abandon his attempts to be the phallus" (Evans 23).

33. However, the symbolic father does not perform the symbolic castration. The agent of castration is the real father, that is, the father of the register of the Real.

34. The identification of the paternal principle with verticality coincides with Gilbert Durand's description of the diurnal order in *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary* (1960).

35. To a greater or lesser extent, the decline thesis is shared by a number of authors. See, for instance, Hurstel, Kniebheler, and Zoja. Among these, Luigi Zoja's vision is particularly severe, as he situates the beginning of this decline of the father figure in the Roman Empire.

36. Lacan formulated his idea of the evaporation of the father in two different but equally critical moments: in 1938, at a time when the spread of totalitarianism in Europe was reaching its critical point, and in 1969, in the aftermath of May '68 and its anti-bourgeois (and anti-Oedipal) revolution (Recalcati, *Qué Queda* 26–7). Both were, in short, moments of crisis, and a crisis of the paternal Imago to be precise, which bears resemblance to the current displacement of the father figure and its specificities by genderless forms of co-parenting.

37. It is debatable whether Recalcati's theories are more reactionary than he himself is willing to admit. For instance, he refuses—and rightfully so—to equate his interrogation of the role of religion today to a

sentiment of nostalgia for the symbolic authority of a God-like father (*Complejo* 20). Even though he claims that anyone or anybody can fulfill this renewed paternal function, thus marking a continuation with Lacan's abstract principle (*Complejo*160; *Qué Queda* 11; 57), his characterization of the paternal and maternal function falls into a simplistic essentialism that thwarts any real attempt to rethink the paternal function anew. Namely, he seems unable to overcome the binomial opposition mother-nature vs. father-culture that lies at the core of many psychoanalytic theories (see Oliver). Unfortunately, an in-depth criticism of these aspects falls beyond the scope of this study.

38. In Lacanian psychoanalysis the capitalized Other stands for the Symbolic order of culture, namely, "the overarching 'objective spirit' of trans-individual socio-linguistic structures configuring the fields of inter-subjective interactions. Similarly, the Symbolic big Other also can refer to (often fantasmatic/fictional) ideas of anonymous authoritative power and/or knowledge" (Johnston n.p.).

CHAPTER 2 – Notes for an Ethics of Fatherhood

Aren't all fathers inherently patriarchal? If we assume that the answer to this is simply "yes," then the possibilities to rethink the paternal role in a variety of contexts shrink considerably, to say the least. Beth Kowaleski-Wallace is aware of this conundrum when she contends that "our tendency has been to scrutinize the individual father as the *substitute* for patriarchy with its oppressive effects, and we have implied that if only we could remove the influence of the father from his daughters' lives, we could remove the effects of patriarchy itself" (297; original emphasis). Even if we were to try to effectively "remove the influence of the father" as part of an abstract exercise on the theoretical plane, we would still have to face the consequences of such a removal in the lives of actual fathers, as well as the effects it might have on the development of alternative masculinity ideals. As the previous chapter has demonstrated, the complex interweaving of socioeconomic and cultural (and even anthropological) factors present in the construction of both paternity and masculinity cannot be simply dismantled by erasing the presence of fathers altogether.

Instead, as Kowaleski-Wallace points out, it would be first necessary to acknowledge the "conflation of the individual father with patriarchy itself," as well as to understand that the "impulse to read the father metaphorically emerges . . . out of our need to articulate the experience of our oppression" (298). This reading practice consists in substituting "one abstract sign—'patriarchy'—with yet another signifier—'the father,' which can become equally universalized" (Kowaleski-Wallace 303). In the previous chapter, I have referred to some of the processes whereby the signifier "father" has acquired its current status and meaning in a particular time and context. Now, I turn to the alternatives to the conflation Kowaleski-Wallace speaks of.

This chapter will examine whether the individual father can be separated from the patriarchal system, and the role literature can play in undoing this seemingly reified association. First of all, I want to resume the discussion of Massimo Recalcati's take on rehabilitating the paternal function that was first addressed in the previous chapter. Here I want to clarify that, on one hand, I agree with Yaeger and Kowaleski-Wallace's observation that the overt privileging of the symbolic in Lacanian theory has somehow undermined the interest in actual fathers: "The Lacanian father is a disembodied entity, a law or function who is essentially bodiless . . . If the Lacanian view denies the father a body, it also denies him a plural history, for the Symbolic father operates beyond the bounds of time or space" (xiv). Nevertheless, a noteworthy aspect in Recalcati's proposal is his attempt to particularize the paternal function, drawing attention to the role of individual fathers. In my view, this movement from the universal to the singular should orient the creation of alternative configurations of paternity, hence my review of his approach in depth.

However, there are some aspects left unresolved, or at least underdeveloped, in Recalcati's proposal. In particular, I would like to foreground the importance of the father's body, as well as the solutions posed—or absence thereof—by Recalcati. It is convenient to remark that one of the main symptoms of the father-patriarchy conflation is precisely the *asomia* or bodilessness that "characterizes our way of describing and thinking about the father" (Yaeger 9). As we will see, paternal asomia is intimately connected to gender essentialism insofar as it stems from the reified association between father and culture, on one hand, and mother and nature, on the other hand. I will review these notions and ponder the consequences of Recalcati's paradoxical claims about the father's materiality. Even though he insists on the need to particularize the paternal function, he likewise argues that the paternal role can be fulfilled by anybody or anything (*Telémaco* 160; *Qué Queda* 11; 57), thereby connecting with Lacan's idea that the paternal function is merely an abstract function

70

and hence not bound to sex or gender. Even though I agree with the latter, the particularization of the paternal function necessarily (re)introduces the materiality of the body, which leads us to ponder which type of body a father ought to have. If we simply take for granted that the paternal body is a male body, does not that assumption undermine the idea that the paternal role can be fulfilled by anyone, and should not therefore be circumscribed to a particular set of attributes? I will address this issue in depth in section 1, "The father's body."

In order to flesh out an alternative to the father-patriarchy conflation, the relation of this renewed father figure to materiality and the body must be clarified, but it is also necessary to shed light on the bonds established between father and child. Recalcati has coined the term "inheritance process" to describe the dialectical identity-formation process whereby the subject uproots itself from the familiar setting of sameness and comes to assimilate the symbolic debt with the Other. The inheritance process grounds a type of father-child bond that is inherently ethical insofar as it stems from a relational understanding of subjectivity. In section 2, "Paternal ethics," I examine the similarities and differences between this approach and the notion of Emmanuel Levinas that paternity can be a model for ethics.

I will argue that an ethics that is solely articulated around the father figure risks further upholding the dominant fiction that undergirds the father-patriarchy conflation. The dominant fiction constitutes the "compensatory psychosocial model" that is "designed to conceal" the inherent and unavoidable lack that is constituent of human subjectivity (Shostak, *Fictive* 4). Likewise, the dominant fiction projects the fantasy of an absent, mighty father as creator and author of his child. In order to produce a truly ethical alternative to the discourses of the dominant fiction, I propose to explore models that overtly question the notion of wholeness in human subjectivity. In section 3, "Paternal bonds," I discuss the notions of

social subjectivity and narrative identity in confluence with Recalcati's inheritance process, seeking to underscore the benefits of reframing Recalcati's identity-formation process against the backdrop of philosophical and narrative hermeneutics. I contend that by doing so, it is possible to challenge some of the most problematic aspects present in the dominant fiction.

By shifting from psychoanalysis to narrative hermeneutics, I seek to reconceptualize the inheritance process in the manner of a hermeneutic circle, thus stressing the constructed and relational side of human subjectivity. In addition, this facilitates the shift from the absent, bodiless paternal function of the dominant fiction towards an embodied, particularized father figure. The framework provided by hermeneutics does emphasize that there is no such thing as "pure experience that occurs as in a vacuum," and it likewise foregrounds that "subjectivity and agency involve the whole embodied, emotionally engaged self" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 46). In sections 4 and 5, "Transforming storytelling" and "Filial tales," I argue that it is possible to challenge the dominant fiction by displacing the focus from the father figure to the bond between father and child that is established in the promise of reciprocal narration. Using the concepts of subsumptive and non-subsumptive logic of narrative understanding, I assess the role that literature can play in the undoing of the father-patriarchy conflation through individual acts of storytelling.

The father's body

Let us begin by examining Recalcati's take on the paternal body. Something that is worth highlighting in his attempt to particularize the paternal function concerns the fluctuation between the historical and the ahistorical, the biologically-bound descriptions and the wish to elaborate a universalizing model. Namely, he draws attention to the changing societal paradigms, acknowledging that the heteronormative nuclear family, bound by marriage, is no longer an effective model to describe the current configuration of family ties (*Qué Queda*

72

59). However, he fails to examine the relation between this model and the existing clear-cut separation of the maternal and paternal roles, for example. Neither does he reflect on the historically-bound nature of these concepts, nor does he attempt to untangle the myriad layers of meaning that have been stacked within each of these functions over the years. And even though he speaks of the decline in the paternal function, he likewise fails to identify the social factors interfering with and shaping the paternal function simultaneously in the individual and collective imaginary.

As indicated before, Recalcati tries to recuperate the paternal role by particularizing it in individual subjects. In this regard, he remarks that fatherhood (but also motherhood) is independent of biology. Anything can be a father, as long as it makes possible the encounter between Law and desire (*Telémaco* 160; *Qué Queda* 57). When discussing the maternal function, he also contends that the mother does not necessarily have to be the biological progenitor to fulfill her function (*Manos* 24). In sum, both the mother and the father are figures that transcend sex, blood ties, lineage, and biology (*Manos* 24).[1] And yet, in spite of this purported detachment from biological constraints, the fact that many of the paternal and maternal attributes perpetuate the association father-culture and mother-nature does not suggest that this is any different from the traditional functions in psychoanalysis.

Put differently, rather than representing a break from the old paternal function, Recalcati's alternative is less innovative than it might seem. Although it may not be so noticeable at first, it does become more evident upon closer examination. In *The Mother's Hands*, he acknowledges some pressing problems regarding the conception of the maternal role, namely, that patriarchal ideology has reduced women to the experience of motherhood, codifying their experience as one of sacrifice and self-denial (12). He also draws attention to patriarchy's simplistic reduction of "femininity" to an antithetical choice between motherhood and womanhood, the former being regarded as positive, whereas the latter is

usually depicted in a negative light (*Manos* 13). Regardless, his later description of the maternal function is rife with elements that perpetuate the association between mother and nature, with a particular emphasis on the maternal pregnant body.[2] The profusion of physical elements in the description of the mother contrasts with the absence thereof in the case of the father.

Unlike mothers, father figures have generally been conceived as rather abstract and universal principles of law and authority, and therefore not bound to biology in the least.[3] Kelly Oliver posits that "[f]atherhood is made determinant by denying the body" (*Subjectivity* 143), given that "[p]aternal authority is associated with culture against maternal nature" (*Family* 5). Nevertheless, this antithetical opposition is in itself quite paradoxical. Oliver contends that:

> Patriarchy is founded on the father's authority. . . . But, in both philosophy and psychoanalytic theory, it turns out that the paternal authority that legitimates culture and breaks with antisocial nature is founded on the father's *natural* authority because of his *natural* strength or aggressive impulses. The paternal authority of culture is founded on the father's *naturally* stronger body: might makes right. After grounding the father's authority in nature, our philosophers and psychoanalytic theorists have disassociated the father from nature by disembodying him. The father is physically absent from the family scene because he is part of culture. . . . The association between father and culture, and the opposition between nature and culture or body and mind, disembodies the father. His body must be evacuated to maintain images of his association with culture against nature; his body threatens a fall back into nature. (*Family* 5; original emphasis)

The new paternal role as presented by Recalcati conveys the impression of being an equally disembodied entity due to the absence of direct reference to the father's corporeity, in spite of

his emphasis on the father being a particularized individual. He fails to account for the way in which this newly acquired (or rather, regained) materiality affects the status of the father. This issue feels particularly crucial as the question of the *asomia* or bodilessness of the father has long been a fundamental feature in representations of paternity, as well as a founding element in the conflation of father and patriarchy. Even though Recalcati's aim is not to undo said conflation, it is worth noting that his proposal to particularize both functions, as well as his critical comment on the changing social background to these functions, clashes with this uncritical repetition of the mother-nature and the father-culture argument.

In my view, to re-embody the father inevitably entails that the father acquire physical attributes, whatever those might be. And since Recalcati maintains that anybody or anything can fulfill this role, it would be interesting to clarify whether the father in his vision possesses a gendered body, or whether the kind of body the father might have is irrelevant altogether. Recalcati's emphasis on the ethical foundations of the father-child relationship could suggest that what is relevant is that fathers ought to have a body—i.e., they ought to be actual individuals—regardless of their bodily attributes. Since those issues are left unaddressed, I will not venture into making conjectures about Recalcati's views on this particular subject. Nevertheless, I believe that this blind spot in his theory is telling, insofar as it showcases the importance of addressing paternal asomia if we are to devise alternatives to the patriarchal father figure.

In what follows, I want to further discuss the problem of asomia in relation to the father as an ethical figure. As I have previously mentioned, this idea lies at the core of Recalcati's proposal, but is by no means a novel one. I turn now to address the role of the paternal body, and assess the role that gendered bodies play in various attempts to characterize the father as a loving, ethical figure. In particular, I focus on Julia Kristeva's concept of the imaginary father and on Emmanuel Levinas's vision of paternity in *Totality*

and Infinity (1962). I have chosen to comment on these two approaches on the grounds of the general aim they share with Recalcati's approach in *The Telemachus Complex*. Levinas's conception of paternity is based on the act of promise (Oliver, "Fatherhood" 48), whereas Kristeva's vision of the imaginary father is based on the idea that the crisis in paternity (see chapter 1) is provoked by "the lack of love and not the lack of law" (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 69).

In my view, these two complementary dimensions are present to some extent in Recalcati's approach but, more importantly, they may also open up new pathways to rethink the paternal role divested of its patriarchal dimension. Here I would like to emphasize—again—that the status of the father's body in discussions about renewed forms of paternity cannot be overlooked. We need to acknowledge the naturalizing strategies at play in the description of paternal roles, old and new, and critically assess the social and historical forces shaping them. In order to dismantle the father-patriarchy conflation, we ought to

> reinvent the discourse of the father altogether, to move outside an oedipal dialectic that insists upon revealing the father as law, as the gaze, as bodiliness [*sic*], or as the symbolic, and to develop a new dialectic that refuses to describe the father function as if it were univocal and ahistorical. (Yaeger and Kowaleski-Wallace xi)

In addition to developing a new dialectic distanced from the more traditional discourses of psychoanalysis (particularly in its Freudian and Lacanian outlooks), granting the paternal body a more prominent role in the discussion also functions as a guarantee for ethics, as Recalcati seems to realize. Paternal presence—as opposed to the widespread representation of fatherhood as a form of absence—is central for generating alternative discourses to patriarchal-bound fatherhood, alternative discourses that ought to be grounded on paternal rehabilitation and love.

This outlook has been repeatedly argued for by Kelly Oliver, whose discussion of fatherhood tackles the problem of asomia. She argues that in the virile imaginary of traditionally patriarchal representations "[the father's] body is a thing to be controlled and an instrument for control and for reproducing himself. In this image, the father does not love— he possesses. The disassociation of the father from the body ensures that all fathers are absent fathers" (*Subjectivity* 146). Drawing from Julia Kristeva, Oliver examines the notion of the imaginary father as a possible alternative to the disembodied paternal principle of psychoanalysis. She posits that "the child enters the social and language not just because of paternal threats" of castration, as argued in both the Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic models, "but also because of paternal love in the figure of the imaginary father" (*Subjectivity* 133).

The imaginary father, as well as the social mother, are images elaborated by Kristeva to counter the "Western images of conception, birth, and parental relationships [that] leave us with a father who is not embodied, who cannot love but only legislates from some abstract position, and a mother who is nothing but body, who can fulfill animal needs but cannot love as a social human being" (*Subjectivity* 135). Oliver notes that the imaginary father is defined in relation to the mother as "the imaginary union between maternal and paternal bodies" (*Subjectivity* 139). The imaginary father "allows the child to feel loved even while it is separating from its mother's body" in order to facilitate such a separation in the first place: the father "must promise love" so that the child accepts leaving the maternal body (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 138–9). Without the primary identification with the love of the imaginary father "the discourse seems empty," the symbolic lacks meaning (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 69).

Nevertheless, Oliver contends that Kristeva's imaginary father is merely another side of the Lacanian symbolic father, as the child's identification with the father-mother union is actually "an identification with the mother's desire for the father's phallus" (*Subjectivity*

139). The loving imaginary father is ultimately a disguise for the mother's love, which functions as the subject's gateway into the order of culture (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 70).[4] Oliver denounces that:

> In order for the child to feel loved, the symbolic or imaginary father can never replace a real embodied father. Whether or not there is a father physically present, our images of fatherhood should include an embodied loving father rather than just the stern symbolic father of the law or an imaginary father who collapses into either the symbolic father or the maternal body. (*Subjectivity* 146–7)

The reason why Oliver insists on images of embodied love stems from the importance she bestows on primary relationships, on one hand, but also from her conception of "subjectivity as social subjectivity" (*Family* 231). She observes that our first relation is to the maternal body, but the conception of the maternal body within our culture "prevents this relation from serving as a model for any subsequent social relation" as it is "imagined as antisocial, a nonrelation which, if anything, threatens the social" ("Conflicted" 2). On the other hand, the father's love is found within the social plane, but is nonetheless "made abstract or impossible by the identification of father and anti-body culture" (Oliver, "Conflicted" 3). The paternal body, Oliver notes, "must be evacuated to maintain images of his association with culture against nature" ("Conflicted" 4), something that contributes to buttress the father-patriarchy conflation.

Oliver's argument can be summed up as follows: if subjectivity is social, then our primary relations must likewise be social and grounded on love, as "[s]elf-identity is not necessarily bought through the sacrifice, or abjection, of others" (*Family* 232). By contrast, "if our stereotypes of mothers and fathers figure them as something other than embodied human beings, then love relationships with embodied human beings become difficult"

("Conflicted" 2). In the case of fathers, Oliver contends that "[t]he father can be social or part of culture and embodied at the same time, which makes paternal love possible" ("Conflicted" 16). She argues for a "paternal Eros," a notion rooted in physical interaction between father and child that "sets up the possibility of the infant's *growth* into language and culture through affective attunement and the repetition of bodily dynamics rather than through threats and law" (*Family* 230; original emphasis). But this notion, she observes, would require "a new conception of the paternal body and the paternal function," as well as "a different conception of the subject and a different notion of manhood" (Oliver, *Family* 230). This is, incidentally, what this chapter is trying to provide an answer to.

However, before moving on, I would like to discuss the ethical implications of understanding subjectivity (and hence subjectivity formation) as a social process. This is the point where Oliver's views on paternity tie in with Recalcati's approach, as well as with other approaches to ethical fatherhood such as Levinas's. Now I will elaborate on the possibility of establishing an ethics of paternity. It is my contention that one possible way to undo the association between father and patriarchal domination could be to present fathers as ethical figures, but there are some problems in this solution that require closer examination. In the following section, I examine some of these potential problems by comparing Recalcati's take on the ethical core of the paternal function with Emmanuel Levinas's proposal to foreground the ethical nature of the father figure and the father-child bond.

Paternal ethics

The renewed paternal role that is explored by Massimo Recalcati in *The Telemachus Complex* offers a compelling alternative to the patriarchal tradition of the absent father-as-symbolic-function, but is not devoid of potential difficulties. An important aspect of father figures for Recalcati is that they ought to be subject to the Law, which in turn allows them

not to reduce their children to being mere property (Recalcati, *Telémaco* 36). A similar point is underscored by Kelly Oliver when she argues that paternal images are dissociated from the body, thus making the body "and its products"—that is, children—the father's "possessions" (*Family* 230). Both authors engage here with the same notion, namely, that the alternative to the stern father of the Law necessarily implies that father and child both share the status of subjects.

This shift regarding the patriarchal *paterfamilias* corrects the power imbalance between father and child, as the former does no longer command respect because of the higher rank he occupies in a purported hierarchy. Instead, the father-child bond is based on the father's firsthand knowledge of the Law not because he enforces it, but because he has submitted to it in order to articulate desire and thereby a plentiful existence. Thus, accepting the Law and its boundaries leads to the acceptance of the fundamental lack at the core of human existence; at the same time, this acceptance is precisely what allows subjects to come to terms with lack and be able to turn it into a productive lack—that is, desire *à la* Lacan.

The dominant fiction underpinning the conflation of paternity and patriarchy is based on presenting fathers as both figures of authority and authors of their child's identity (Shostak, *Fictive* 3). In the Lacanian development of the Oedipus complex, the father is the signifier that separates mother and child (see chapter 1). As the mother's object of desire, the father projects an impression of wholeness that the child wishes to mimic. However, this image of completion is nothing else than a fantasy, a myth that the image of patriarchal power has learnt to use to its advantage. What makes Recalcati's alternative promising is its open acknowledgment of the fundamental lack that is common to (individual) fathers as much as to their children. In other words, instead of creating and sustaining a fantasy of wholeness, for Recalcati fathers make that radical lack explicit and, more importantly,

demonstrate with their own vital experience that a life founded on lack is a life worth living (*Telémaco* 14).

It is by accepting this absence of completion within themselves that the paternal role moves from a position of dominance to one of equity, at least from the perspective of the Law of desire: the father is no longer above the Law, but equally submitted to it. This requires an effort from the father as subject, detached from the paternal role. Arguably, it would be virtually impossible to develop an ethics of fatherhood without each individual father's assimilation of his own fundamental lack, a process that should therefore precede the making of any father-child bond. Assuming that this prerequisite is fulfilled, after the evaporation of the father (see chapter 1) what is left would not be manifested as the transcendental order of the Law, but as the singular, ethical order of the (particular) testimony (Recalcati, *Qué Queda* 58). This ethics of singular responsibility stems from the testimony itself. The father does not pretend to have all the answers, being aware that this testimony will not provide a satisfactory explanation to the problem posed by a fundamental, unavoidable lack; however, that does not prevent paternal involvement from occurring (Recalcati, *Qué Queda* 57).

Herein lies the truly ethical core of Recalcati's proposal. As advanced in the previous chapter, the paternal role is central to the process that Recalcati terms "inheritance," which can be best understood in terms of a dialectical process of subjectivity formation. Recalcati contends that, in order to speak about itself, the subject feels compelled to speak about the Other from where they come from, frequently the family unit (*Qué Queda* 12–3). We as subjects always come from a horizon, the discourse of the Other, that both precedes us and shapes us, and it is precisely *qua* subjects that we have the potential to subjectivize that discourse and make it our own (Recalcati, *Qué Queda* 13). The inheritance process consists in acknowledging the symbolic debt with the Other, then uprooting ourselves—that is, separating ourselves from what is familiar to us—only to later recuperate our legacy, that

which we have inherited from the Other, via a subjectivization process (Recalcati, *Telémaco* 148–9). For Recalcati this inheritance is what renders life humane, and grounds symbolic filiation (*Telémaco* 149). Symbolic filiation transcends the familial bond, he further adds, because it also encompasses our origin in the Other understood as language or the symbolic order of culture (Recalcati, *Telémaco* 150).

Put differently, the inheritance process can be described as a dialectical movement from identification to dis-identification and back to identification. Still, the final stage differs fundamentally from the initial one insofar as the symbolic debt has been subjectivized, that is, critically filtered and incorporated into one's own subjectivity. In my opinion, the ethical nature of this process stems from the recognition of one's origin in the Other, and the realization that despite the existence of such bonds, the subject still needs to negotiate its selfhood without either rejecting the Other or assimilating the Other altogether. It is this social dimension of self-formation that both Recalcati's argument and Kelly Oliver's notion of social subjectivity have in common (see section 1).

When reduced to its bare elements, the connection between this dialectical process and paternity is not necessarily apparent. Paternity could be (and has been indeed) interpreted under a number of guises, most notably as the dominant fiction that has kept "the mythic, patriarchal father at the symbolic center of the social order" (Shostak, *Fictive* 4). Such is the case of Emmanuel Levinas's notion of paternity. Despite its potential, I find Levinas's argumentation fundamentally flawed precisely because it is articulated around the binary opposition of masculine and feminine principles. Nevertheless, as is also the case with Recalcati's approach, there are elements worth keeping which could lead to thought-provoking results within a different framework.[5]

Let us briefly unpack the background for Levinas's idea of paternity. In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), a brilliant critique of Western metaphysics, Levinas seeks an alternative to the

totalizing relation between the Same and the Other that does not end up in the latter being assimilated by the former. For Levinas, to approach the Other aiming to understand it necessarily implies violence, for "[t]he common knowledge proceeds toward unity" (302). In traditional Western metaphysics, knowledge always presupposes the reduction of the other to the same, either through the reduction of others to mere objects inserted in a rational system, i.e., scientific knowledge, or through the "conquest of beings outside of every system by violence," i.e., history as a manifestation of reason (Levinas 302). Nevertheless, as Levinas contends, the Other cannot be reduced to an object, a mere category ready to be apprehended (49). Ethics is here presented as the "critique" that calls into question Western ontology, or the exercise of the same (43).

For Levinas, when the I approaches the Other, it puts its freedom into question. This approach deconstructs the structures that used to bestow the I with a sense of completeness. Freedom, justice, truth, and *logos* are questioned and undermined by the revelation of the Other before the I. It is by means of this relation that the limits of freedom and subjectivity can be reconsidered and reshaped. The ethical relation is made possible by privileging reception over appropriation (Levinas 50–1). This is why the same and the other cannot enter into a "cognition" bringing them both together, encompassing them simultaneously. The only possible conjuncture of both totality (as self) and infinity (as other) is that of transcendence, or, in other words, the "*direct* and *full face* welcome of the other by me" (80; original emphasis).[6]

Levinas sees the father-son relation as the epitome of this ethical bond that demands mutual, endless responsibility. The son is, for the father, partly I and partly Other: "Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other . . . *is* me, a relation of the I with a self which yet is not me" (277; original emphasis). Levinas discards the biological justification

and instead stresses the act of choosing the son—but not the other way around—making him unique:

> The son resumes the unicity of the father and yet remains exterior to the father: the son is a unique son. . . . The love of the father for the son accomplishes the sole relation possible with the very unicity of another; and in this sense every love must approach paternal love. . . . The paternal *Eros* first invests the unicity of the son; his I qua filial commences not in enjoyment but in election. (279; original emphasis)

In turn, the father's choosing of the son opens up to the future: "Paternity is produced as an innumerable future; the I engendered exists at the same time as unique in the world and as brother among brothers" (Levinas 279). As Kelly Oliver observes, "the promise of paternity, as Levinas describes it, is a promise of an open future, the promise that the son is to his father" ("Fatherhood" 48). That is, the son is the product of the father's transcendence—because he is the product of the erotic relationship with the Other—and at the same time grants the father's transcendence through himself, because he is partly his father (same) and partly not his father (other): "Paternity, with its generation and generations, literally opens onto infinite time, a time beyond death. That future is the infinite desire which is present as a desire for desire itself infinitely extended into a future that is never future enough" (Oliver, "Fatherhood" 50). It is worth noting that for Levinas the son is the promise of futurity to the father, whereas for Recalcati this projection into the future is reversed: it is the child, in the process of becoming, who is projected into the future thanks to the paternal bond. I will come back to this.

In my view, the most problematic feature of Levinas's views on the paternal-as-ethical stems from his conception of sexual difference. I cannot but agree with Oliver's critique that his notion of paternal Eros is channeled through the maternal body (*Family* 207).

In Levinas's proposal, the son is the result of the erotic relation with the Other, identified with the feminine principle. In fact, Oliver argues that for Levinas "Eros is possible because of sexual difference" ("Fatherhood" 48):

> Paternity, made possible through a relationship with the feminine, opens the masculine subject onto infinite time and returns him to the ethical relationship . . . fecundity necessitates a relationship with a feminine other. This feminine other is a prerequisite for moving outside of oneself. . . . The transubstantiation of the father by the son is possible only by virtue of the feminine other. Man needs woman to beget a son. ("Fatherhood" 49)

To recapitulate, I think that the underlying idea sustaining Levinas's proposal—the paternal relation as election and promise—could be potentially productive insofar as it may contribute to breaking the association between father and rule or law. In the words of EwaZiarek, "[t]he fundamental effort of Levinas's thought is to initiate an ethical encounter with the other without reducing it to the order of consciousness or to the totality of a linguistic or philosophical system" (64). This radical effort to resist thinking the other as an object to be apprehended could challenge the pattern of fatherhood understood as a form of domination. In addition to this, codifying the relation with the paternal in ethical terms, including the father's "choosing" of the child, could alleviate the burden of traditional depictions of fathers, including depictions of fathers as economic providers or reductions of fatherhood to a biological event. In short, showing that other forms of conduct could be promoted that are beneficial for both child and parent.

Nevertheless, there are at least two major problems posed by Levinas's approach, and they both stem from the reduction of the feminine to a mere enabler of the paternal relationship. The first problem concerns the transcendence of the I, the father, through his son. Although Levinas dismisses the role of biology in the paternal-as-ethical relation ("these

relations free themselves from their biological limitation," 279), this seems to only encompass the fact of biological filiation—similarly to what is also argued by Recalcati, namely, that filiation is always symbolic because it represents a free choice. In that case, why does the Levinasian father choose not to choose a daughter?

Kelly Oliver wonders whether we should "interpret Levinas literally in his discussion of the paternal election of a son" ("Fatherhood" 51). Let us recall that the father, having discovered that his son is a stranger and yet himself (i.e., same), becomes other to himself and still continues to be an I: "Levinas suggests that paternity opens onto infinity because it is a relationship with an absolute other in which the I survives" (Oliver, "Fatherhood" 51). But if the basis of the father's possibility to transcend is the encounter with the son, who is an absolute other, would not the encounter with a daughter fulfill the same conditions? Oliver convincingly argues that if the father's discovery of his and his son's singularity springs from their sameness, then a daughter would make an even stranger child; that is, if absolute otherness is indeed the condition for transcendence (Oliver, "Fatherhood" 51). Nevertheless, this argument reveals itself a bit too far-fetched given that the English term 'child' does not have an exact translation in French, the masculine noun *fils* being the word used as the unmarked term.

Ultimately, Oliver further adds, if it's the case that "the father cannot elect a daughter, then we always get more of the same and never anything/anyone different. *The singularity engendered by paternity is the singularity of the masculine*" (*Family* 52; emphasis added). This leads us to the second problem: it appears that this model cannot renounce the feminine, for it is necessary that the I enter into an erotic relationship with the (feminine) other in order to engender the son, but at the same time the feminine is *so* other that its encounter with the I cannot lead to transcendence—only to fecundity. Moreover, if this model sets the other as the feminine principle, then the I appears invariably as masculine. In my opinion, this view of the

paternal-as-ethical is shattered by its inherent gender essentialism. Levinas's attempt to think paternity as the outcome of fecundity—fecundity being in turn the outcome of the interaction between the I-masculine and the Other-feminine—limits the scope of his otherwise enticing ethical project.

To sum up, the prior examples of the merging of fatherhood and ethics all feature diverse strategies that are worth taking into consideration. Some of these strategies include conceptualizing fatherhood as a promise of futurity, conceiving fathers as embodied subjects, and framing fatherhood in the context of social subjectivity and relational ethics. On the other hand, the most widespread problem among them derives from the uncritical repetition of gender roles that buttresses the father-patriarchy conflation. As has been shown, there's no use in stating that anyone or anything can fulfill the paternal role without acknowledging, and critically examining, the way we construct our images of paternity and maternity first.

I believe that it is paramount to discern between paternity and maternity, on the one hand, and gender roles, on the other hand. Even though some might find it preposterous to say that fatherhood and motherhood should be independent of sex or gender, I do believe this is an important point to underscore. Our bodies do not condition the bonds we can create, nor should they thwart our development as subjects. Only by challenging the association between parenthood, sex, and gender can we effectively undo the conflation of paternity and patriarchy. Here it is convenient to remark that sex and gender encompass, but are by no means limited to, physical attributes. As I have argued in chapter 1, hegemonic masculinity is composed of myriad layers that purport to answer questions such as what type of body a man ought to have, what type of bond he ought to have with his children, or what attitudes are acceptable for him to display. The objective, then, would not be to separate fatherhood from men, but instead to acknowledge the multiple ways in which fatherhood manifests itself in

the lives of individuals, thereby downplaying the straightforward association between (hegemonic) masculinity and paternity.

Yet in the end, if our aim is to devise an ethics of paternity that would allow us to overcome the restrictive framework provided by hegemonic masculinity, we fall into the trap of a universalizing model that erases the very differences it intends to preserve. By developing an ethics that revolves around the paternal figure, we are forced to face questions that lead to seemingly irresolvable paradoxes. Namely, the problem with models such as Recalcati's or Levinas's is that they have a universal projection that is troublesome insofar as it homogenizes the reality of individual fathers. On the other hand, an embodied model of ethical fatherhood that recuperates the paternal body presents us with the problem of defining—and most likely pigeonholing—the father's body.

So far, we have seen that representing the individual father as an embodied father can contribute to break down the father-patriarchy conflation, as it subverts one of its main tenets—that the father stands for absence, either literally or metaphorically. It also seems apparent that the key role played by the father figure in the subjectivity formation process could be maintained without having to keep all elements present in the father-patriarchy conflation. In doing so, there could be an alternative to "the disembodied abstract father who represents the authority of culture" who, in the current configuration of the dominant fiction, "cannot provide love because love is concrete and embodied" (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 137). Furthermore, by re-embodying the father, we might contribute to normalizing the association between fatherhood and representations of bodies that are not necessarily normative, nor typically masculine. Continuing Recalcati's claim that anyone can be a father, this would allow us to further blur the boundaries between paternal role, gender roles, and gendered bodies. The downside to this is that it seemingly forces us to choose between a far-reaching, universalizing model that erases difference, or else a model that foregrounds individual

paternity. The latter would inevitably lead us to a point where a definition for 'father' would become untenable. In order to get out of this aporia, we would need a model that simultaneously accounts for the universality of human experience while preserving its particularities.

Paternal bonds

The fundamental problem of an ethics of fatherhood is that, in order to leave the father-patriarchy conflation behind, we ought to get rid of paternal asomia while avoiding any attempts to universalize the experience of paternity. Now, interpreting the paternal role as an inherently ethical role, like Recalcati does, is just one among many possibilities—yet it is a possibility that contributes to undo the dominant fiction, inasmuch as it exposes it in its constructedness. What I find most appealing about applying this ethical formula to the understanding of paternity is that it distances itself from the limiting—albeit imprecise—boundaries of masculinity ideals, and sexual difference overall. At first sight, the paternal role understood as an ethical role seems to overcome any sex and gender boundaries, because a truly ethical relationship ought to be founded on the principle of mutual responsibility and equality regardless of the subject's status.

At the same time, presenting paternity not as an abstract function, but as a singular act of personal responsibility, demands an embodied agent. In Kelly Oliver's words, paternity requires a paternal body (*Family* 211). And embodied agents do not exist in a vacuum; they occupy different positions in social hierarchies, and are bestowed with diverse degrees of power and agency. As Oliver has it, "in order to make ethical or judicious decisions we must examine the relationships between people and the conditions that make these relations possible," instead of assuming "a surface equality that often masks deeper inequalities" (*Family* 231).

Yet how do we get to a framework that simultaneously accounts for the universality of human experience while preserving its particularities? In this section I propose a theoretical shift from Recalcati's Lacanian psychoanalysis to a model based on hermeneutics. Recalcati's inheritance process, which forms the true ethical core of his theory, can be easily understood in terms of a dialectical process of subjectivity formation. I seek to maintain those elements that I consider suitable to rethink paternity outside the patriarchal framework—e.g., the characterization of paternity as founded on an act of promise—while replacing those that have been deemed potentially problematic in previous sections.

In other words, if there is a way to undo the paternity-patriarchy conflation via ethics, it can only be done via a relational model of ethics and subjectivity, as both Recalcati and Oliver suggest. Even if Recalcati does not refer explicitly to relational models, it does become clear by looking at his description of the inheritance process that he understands subjectivity as inherently relational. Throughout this section, I will use Recalcati's approach to paternity as the foundation for a theoretical framework that also draws from narrative hermeneutics. I will argue that by focusing on the paternal relationship over the paternal figure, the emphasis falls on the relational and embodied aspects instead, thus striking the necessary balance between maintaining difference and a certain universal projection.

I have already described the ins and outs of the inheritance process described in *The Telemachus Complex* in the previous section. As we have seen, this process is anchored in the act of promise; however, contrary to Emmanuel Levinas's idea of paternity as promise, here it is the father who enables the son's future, and not the other way around (Recalcati, *Telémaco* 157). The father figure, via its vital testimony, shows that life is worth being lived in spite of the fundamental absence that lies at the core of human existence. In fact, it is precisely by acknowledging that foundational lack that we can ground our desire, which then turns into a productive force (Recalcati, *Telémaco* 157). By proving through its vital

testimony that a life founded on desire is worth living, the father enables the child's future—that is, the father shows the child that futurity exists as the reevaluation of the symbolic debt with the Other. It is through the renovation of the symbolic debt, namely, that we all come from the Other and are shaped by and in relation to the Other, that futurity remains open. For Recalcati, the precondition for futurity is to encounter an incarnation of the Law of desire (Recalcati, *Telémaco* 155).

Likewise, the subjectivity formation process is equally entwined with the Other, although this does not necessarily imply a deterministic outcome. We have seen that Recalcati proposes three different outcomes to the inheritance process: we can either succeed or fail, and the failure takes two forms. For the subject to fail, all it takes is either to repeat the tradition uncritically or to reject the symbolic debt altogether, thus refusing to acknowledge its origin in the Other (*Telémaco* 139; 142). In both cases, the outcome is the same: failing to subjectivize the symbolic debt leads to a hindered subjectivity formation. By contrast, for the inheritance process to succeed it is necessary that the subject become an orphan, uproot itself from the familiar world and become a wandering self. This is not to be taken literally—although there might be some examples of wandering characters in works of fiction. Some distance is required for the dialectical process to come to fruition, according to Recalcati; that distance equals orphanhood, either literal or metaphorical, insofar as the subject undergoes a first stage in which familiar bonds (again, either literal or metaphorical) are severed.

Similarly to what Levinas argued in his model of paternity, the contact with the Other is what allows the subject to both go beyond itself and continue to be a self. Our roots, Recalcati argues, do not determine our identity, but need to be re-conquered through the subjectivization of our bequest (*Telémaco* 141). This subjectivization process is compared to mourning insofar as it consists in letting the dead go, not because they have been forgotten,

but because their legacy has been assimilated by the living (Recalcati, *Telémaco* 142). Still, this model fails to mention whether this is a continuous process. We might assume it is—but it is not explicitly included nonetheless. Albeit compelling, the inheritance process appears to be almost a teleological tool for subjectivity development.

In order to fill in the gaps of this approach, I want to re-contextualize this view of ethical paternity against the backdrop of narrative hermeneutics. But before I proceed any further, I would like to take a detour to clarify some important elements that I will be building on in my proposal. Earlier, I briefly referred to Kelly Oliver's contention that subjectivity is social. It is important to note that the notion of social subjectivity and its variants underpin much of the theoretical corpus from which I will draw here. Thus, now I will refer to three basic aspects, taken from three different authors, that are connected to the notion of social subjectivity in various forms. The first one is Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity. In my view, understanding the inheritance process through the lens of narrative identity makes it easier to grasp the notion of subjectivity that undergirds this project. Next, progressing from a narrative understanding of identity, I will deal with Adriana Cavarero's altruistic ethics of relationality in order to account for the ways in which the narrative dimension of identity entwines with ethics. Finally, following Hanna Meretoja, I will refer to the very notion of narrative and the way in which subjects interact with those narratives.

Ricoeur comes up with the notion of narrative identity as a solution to unravel the aporia of personal identity:

> Without the recourse to narration, the problem of personal identity would in fact be condemned to an antinomy with no solution. Either we must posit a subject identical with itself through the diversity of its different states, or . . . we must hold that this identical subject is nothing more than a substantialist illusion, whose elimination merely brings to light a pure manifold of cognitions, emotions, and volitions. This dilemma disappears if we substitute for

identity understood in the sense of being the same (*idem*), identity understood in the sense of

oneself as self-same [*soi-même*] (*ipse*). . . . Self-sameness, "self-constancy," can escape the

dilemma of the Same and the Other to the extent that its identity rests on a temporal structure

that conforms to the model of dynamic identity arising from the poetic composition of a

narrative text. . . . Unlike the abstract identity of the Same, this narrative identity, constitutive

of self-constancy, can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one lifetime. The

subject then appears both as a reader and the writer of its own life… (*Time* 246; original

emphasis)

Thus, Ricoeur contends that identity can be broken down into two sides, the *idem* or

sameness and the *ipse* or selfhood ("Narrative" 73). Whereas the *idem* encompasses the

continuity of the subject *qua* material reality throughout time, the *ipse* refers to an agent to

which actions can be ascribed: "To begin to unfold the notion of ipseity is to look into the

nature of the question to which the self constitutes a response . . . This question is the

question who, distinct from the question what" (Ricoeur, "Narrative" 75). Martin Klepper

remarks that the *ipse* dimension of identity can be defined as the assignation of an agent to

action, "to whom then the (moral) responsibility for the action may be imputed" (5).

This quality of being more than just a "what" is also voiced by Hannah Arendt, who

reflects on how "otherness" and "distinctness" in humans become "uniqueness," "human

plurality" thus being "the paradoxical plurality of unique beings" (176). Likewise, Arendt

points out that this "unique distinctness" is revealed through speech and action, which are

"the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but

qua men" (176). For Arendt, action and speech are "closely related because the primordial

and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of

every newcomer: 'Who are you?'" (178). It is "[w]ith word and deed [that] we insert

ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth" (Arendt 176). It is

important to highlight that the existence of a "who" does not curtail the existence of a "what"; in other words, even though human beings are more than just mere objects, their actions— that is, the actions attributed to the *ipse*—always depart from an embodied origin.

Our insertion into the human world includes being inserted into time, which is precisely the "one exact point" where *idem* and *ipse* intersect with one another (Ricoeur, "Narrative" 75). The permanence of a self that is also the same over time results in narrative identity. Precisely thanks to our understanding of narrativity as a means to establish connectedness, we create ourselves through lines by which we apprehend personal identity in narrative terms. Put differently, narrative identity is the sort of identity to which humans have access thanks to the mediation of the narrative function (Ricoeur qtd. in Klepper 1). Ricoeur insists that it is in the plot that "we must search for the mediation between permanence and change": "the narrative constructs the durable character of an individual, which one can call his or her narrative identity, in constructing the sort of dynamic identity proper to the plot which creates the identity of the protagonist in the story" ("Narrative" 77).

Therefore, to invoke the idea of narrative identity does not imply to conceive of human life as a totality of events arranged according to a purpose; unlike fictional stories, narrative identities are not crafted or modeled as planned totalities, which is why "narrative identity is not a stable and seamless identity" (Ricoeur, *Time* 248). Rather, narrative identities become cognoscible by imposing order once the events of a lifetime have taken place, and are motivated by the subject's self-perception and knowledge of its own life. Yet, since this knowledge is incomplete, we can never gain access to the whole of our story by ourselves; it is due to the inherent incompleteness and "the elusive character of real life" that "we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively" (Ricoeur, *Oneself* 162).

This is a central aspect of narrative identity: regardless of the organizing potential of narratives, "[l]ife cannot be lived like a story, because the story always comes afterwards, it

results; it is unforeseeable and uncontrollable, just like life" (Cavarero 3). Klepper likewise concedes that narrative identity cannot yield a true or seamless self, nor is it ever stable (7). Still, in my view, this is not problematic in itself. Identity formation is never a goal-oriented process with a clear beginning and end, nor does it result in a neatly defined, monolithic self. Following this line of thought, it is more accurate to regard identity formation as a dialogical dynamic; namely, more similar to Recalcati's inheritance process. If we are to assume that the inheritance process can be in fact equaled to (at least some part of) subjectivity formation, then the role of the father can go beyond familial ties and establish itself as one of the cornerstones in the individual's identity formation process.

Ricoeur reasons that when we interpret ourselves in terms of a life story, we might be at once narrator and character, but never author—only co-author, at most (*Oneself* 160). He further posits that unlike fictions, life narratives lack clear narrative beginnings and ends, at least from the viewpoint of the subject living through it: "there is nothing in real life that serves as a narrative beginning," as the events of early childhood are hazy and "belong more to the history of others —in this case, to my parents— than to me" (*Oneself* 160). In a similar vein, it is not possible to grasp death as the narrative end because "it will finally be recounted only in the stories of those who survive me" (Ricoeur, *Oneself* 160).

Despite being the narrator and main character, my life is never completely mine; my story is never told solely by myself. As Adriana Cavarero brilliantly observes, we also need others to tell us the stories of our lives: "The relational status of identity indeed always postulates *an other* as necessary" (24; original emphasis). In other words, to describe identity as relational, or social for that matter, heavily implies the presence of another to whom we need to relate. This necessity could be labeled as ontological, if we follow Ricoeur: "otherness is not added on to selfhood from outside" but instead belongs "to the tenor of meaning and to the ontological constitution of selfhood" (*Oneself* 317). At the same time, it is

95

also radically ethical, since the self depends on the other—on other "selves"—to constitute itself. Human existence, in its uniqueness "already on the corporeal level," demands that "identity depends upon the presence of others" (Cavarero 21). This provokes that the "unity of the self" becomes "irremediably lost" the moment that the self enters into existence: "The beginning of the narratable self and the beginning of her story are always a tale told by others" (Cavarero 39).

It has been argued in previous sections that paternity has been traditionally represented in terms of absence and asomia. Far from being regarded as problematic, this tendency has been widely accepted, an unspoken rule to be complied with, almost a necessary evil. For, as famously stated by Roland Barthes, "[i]f there is no longer a Father, why tell stories? . . . Isn't storytelling always a way of searching for one's origin, speaking one's conflicts with the Law, entering into the dialectic of tenderness and hatred?" (*Pleasure* 47). It is maybe due to this governing principle that undergirds the paternal function that "we remain disturbed or even haunted by the individual figure" even though "feminism has allowed us to have *seen through* the father to patriarchy" (Bueno et al. 6; original emphasis). Even in representations of father-child relationships, paternal absence often works, both literally and metaphorically, as a sign of the child's "longing for the father as both figure of authority and *author of the child's identity*" (Shostak, *Fictive* 3; emphasis added).

Drawing from Kaja Silverman, Debra Shostak argues that the paternal image lies at the very core of the "dominant fiction" in our culture, a "compensatory psychosocial model" that is "designed to conceal" the inherent and unavoidable lack that is constituent of human subjectivity: "We depend on the dominant fiction for a sense of wholeness and order to fill the lack of completion and coherence we confront once we function within the symbolic order of language that binds us into the social world" (*Fictive* 4). It is no coincidence that the dominant fiction assumes the normative heterosexual family as the kernel unit of the social

order, whose symbolic center is the mythic, patriarchal father and, by proxy, "the white heteronormative father figure" (Shostak, *Fictive* 4). Shostak goes on to denounce the fact that the dominant fiction, inasmuch as "it announces itself fundamentally as a *fiction*, a myth," contributes to the preservation of the social order; as a fiction, it "disguises" the conflation or confusion of the multiple registers for "father," thereby allowing "the subject who has entered into it to disavow recognition of lack" (*Fictive* 4–5; original emphasis). Even though there is nothing negative *per se* in creating fictions to compensate that inherent lack that fuels desire, as Lacan would have it, it is certainly problematic that we just repeat this myth of paternal potency without being aware that it is only that, a myth, a fiction—and without being aware of its nature, either, or its role in preserving the *status quo*.

What can be done to challenge the dominant fiction? To begin with, acknowledging incompletion as an inherent trait of human subjectivity would be essential. The dominant fiction described by Silverman and Shostak projects a fantasy of completion, and thereby contributes to uphold the mirage of self-generation—something that Recalcati warns against as the pitfall of Narcissus, the paradigm that defines hypermodern times. In my view, the dominant fiction can be most effectively undone by rejecting these views and foregrounding the social nature of subjectivity, that is, by fostering models that stress interpersonal bonding and responsibility. And I believe that Recalcati's vision of the paternal function today may prove a good fit, albeit partially. For it to become a fully-fledged alternative to the dominant fiction that underpins the father-patriarchy conflation, there needs to be some readjustments.

The dialogical approach to the father-child bond ought to be completed with a more straightforward take on the ethical underpinnings of said bond. In my view, seeing the father-child bond as a process grounded on narrative identity facilitates the transition toward ethics. The aforementioned dialectical movement from orphanhood to uprooting, and then to the subjectivization of the symbolic debt, is easily transferrable to a plane where the individual's

subjectivity formation (in this case, the child's) is shaped in dialectical exchange with the father's testimony—which, according to Recalcati, is a personal account of how life is worth living. In other words, both the transmission of the symbolic debt and the whole of the inheritance process take the form of storytelling. In this storytelling dynamics, the father arguably tells two stories to the child: the father's, i.e., the testimony, but also the child's— that is, the father becomes narrator of his own story and the story of an other, the child. In accepting to tell these stories, the father contracts an ethical duty toward the child. Judith Butler explains the relation between inter-relational subjectivity formation and ethics as follows:

> If we are formed in the context of relations that become partially irrecoverable to us, then that opacity seems built into our formation and follows from our status as beings who are formed in relations of dependency. This postulation of a primary opacity to the self that follows from formative relations has a specific implication for an ethical bearing toward the other. Indeed, if it is precisely by virtue of one's relations to others that one is opaque to oneself, and if those relations to others are the venue for one's ethical responsibility, then it may well follow that it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds. (*Giving* 20)

This opacity can be overcome when we offer ourselves to others as narrators of their stories, according to Cavarero (63). She argues that "friendship is a specific horizon where this narratability can be meaningfully translated in the act of a *reciprocal narration*" (Cavarero 63; emphasis added). It is my contention that paternity could be a case of asymmetrical narration, in the same sense that Levinas proposes that we are always exposed and responsible before the Other. Put differently, the father acquires a commitment to the child upon accepting the responsibility of passing on its vital testimony, something that contributes

98

to the child's subjectivity formation process. Yet from that moment onward, the father also contracts the parallel responsibility to tell the child its story, becoming a narrator of the child's life.

What about the child's role? For Recalcati, it appears that the symbolic debt that the child subjectivizes does not emanate exclusively from the father, but encompasses the big Other, the symbolic order of culture in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Levinas, on the other hand, claims that the relationship with the child is one rooted in the fecundity of the I, which is "neither a cause nor a domination": "Neither the categories of power nor those of knowledge describe my relationship with the child. . . . I do not have my child; I am my child. Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other . . . *is* me, a relation of the I with a self which yet is not me" (277; original emphasis). This relation of transcendence, projected onto the future, is made possible by means of paternal election: the father chooses the son, marks him apart as unique. For Levinas, the role of the child consists in projecting the father onto the future via this very relation of transcendence, whereas for Recalcati the father bestows the child with the gift of forgiveness and faith, thereby opening the possibility of a future (*Secreto* 96). In other words, the father ought to renounce the paternal (patriarchal) right to treat the child as mere property.

Even though I agree with the conception of paternity as an asymmetrical relation of responsibility, it is worth noting that this asymmetry is mutual—only not symmetrical in its mutuality. The child also contracts a responsibility with the father, which does not however correct the inherent asymmetry that is required in ethics—the same asymmetry that Levinas describes as being endlessly responsible before the Other, always ready to respond to the Other's call. In my view, the child plays this role of endless responsibility by becoming the father's reciprocal narrator, in the manner described by Cavarero. The possibility of reciprocal narration is what marks the father-child bond as truly ethical.

Reciprocal narration is sustained by what Cavarero calls "a relational ethic of contingency," that is, "an ethic founded on the *altruistic* ontology of the human existent as finite" (87; original emphasis). Unlike Levinas's idea of infinite responsibility, for Cavarero the "altruism of uniqueness is neither sacrifice nor dedication," but instead informs "the ontological status of a *who*, which is always relational and contextual, for whom the other is necessary" (90; original emphasis). Yet it is also grounded on the notion of radical, inassimilable difference inasmuch as unique existents cannot be fully contained by any "categorization or collective identity" (Cavarero 90). As Cavarero further adds, "[t]o recognize oneself *in* the other is indeed quite different from recognizing the irremediable uniqueness of the other" (91; original emphasis). It is convenient to recall that Levinas's idea of transcendence through paternity is anchored in the former. This is not too far from Kelly Oliver's claim that the singularity engendered by paternity according to Levinas is the singularity of the masculine (*Family* 52).

If the goal is to disentangle paternity from patriarchy, then assuming a logic that can counter the dominant fiction should become a priority. As argued above, the dominant fiction maintains the illusion of wholeness by presenting the father in the role of author of the child's life. It is possible to argue against that logic by demoting the father to the role of narrator, on one hand, but also by foregrounding the child's role as narrator to the father's story. This shift also contributes to undermining both the fiction of self-generation and the notion of a monolithic self: "within the expositive horizon of the *who*, the individual is not ineffable at all. What ends up being ineffable in all of this is, if anything, a supposed *internal*, profound, hidden nucleus; namely, a mysterious interiority, which the *who*, in its total exposition, does not possess" (Cavarero 89; original emphasis).

Transforming storytelling

So far, I have spoken of replacing the dominant fiction with an outlook that underscores narrative identity and reciprocal narration as ethical countermeasures. To dismantle the notion of the father-as-author would ideally imply divesting the father of his patriarchal halo; however, as I have mentioned before, dialectical exchanges do not take place in a vacuum. And although this idea might appear enticing on paper, it can easily falter when tested in real world circumstances. Our being in the world, albeit unique and deserving of a story of our own, is conditioned by far too many factors that meddle with, and can undermine, our status as embodied agents—to state otherwise would be naïve. Herein lies the peril of a model with a universalizing scope. Commenting on the conditions that make for recognition among individuals, Judith Butler observes that

> if one is to respond ethically to a human face, there must first be a frame for the human, one that can include any number of variations as ready instances. But given how contested the visual representation of the 'human' is, it would appear that our capacity to respond to a face as a human face is conditioned and mediated by frames of reference that are variably humanizing and dehumanizing . . . there is already not only an epistemological frame within which the face appears, but an operation of power as well, since only by virtue of certain kinds of anthropocentric dispositions and cultural frames will a given face seem to be a human face to any one of us. . . . There is a language that frames the encounter, and embedded in that language is a set of norms concerning what will and will not constitute recognizability. (*Giving* 29–30)

By adopting an approach based on a narrative conception of identity and human subjectivity, we ought to be aware of these "frames of reference," as Butler calls them, within which narratives unfold and interact with one another. Furthermore, we ought to realize that such

frames of reference are as ever-present as they are malleable. Just because they exist does not entail that they are somehow fixed or will always remain unaltered. In the words of Kelly Oliver:

> Changing the stereotypes and images that populate our cultural imaginary is an important step in changing our social situations. Our relationships, family structures, and family dynamics change when we can imagine them differently; and as we recreate our families outside the restrictive and unrealistic ideal of the nuclear family, we transform our images of ourselves, our relations to others, and the possibility of love. ("Conflicted" 16)

But how could those changes ever come into fruition in the first place? Here narrative hermeneutics can contribute to shed light on the matter.[7] Jens Brockmeier argues that, as humans, "we constantly interpret the world we live in, including ourselves and others. We ponder alternatives, negotiate meanings, and form opinions that we then re-evaluate and revise when it seems appropriate" (223). But as individual subjects, we are likewise already "entangled in systems of meaning that precede us and shape our experiences, thoughts, and emotions"; these systems "present us with cultural ideals and norms," as guidelines of sorts which condition our interactions and expectations (Meretoja, *Ethics* 74–5; 83).

In this context, narratives articulate human understanding and promote not only self-reflection but also social interconnection, insofar as we engage with the world around us (Meretoja and Brockmeier 6). Put briefly, a narrative can be defined as

> a *culturally mediated practice of sense-making* that involves the activities of *interpreting* and *presenting* someone's experiences in a specific situation to someone from a certain *perspective* or perspectives as part of a *meaningful, connected account*, and which has a

dialogical and a *productive, performative* dimension and is relevant for the understanding of

human possibilities (past, present, and/or future). (Meretoja, *Ethics* 48; original emphasis)

Hanna Meretoja distinguishes between narratives as activities and practices of sense-making and, on the other hand, narratives as accounts that are communicated, artifacts "with a material dimension rooted in a particular medium" (*Ethics* 48–9). The dominant fiction described by Silverman and Shostak fits the former definition. As subjects with agency, we can develop our personal interpretations, but those interpretations will be mediated and, in a way, partly shaped by "cultural narratives," that is, "interpretative models [that] affect how we experience things" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 48–9). It is "[t]hrough our entanglement in narrative webs" that we get implicated in "social structures, which our actions as narrative agents perpetuate, shape, or question" (*Ethics* 50). Precisely, these narrative webs "also perpetuate certain ways of structuring society and legitimize unequal distribution of possibilities by strategies of naturalization" (*Ethics* 52). Those narratives that are "culturally dominant" become "largely automatized": "Without being aware of it, we interpret and reiterate the cultural models of sense-making ingrained in our narrative unconscious" (*Ethics* 82). The dominant fiction can be therefore understood within this framework as a constructed yet naturalized practice of sense-making.

Now that the status of the dominant fiction has been clarified, one needs to stress that it should not be mistaken for a teleological account of sorts, nor a crafted discourse tailored to meet a particular agenda. This and other fictions, or cultural narrative webs, "only exist through individual interpretations" whereas, in turn, "individual subjects are constituted in relation to cultural narrative webs" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 74). In other words, we are born into already established narrative webs and learn how to interpret them, each interpretation being unique insofar as it depends on the subject's previous experience. This claim is not, in fact, too far from the Lacanian observation that we are all born into language.

103

That paternal absence has been to some extent naturalized as the default mode to represent father figures does not entail that it is the *only* way that fathers have been or will ever be represented. In fact, as Meretoja contends, "we are not mere effects of cultural narrative webs" because we have agential power to challenge and subvert those narratives we live by (*Ethics* 81): "We are unaware of the narrative unconscious that regulates our narrative interpretations, but we can become partly aware of it, and when that happens, elements of the narrative unconscious can become an active part of our narrative imagination" (83).

As a whole, the cultural models of narrative sense-making of any given society are contained in its narrative imaginary. Meretoja divides the narrative imaginary into two sides: narrative unconscious and narrative imagination. Many of the cultural mechanisms in our imaginary affect us unconsciously, hence this denomination. Meretoja signals that these mechanisms "are easily reified so that they conceal their nature as human interpretations" precisely because they are perceived as natural facts, not mediated interpretations (*Ethics* 19). Cultural models of narrative sense-making influence human modes of experience, yet do not determine them altogether (*Ethics* 11). Sense-making and understanding remain an open path thanks to narrative imagination, which allows us to devise new possibilities amid the narrative webs in which we are enmeshed. Similarly, Jens Brockmeier understands narrative imagination "as a form and practice of human agency" and emphasizes that narrative imagination "comes as a fundamentally social enterprise," given that to reach "beyond one's limits implies reaching out to difference" (227; 228).

Meretoja argues that narrative fiction can contribute to our narrative imagination by cultivating our sense of the possible (*Ethics* 20). As we encounter new narratives, these might either reinforce our narrative unconscious and thereby our interpretative practices, or by contrast they can challenge it (*Ethics* 91): "through enriching our hermeneutic resources, storytelling practices also open up new possibilities" (93). This capacity to enrich our

hermeneutic resources is, according to Meretoja, one of the potentially ethical aspects of narratives and storytelling in general (*Ethics* 93). Yet it is also true that our power to challenge, not to mention modify, said narratives is directly proportional to what Meretoja calls "narrative agency":

> Narrative hermeneutics envisages the relationship between narrative sense-making models and the individual subjects who interpret them as fundamentally *dialogical* in the sense that while the subjects become who they are in relation to the cultural models, these models only exist through being interpreted. . . . Reinterpretations can resist and challenge culturally prevalent narrative models, *although such challenging is considerably more difficult for precarious subjects than for those in privileged positions of power*. (*Ethics* 11; emphasis added)

Depending on the subject's degree of narrative agency, which is in turn conditioned by the position of power that the subject occupies, naturalized narratives can be more or less successfully contested. Meretoja is adamant that a dialogical conception of subjectivity and narrative needs "to acknowledge the *normativity*—and hence the potential for oppression—inherent in cultural narratives," as they "present us with cultural ideals and norms" that are already codified as being "possible, likely, desirable, or acceptable for us—given our gender, race, class, age, looks" (*Ethics* 83; original emphasis). Far from blindly accepting that all narratives are inherently positive, she warns that they "can lead us to repeat harmful emotional patterns that we have blindly inherited from our family and cultural traditions," whilst she also concedes that "they can engage us in reinventing the world together with others" (*Ethics* 299).

For Meretoja, those narratives that reinforce naturalizing strategies accommodate themselves to a subsumptive logic of understanding, whereas those that challenge these same naturalizing strategies fall under the category of a non-subsumptive logic:

> Narrative practices function subsumptively when they reinforce problematic stereotypical sense-making practices. Such practices tend to hinder our ability to encounter other people in their uniqueness and perpetuate the tendency to see individuals as representatives of the groups to which they belong according to gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, class, and so on. Non-subsumptive narrative practices, in contrast, problematize simplistic categorization of experiences, persons and relationships, as well as control-oriented appropriation of what is unfamiliar, foreign and other. They can function as counter-narratives that consciously challenge stereotype-reinforcing hegemonic narrative practices and provide us with tools to see the singularity of individual lives beyond generalizing narratives. (*Ethics* 107)

There is not a magical recipe that automatically positions a narrative within the non-subsumptive order of narrative understanding. For Meretoja, there is "a continuum from blind perpetuation of the narrative unconscious . . . to an active, explorative narrative imagination that is characterized by critical self-reflection, ethical inquiry, and a creative exploration of new modes of being, thinking, and experiencing" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 91). The pole of "blind perpetuation" is characterized by the appropriative functioning of narrative understanding, which consists in "subsuming new situations under what is already known" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 91). Subsumptive practices "present themselves as if mirroring the natural order of things, and in this reified form, they cannot be subjected to critical discussion" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 19). By contrast, the explorative end is characterized by a type of "narrative understanding [that] functions non-subsumptively and dialogically, in the mode of a hermeneutic circle whereby

encountering new situations changes one's preconceptions and narrative models of sense-making" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 91). Meretoja concludes that:

> Self-aware narrative imagination that critically engages with the cultural narrative unconscious nourishes the process of actively constructing one's own narrative identity instead of remaining entrapped in an identity imposed on oneself from without. Social conditions can foster or impede such active narrative agency: they can empower or paralyze. (*Ethics* 91)

This notwithstanding, by becoming aware of "the historical processes that have shaped the narrative traditions in which we are entangled" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 91) we can begin to dismantle and question those same traditions. According to Meretoja, "[l]iterary narratives can amplify our narrative agency and the degree of co-authorship we have in our lives, helping us move from being enslaved by the blind perpetuation of the dominant unconscious toward greater agentic power and a richer narrative ethical identity" (*Ethics* 106). Nevertheless, she is also aware of the fact that "not all narratives provide us with ethically valuable tools for self-reflection" and, on a broader note, that "not all self-reflection leads to ethical action or makes us better persons" (*Ethics* 106). With this in mind, let us now move on to consider the role of literature in challenging the father-patriarchy conflation.

Filial tales: towards a new ethics of paternity

So far, I have explored the more theoretical aspects that buttress the father-patriarchy conflation behind the dominant fiction of paternal might, as well as the possible alternatives that would allow us to effectively undo such a conflation. To recapitulate, conceiving human subjectivity as social and hence relational contributes to undermining the association between

fatherhood and power. However, as Beth Kowaleski-Wallace points out, it is also true that "we implicitly fear that the signifiers representing [the father] might be empty":

> we seek to protect *ourselves* by perpetuating the myth of paternal omnipotence, since our own 'castration' is made most apparent when we are forced to recognize the limitations of the father and his language. . . . If neither 'wholeness' nor 'autonomy' can be part of the human experience, then it is not the father who blocks or denies us access to such completion, for 'wholeness' is not his to give us. (309; original emphasis)

Yet if we were simply to acknowledge the made-up nature of wholeness and autonomy referred to human subjectivity, together with the fact that nobody, not even the father, can have access to it, then it would become easier to question the dominant fiction and the very foundations on which it is grounded. However, this would represent too profound a paradigm shift to occur all of a sudden. Even though the concepts that I have presented so far (notions such as 'social subjectivity,' 'narrative identity' or 'narrative understanding') are helpful to the discussion, our greatest asset for profound change lies in the small, individual acts of narration—not necessarily limited to the literary plane, but more broadly referring to any storytelling act in which individuals effectively engage.

I have previously stated that the promise of reciprocal narration is what makes the father-child bond truly ethical. But what exactly is the role of both father and child as authors of those narrations? Let us bear in mind that the inheritance process understood as one of identity formation reveals that the father passes on its legacy to the child, who is then responsible for subjectivizing—i.e., assimilating—this testimony. In other words, the child's identity formation is conditioned to receiving the father's testimony, which is not just the father's but encompasses the symbolic debt of the Other. If we were to assume an outlook in which the child struggles to become the author of its own life, we could interpret this process

through Harold Bloom's notion of the anxiety of influence, and argue that the child struggles for control over its own life story by misreading, and then discarding altogether, the father's life story. Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, one can never truly manage to become the sole author of one's own life.[8] It is interesting to note that the projection of autonomy and self-generation that originates in the anxiety of influence is firmly entwined with the same notions that undergird the dominant fiction. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe, "the patriarchal notion that the writer 'fathers' the text just as God fathered the world is and has been all-pervasive in Western literary civilization, so much that . . . the metaphor is built into the very word, *author*, with which writer, deity, and *paterfamilias* are identified" (4; original emphasis). Further on, they note that:

> In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. More, his pen's power, like his penis's power, is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim. . . . Thus, because he is an author, a "man of letters" is simultaneously, like his divine counterpart, a father, a master or ruler, and an owner: the spiritual type of a patriarch, as we understand the term in Western society. (6–7; emphasis added)

The idea that the patriarchal author creates "a posterity to which he lays claim" is not too far from Levinas's idea that the child is a promise of futurity for the father because it is through the child that the father can live on. Authority, authorship, and property are thus closely entwined within the father-patriarchy conflation, as Gilbert and Gubar also contend: "The roots of authority tell us, after all, that if woman is man's property then he must have authored her, just as surely as they tell us that if he authored her she must be his property" (13).

In order to unravel the entwinement of authority, authorship, and property, I propose conceiving the paternal-filial bond through a variation of the anxiety of authorship, together with the notion of reciprocal narration. It is my contention that the child also battles "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her" (Gilbert and Gubar 49). Yet what the child creates is not its own selfhood, but the father's: by becoming author of the father's story, the child is able to embrace a productive role that does not alienate it from the father, but instead pulls it closer into the father's influence. In a way, the father's passing on the testimony to the child in the inheritance process serves as a model for future acts of reciprocal narration. In offering back a story for the father, the child inadvertently narrates itself as well, because creating a narration for the Other we come from ultimately equals an act of self-narration.

This game of mirroring narrations consolidates the child's sense of selfhood in a non-alienating manner, and respects the relational nature of subjectivity according to which we can never be (direct) authors of our own life lest we fall into the trap of self-generation. I am not suggesting that the child somehow creates a finite, clear-cut version of this narrative; instead, it would be more accurate to describe this process as an ongoing dynamic that constantly reshapes itself, in the manner of a hermeneutic circle. Of course, it is worth remarking that this narrative exchange does not exclusively involve the father-child pair, nor does it take place in a social vacuum:

> A dialogical approach to narrative identity emphasizes that our actions and identities are never entirely our own. We live in a social world in which all meanings—including those of our actions and identities—are intersubjectively negotiated and are not determined by any single individual. . . . According to the dialogical conception of subjectivity and identity that emerges from this line of thought, narrative identity, agency, and subjectivity take shape in a dialogic relation to cultural webs of narratives. (Meretoja, *Ethics* 74–5)

It is precisely in relation to these webs of narratives that individual acts of storytelling can foster significant changes. Let us bear in mind that narrative identities can enable agency and promote narrative imagination, but they can likewise "diminish our possibilities, particularly when they are imposed on us and linked to the essentialist idea of fixed, stable identities to which individuals are predetermined through their ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, and so on" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 93). Namely, the dominant fiction that undergirds the father-patriarchy conflation effectively diminishes our possibilities in more than just one way. It presents us with the myth of completeness, wholeness, and makes us long for it when it is in all regards unattainable. However, through storytelling it is possible "to connect with other people, share experiences, and establish new communities and modes of relationality" by creating a "relational space" that Meretoja calls "the narrative in-between": "The narrative in-between shapes what is thinkable and sayable, visible and audible, experienceable and doable within different subject positions" (*Ethics* 117).

In my view, there are narratives that follow the non-subsumptive logic of understanding that can indeed destabilize and challenge the dominant fiction that has been naturalized in many other narratives within the subsumptive logic. Meretoja notes that, from an ethical viewpoint, "monological narratives that invite immediate identification through naturalizing strategies tend to be more dangerous than ones that encourage awareness of multiple perspectives and of narrative constructions" (*Ethics* 131). Despite this, monological narratives are worth exploring insofar as they may reveal the intricacies of the dominant fiction upon closer examination. After all, "[t]he ethical potential of narrative fiction lies more in the questions it poses and in shaping or refining our sense of the complexities of the moral space we inhabit than in the answers it proposes" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 135). Thus, it is not really relevant that narratives dealing with fatherhood and father figures present us with

outstanding ethical characters or morally sound scenarios. If we displace the focus from the ethical value of the father figure in itself to the ethical value of the father-child relationship, it becomes possible to develop new strategies to undo the father-patriarchy conflation.

By following the structure of Recalcati's inheritance process, we can formulate an alternative to the dominant fiction in which paternity is conceived as a promise of reciprocal narration. The most positive asset of this configuration, in my opinion, lies in the indeterminacy of the father's role: in order to be ethical, the father does not need to fulfill any particular precondition other than being willing to engage in the act of reciprocal narration. It is still necessary for the father to be a particular, hence embodied, subject, since the act of reciprocal narration is itself grounded on a conception of human subjectivity as inherently relational and perpetually exposed in its exteriority. Nevertheless, this configuration is open enough so as not to take for granted that the father's body is a cisheteronormative-compliant male body. In addition, since this configuration also contemplates that these acts of reciprocal narration occur amid cultural narrative webs, between individuals whose narrative agency is conditioned by them, the particularities of such exchanges are not lost to a false projection of universality that blurs and homogenizes those experiences.

In sum, the solution to challenge the dominant fiction and, by extension, undermine and ultimately dissolve the conflation between paternity and patriarchy, lies in small, individual acts of narration that can assume multiple forms. I would like to stress that the most effective way to undo this conflation should not be based on replacing the dominant fiction with an alternative version, but rather on shattering its homogeneity, thereby allowing myriad smaller fictions to spring and develop. Despite the greater potential of non-subsumptive narrative practices for questioning this conflation, we should not downplay the role of a subsumptive narrative practice insofar as its examination can indeed shed light on the naturalizing strategies employed to sustain the father-patriarchy conflation.

Now I turn to examine particular examples of how narratives that explore, or somehow tackle, the issue of fatherhood can in fact foster new narrative in-betweens, subvert associations that are already reified in the cultural narrative unconscious, or simply make us reflect on the naturalizing strategies that so often go unnoticed. On a similar note, the question arises as to whether non-subsumptive narrative practices present any particular traits, formally speaking, that set them apart from subsumptive narrative practices. These and other topics will be conveniently addressed in subsequent chapters.

Notes

1. At the beginning of *The Mother's Hands*, Recalcati argues that patriarchal ideology has reduced women to the experience of motherhood, codifying their experience as one of sacrifice and self-denial (*Manos* 12). He also draws attention to patriarchy's simplistic reduction of "femininity" to an antithetical choice between motherhood and womanhood, the former being regarded as positive, whereas the latter is usually depicted in a negative light (Recalcati, *Manos* 13).

2. Recalcati constructs his ideal of contemporary motherhood using the same faux dichotomies and commonplace images of maternity that have been pervasive under patriarchal domination. For instance, he argues that women ought to find a balance between motherhood and womanhood, and denounces that in hypermodern times women tend to deny the former in order to privilege the latter (*Manos* 16). His description of the mother figure is filled with references to normative, cisgender feminine attributes and, on another layer, the symbolic interpretations associated with these biological traits. These include, among others, the waiting and patience associated with pregnancy, unconditional love, stubbornness (especially when it comes to protecting and even saving one's child), bodily intimacy, an emphasis on care, and women's greater capacity to wait and be patient on the basis of the experience of maternity (Recalcati, *Manos* 25–30; 31–2; 33–5; 45; 48–50; 68–9; 77).

3. See Kelly Oliver's *Family Values*, especially chapter 3, "No Body Father" (pp. 119–94) for a comprehensive overview of the characterization of male bodies in Western philosophy.

4. This idea is likewise advocated by Recalcati in *The Mother's Hands*.

5. I have decided to focus on Levinas due to the similarities existing between his and Recalcati's approach to the paternal relationship as a promise. In particular, the use of the father-son relationship as a

113

blueprint for all ethical relations that is present in the early Levinas, up to *Totality and Infinity* and the resemblance between Recalcati's inheritance process and the hypostasis of the later Levinas of *Otherwise than Being*. I am aware that the critiques directed at Levinasian ethics are not extensive to Recalcati's proposal just on the basis of this purported resemblance. In spite of this, I do believe that Recalcati's lack of precision in his characterization of the embodied status of the father, which has been addressed before, could raise similar concerns to the ones expressed here.

6. The face is described as a nudity "disengaged from every form, but having meaning by itself . . . appearing not as a privation . . . but as an always positive value" (Levinas 74). The face has its roots in the physical body, but it transcends all physical boundaries because it stands for infinity, "the infinity of the other whose otherness exceeds the limits of any order whatsoever" (Waldenfels 66).

7. Building on a number of disciplines, notably the philosophical hermeneutic tradition and narrative ethics, narrative hermeneutics posits that "human understanding is mediated . . . through sociocultural circumstances, history, and signs—particularly, language" and assumes "the interpretive nature of human understanding," which is "inseparable from its linguistic, social, and cultural mediatedness" (Brockmeier and Meretoja 4–5). Human understanding follows the structure of a hermeneutical circle: an endless process of interpretation and reinterpretation that is "subject to dialogue, conflict, and contest" and is always rooted in ever-changing historical and social contexts (Brockmeier and Meretoja 5–6). The project of narrative hermeneutics sets out "to explore how and to what degree acts of meaning are realized by narrative practices and how individuals, through these practices, bind themselves into their cultural worlds while binding the cultural world into their minds" (Brockmeier and Meretoja 7). A detailed survey of narrative hermeneutics can be found in Brockmeier and Meretoja, and also in Meretoja's *The Ethics of Storytelling*, particularly its introduction (pp. 1–42).

8. Bloom's anxiety of influence runs counter to the dialectical movement of Recalcati's inheritance process: the "child" also receives and partly assimilates the legacy of the "father," but then proceeds to expel that legacy in favor of solipsism, thus embracing the fantasy of self-generation. For the poetic cycle to be complete, the "child" is forced to alienate itself from the "father" lest its own merit is mistaken for the other's. The dialectical exchange is forcefully interrupted and avoided so that the "child" can become autonomous— only that autonomy and wholeness are truly unattainable without the Other.

CHAPTER 3 – The Father's (a) Void: Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude*

The Invention of Solitude begins with the event of the father's death. Faced with his sudden disappearance, Paul Auster sets his mind on capturing what hehasleft behind, however scarce: "I thought: my father is gone. If I do not act quickly, his entire life will vanish along with him" (6). From the start, the father figure is a mystery to crack, a puzzle whose pieces need quick assemblage lest they vanish all of a sudden. The setting reminds us of the outline of a detective tale. The father's death does not trigger grief in a conventional way: Auster does not "shed any tears," but is shocked by the realization that his father "had left no traces" (6).

In the first section of the memoir, "Portrait of an Invisible Man," Auster attempts to connect the fragments that will eventually reveal his father's true self. However, there is a dark underside to filial attempts at reconstruction. In *Bureau of Missing Persons*, Roger J. Porter scrutinizes several memoirs dealing with paternal-related mysteries, and draws attention to how often the search to discover the father threatens to take over the lives of the writers, who become obsessed with accumulating evidence and strive to regain control over the story that has evaded them (100). Auster struggles to capture his father's personality in writing only to find that the imperious urgency to register his story is not going to make the process any easier: "So great was my need to write that I thought the story would be written by itself. But the words have come very slowly so far" (34). The problem, as he soon finds, stems from "the fundamental quality of his being," which is none other than absence itself (Auster 6).

At first sight, *The Invention of Solitude* appears to fit the mold of literary paternity described by Robert Con Davis insofar as it departs from, and tries to compensate for, paternal absence. In his commentary on postmodern paternity in Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*, Davis argues that it is "essential to the concept of the symbolic father" that particular fathers fail so that "the place [they leave] empty can indicate the symbolic function and not the particularity of the agent of that function" (179). Further on, he argues that, "[f]rom the structural point of view," it must be "father absence, not presence, that signifies the father: the father is lost so that his meaning can be found symbolically" (180).

Yet it is precisely the question of presence which drives Auster's exploration of the paternal principle, as Debra Shostak convincingly argues:

the subject's presence hinges on embodiment as the ground of language, being, and meaning. To the degree that the father figure—biological or surrogate—is the most singular influence on the son by the fact of his material presence or absence, the son's own embodiment becomes central to the narrative's inquiry into subjectivity. . . . Yet much of Auster's fiction struggles with the contradiction between a poststructuralist epistemology of reality as constructed by the subject through language and the acknowledgement of materiality and the real of referential history. Auster draws towards this contradiction by installing the problem of absence in the novels—whether the father's body, the son's, or both. . . . The body must become aware that it *is* a body to be "real." Specifically, the narrative configurations according to which Auster's fictive sons long to fill the lack of a father insist on a nonlinguistic presence, an "out there" that must be narrated so as to free the subject. Subjectivity, that is, requires a history, a story of the body in time. (*Fictive* 115–7; original emphasis)

This tension between absence and presence is the driving force within *The Invention of Solitude*. Many examples of biographical writing begin with parental death and the need to

conjure the missing figure again via writing. These are often cases in which the child addresses the things left unsaid by the parent, sometimes using the authority implicitly contained in authorship to find closure. In some aspects, this is a process that belongs to the realm of mourning; however, it might be possible for the child to bend the limits of what is ethical by choosing to disclose long-kept family secrets. Sometimes the child crosses the line of the morally questionable and assumes the role of a ventriloquist through which the missing parent speaks—only that it is the child's words through the parent's mouth that we hear.

Ventriloquism, as we will see, is a major preoccupation of Auster in his memoir. Nevertheless, this is not the only case in which the ethical dimension of telling is brought to the fore in *The Invention of Solitude*. Shostak remarks that in Auster's act of writing his father's story, as well as in recounting his "engagement of surrogate intellectual fathers and devoted efforts towards a compensatory fatherhood" with his own son, the book "vouches . . . for a generational imperative in fathering—the urgent need for a psychological and ethical presence" (*Fictive* 118; original emphasis). Two distinct layers of fathering are stacked in the memoir: on one hand, the absent father-as-structural-device Davis refers to, and, on the other hand, the absent father-as-individual whose paternal shortcomings Auster tries to mend by becoming a present father for his son Daniel.

In this chapter, I seek to examine the complex image of fatherhood that stems from Auster's attempts at grappling with his father's double absence—as individual and paternal principle. My analysis will begin with the Arendtian concept of *who*, as well as with Adriana Cavarero's notion of reciprocal narration (see chapter 2), in order to shed light on the problematic of absence in relation to subjectivity and identity formation. This will lay the foundation for a closer examination of the paternal role from an ethical standpoint, in particular its entwinement with the authorial role. I contend that Auster's efforts to reconstruct the absent father challenge the dominant fiction insofar as the resulting tale

exposes the cracks in the idea of paternal wholeness and might. By recourse to narration, Auster demonstrates that the intergenerational bequest of solitude being passed on from fathers to sons can be altered, thereby proving that "the son saves the father" (Auster 146). In resignifying solitude, Auster employs the other gift his father had inadvertently bestowed on him, that is, invention.

Narrating (other) selves in the dark

The father's death occurs and the son can only react by shouldering the weight of his legacy. In this case, the father's legacy is nothing but a deafening silence. Faced with the inscrutability of such a bequest, Auster tasks himself with the responsibility of invention. At the beginning of the book, Auster acknowledges this burden: "I knew that I would have to write about my father. I had no plan, had no precise idea of what this meant. I cannot even remember making a decision about it. It was simply there, a certainty, an obligation that began to impose itself on me the moment I was given the news" (Auster 6). What leads him to carry out this Sisyphean task is the desire to come to terms with his past, to find some closure in the very act of writing. Yet his resolution backfires:

> There has been a *wound*, and I realize now that it is very deep. *Instead of healing me as I thought it would, the act of writing has kept this wound open*. . . . Instead of burying my father for me, these words have kept him alive, perhaps more so than ever. I not only see him as he was, but as he is, as he will be, and each day he is there, invading my thoughts, stealing up on me without warning. . . . *A feeling that if I am to understand anything, I must penetrate this image of darkness, that I must enter the absolute darkness of earth*. (Auster 34; emphasis added)

The urge to save whatever is left of the father is nonetheless smothered by the overwhelming nothingness the author encounters. Auster finds himself engulfed by a never-ending process that threatens to annihilate him. Instead of shedding light on the father's mystery, the attempts at gaining control of the story undermine the child's own grasp over his own self.[1] The investigation becomes an emotional, mental, and even physical burden: "No sooner have I thought one thing than it evokes another thing, and then another thing, until there is an accumulation of detail so dense that *I feel I am going to suffocate*" (Auster 34; emphasis added).

The main problem that Auster needs to sort out is not so much the lack of material and emotional evidence as much as the lack of a (coherent) story. For Laura Barrett, the finding of "hundreds of photographs discovered in his father's bedroom closet" together with a blank photo album titled "This is Our Life: The Austers" provides "the consummate metaphor for the narrator's childhood: random moments which fail to cohere in any meaningful narrative" (101–2). Auster longs for a coherent narrative that serves the double goal of filling in the gaps of the father's story and releasing him from his filial obligation to deliver such a narrative. Maybe the responsibility to do so is all the more pressing due to the knowledge that there is none.

Indeed, Auster acknowledges that his father never cared to produce an authentic narrative for himself: "What people saw when he appeared before them, then, was not really him, but a person he had invented, an artificial creature he could manipulate in order to manipulate others. He himself remained invisible, a puppeteer working the strings of his alter-ego from a dark, solitary place behind the curtain" (Auster 16). However, the question lingers as to why Samuel Auster would refuse to engage with others so that a narrative of the self could emerge—a narrative that could be shared with, and completed by, others in the

way Cavarero defines reciprocal narration (see chapter 2). As we will see later, the negative of Samuel to render himself visible to others is a consequence of childhood trauma.

Yet the question remains whether it is possible to "get beyond the father's absence," as Barrett puts it (103). Auster's certainties are shattered as he recognizes that the story he is trying to tell "is somehow incompatible with language": "the degree to which it resists language is an exact measure of how closely I have come to saying something important, and that when the moment arrives for me to say the one truly important thing (assuming it exists), I will not be able to say it" (Auster 34). The solution, as Barrett posits, implies telling the story "obliquely—through allusions and adumbrations" (103). William Dow reaches a similar understanding and notes that "the reconstitution of his father's character and Auster's memories of his father do not take the form of a conventional totality, a definitive portrait" (274). Instead, he resorts to "deferral" and accrual as tools for knowledge, which for Dow "evinces a trust in knowledge as a slow accretion, a series of emotional and intellectual proximities" (274).

In this regard, Auster concedes that "each fact is nullified by the next fact . . . each thought engenders an equal and opposite thought" (65). To this he refers to "the anecdote as a form of knowledge," which is the only possible means to write about a man who could not otherwise be pinned down: "Impossible to say anything without reservation: he was good, or he was bad; he was this, or he was that. All of them are true. At times, I have the feeling that I am writing about three or four different men, each one distinct, each one a contradiction of all the others" (Auster 65). In embracing epistemological slipperiness, Auster manages to challenge traditional conceptions of the self as a monolithic entity, as Dow suggests: "*Invention*'s notative form, although denying a self-evident center, emphasizes the notion that the self is not one self but many selves formed as a collection of moments of conscious glimmers, transcending, subverting, or feeding our understanding" (275).

Nevertheless, the fact remains that there might be nothing worth uncovering despite the writer's efforts, as Porter suggests: thus, the difficulty with writing this story "stems from a growing belief that there is no subject, no center to get a hold of" (102). The only thing standing between the father and oblivion is Auster himself, as creator of his own father—i.e., the creator behind this narrative version of Samuel Auster. The longer the creator narrates, the longer the father will live. Choosing to go back to silence entails not so much killing the father as it implies that the father goes back to not being, ceases to be—again:

> In spite of the excuses I have made for myself, I understand what is happening. The closer I come to the end of what I am able to say, the more reluctant I am to say anything. I want to postpone the moment of ending, and in this way delude myself into thinking that I have only just begun, that the better part of my story still lies ahead. No matter how useless these words might seem to be, they have nevertheless stood between me and a silence that continues to terrify me. When I step into this silence, it will mean that my father has vanished forever. (Auster 69)

In my view, the resulting portrait emerges precisely from the desire to interrupt the silence. Like Porter aptly suggests when commenting on the trick photograph reproduced on the cover of the book, the son attempts to bring his father back from the dead narratively (105). The efforts to do so include going through a fair amount of material evidence, "facts and artifacts, collections of past deeds as well as residual clothing, letters, and photographs" from which the writer fails to cohere a single narrative, ending up instead with "a collection of images" (Barrett 99). The idea that "there is no coherence" in *The Invention of Solitude,* but "merely an accumulation of fragments," is likewise foregrounded by Porter, who also notes that the evidence Auster has access to is "either absent or insignificant," or worse, "illegible," "undecipherable" (103–4).

The issue of legibility and recognition is a key element to understand the portrait of the father. It seems apparent that Auster never managed to establish a meaningful bond with his father due to the fact that Samuel Auster repeatedly failed to recognize him. For reciprocal narration to be possible in the first place, one must acknowledge its interlocutor *qua* subject. Hannah Arendt writes that "men show who they are" in their acting and speaking "and thus make their appearance in the human world," establishing an opposition between the "disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is" (179). It is often the case that the *who* "remains hidden from the person himself" whilst it appears "clearly and unmistakably to others" (Arendt 179). According to Arendt, "[t]his revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness" (180; original emphasis). It may also be the case that the *who* remains unrevealed, since "nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed or word" and therefore "must be willing to risk the disclosure" (180). However, Arendt specifies that the *who* "can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity" (179; original emphasis).

Samuel Auster took great care in concealing himself so that the disclosure Arendt speaks of never happened. It can be argued that he is a solitary figure because he did not reveal himself in his words and deeds, having adopted a meditated detachment from any form of intimacy: "For a man who finds life tolerable only by staying on the surface of himself, it is natural to be satisfied with offering no more than this surface to others" (Auster 15). He is described by his son as being "immune to the world," "a block of impenetrable space in the form of a man" (7). Auster defines him as solitary, but later on he adds: "not in the sense of being alone . . . Solitary in the sense of retreat. In the sense of not having to see himself, of not having to see himself being seen by anyone else" (17). Being seen by someone else, in the sense proposed by Arendt, would reveal the *who*; the countermeasure to avoid exposing

himself in such a way consists precisely in adopting an absolute form of passivity, thereby severing all ties with his environment.

The father thus appears as unreachable and unreadable: a figure so aloof that he could not become Auster's reciprocal narrator during his lifetime. He explains that his father's "absence" constitutes his earliest memory of him, and reflects on the nature of his longing as he seeks his recognition:

> From the very beginning, it seems, I was looking for my father, looking frantically for anyone who resembled him. . . . Later memories: a craving. . . . I mushily went on hoping for something that was never given to me . . . It was not that I felt he disliked me. It was just that he seemed distracted, *unable to look in my direction*. And *more than anything else, I wanted him to take notice of me*. (Auster 21–2; emphasis added)

Even the smallest, dullest, most unimportant interactions between them—tiny demonstrations of mutual recognition—shake Auster and leave him "nearly crushed . . . with happiness" (22). This lack of meaningful moments translates into the conviction that Samuel Auster was never himself among others but put up a made-up persona that concealed his true self:

> Because the domain of the other was unreal to him, his incursions into that domain were made with a part of himself he considered to be equally unreal, another self he had trained as an actor to represent him . . . The principle was to say as little as possible . . . What people saw when he appeared before them, then, was not really him, but a person he had invented, an artificial creature he could manipulate in order to manipulate others. He himself remained invisible, a puppeteer working the strings of his alter-ego from a dark, solitary place behind the curtain. (Auster 16)

123

In addition to the difficulty of capturing the vanishing presence of the dead father, Auster struggles to "enter another's solitude" only to realize that it is an impossible task: "If it is true that we can ever come to know another human being, even to a small degree, it is only to the extent that he is willing to make himself known . . . Where all is intractable, where all is hermetic and evasive, one can do no more than observe" (20). Thus, he resorts to observation in order to try and unearth "another man, a man hidden inside the man who was not there," although he concedes that "the trick of it, then, is to find him. On the condition that he is there to be found" (Auster 21).

Throughout "Portrait," Auster struggles to invent a *who* for his father with whom a dialogue, even if a posthumous one, can take place so that some closure may be reached. But where to start? Arendt notes that "[t]he moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a 'character' in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us" (181; original emphasis). The finding of his father's photographs leads Auster to believe that his *who* can finally be apprehended: "I found them irresistible, precious, the equivalent of holy relics. It seemed that they could tell me things I had never known before, reveal some precious hidden truth . . . The fact that many of these pictures were ones I had never seen before . . . gave me the odd sensation that I was meeting him for the first time" (Auster 14).

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes affirms that "[e]very photograph is a certificate of presence"; and even though the photograph "does not necessarily say *what is no longer*," it confirms "for certain *what has been*" (87; 85; original emphasis). This confirmation, as Barthes notes, is "false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, shared hallucination (on the one hand 'it is not there,' on

124

the other 'but it has indeed been')" (*Camera* 115). Auster's finding is important to him because the photographs "seemed to reaffirm my father's physical presence in the world, to give me the illusion that he was still there" (14). The pictures help Auster "fill in gaps, confirm impressions, offer proof where none had existed before" (15). Not only do they confirm the father's existence at some point in time, making him more real, but they also contribute to project the illusion of liminality, as if they maintained a tenuous balance between life and death:

> *I had lost my father. But at the same time, I had also found him*. As long as I kept these pictures before my eyes . . . it was as though he were still alive, even in death. Or if not alive, at least not dead. Or rather, *somehow suspended*, locked in a universe that had nothing to do with death, in which death could never make an entrance. (Auster 15; emphasis added)

Nevertheless, as Barthes aptly suggests, the photograph is sterile insofar as it does not allow one to "transform grief into mourning": "And if dialectic is that thought which masters the corruptible and converts the negation of death into the power to work, then the photograph is undialectical: it is a denatured theater where death cannot 'be contemplated,' reflected and interiorized" (*Camera* 90). Still, Auster makes a supreme effort to study all the photographs, "absorbing the least detail, the most insignificant shadow, until all the images had become a part of me. I wanted nothing to be lost" (14). Even though the photographic medium is in itself undialectical, Auster retains all he can through painstaking observation so that the still image of his father acquires life—that is, dialectically speaking—as a story that slowly comes together. In other words, it is the writer's mediation that can transform the grief into mourning by turning an undialectical (photographic) portrait into the dialectical "Portrait of an Invisible Man."

The difficulties of inventing the *who*: trauma and the broken *idem/ipse*

The Invention of Solitude is concerned with biographical as well as autobiographical invention, insofar as it attempts to capture Auster's self as well as his father's. Even though Auster plays the role of biographer in the first section, Derek Rubin observes that Auster himself concedes that "his desire to know his father cannot be satisfied" (64). The father is an elusive presence that resists Auster's attempts to pin him down. Despite the photographs that attest to the father's existence, his sudden death has left him suspended in the liminal space between remembrance and oblivion. It is up to Auster to assemble the scattered pieces together and infuse some coherence into them, thereby creating a portrait—or something akin to it.

Here I want to argue that it is the son's narrative that holds the father's self together; once the story ends, the father's semblance of a self will likewise come to an end, that is, it will cease to be. In the future, he will only remain as a character in his son's writing. In other words, unlike a photograph—whose mere existence attests to the referent's reality, even as a *has-been*—literary representation does not automatically validate the veracity of the referent. It might, however, manage to capture something akin to the *punctum* in photography; that is, the subjective quality whereby a photograph is able to shake us, to prick us, according to Barthes's description (*Camera* 47; see also Adams 33). It is not by chance that in spite of the hundreds of photographs found by Auster, only two have been reproduced in the book. These two photographs—the trick photograph taken in Atlantic City and the mended family portrait—exemplify the powerful, almost overwhelming, quality of the *punctum*. In fact, the function fulfilled by these two photographs and their respective *punctum* in the book is to become the through-lines that structure and anchor the otherwise elusive paternal figure.

In both cases, the *punctum* has to do with some form of absence. The father's self is repeatedly described as intimately connected to solitude understood as an inescapable void:

"He never talked about himself, never seemed to know there was anything he *could* talk about. It was as though his inner life eluded even him" (Auster 20; original emphasis). Samuel Auster is said to have been a "man without appetites" (Auster 17), "implacably neutral on the surface," a man who "lacked feeling, who wanted so little of others" (21) and was"[i]mpenetrable. And because of that, at times almost serene" (66). His impenetrability affects others as much as himself: "His refusal to look into himself was matched by an equally stubborn refusal to look at the world" (Auster 26). The father averts his gaze from the world, himself, and most painfully, from his child, being "unable to look in [his] direction" (Auster 22). Uncannily in tune with these descriptions is one of the two photographs reproduced in the book: a photograph showing five men sitting around a table who all turn out to be Auster's father, only the father seen from different angles thanks to a mirror trick:

> There are five of him there, and yet the nature of the trick photography denies the possibility of eye contact among the various selves. *Each one is condemned to go on staring into space, as if under the gaze of the others, but seeing nothing, never able to see anything*. It is a picture of death, a portrait of an invisible man. (Auster 33; emphasis added)

We are told that Auster's father "would stare a thing in the face, nod his head, and then turn around and say it was not there" (Auster 26). This attitude, however, also includes himself as he refuses to engage in any meaningful connection with either his own self or other subjects. In this regard, the photograph cannot keep the dead alive, as Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir suggests (250), because arguably the dead were never alive in the first place. Gudmundsdóttir further argues that:

> Not only is it a photograph of a man who was invisible to others, but also of a man who sees nothing, who will never be able to see anything. So instead of affirming his 'physical

presence' in the world, this is a photograph of death. . . . This is the central theme of Auster's writing on his father. At first the photographs seem to bring him back. Auster believes he has 'found' him, just as by writing on him he thought he would 'find' him, but all he finds is an invisible man, one who was impossible to know and the photograph becomes a 'picture of death' as if he had always been in some sense 'dead', never 'present.' (252)

The *punctum* of the trick photograph is the idea of perpetual solitude as a sign of death—or rather, death in life. In other words, Auster's father is forever trapped within his isolation, forever kept aloof from others as much as from himself. Both notions, as later becomes apparent in "The Book of Memory," are closely entwined. In fact, Auster notes that his father's radical absence had seamlessly transitioned into his death: "Even before his death he had been absent, and long ago the people closest to him had learned to accept this absence, to treat it as the fundamental quality of his being. . . . The nature of his life had prepared the world for his death" (6). Later on, at the beginning of "Book," A.'s existence seems to mirror that of Samuel Auster inasmuch as he feels as though "he were forced to watch his own disappearance" (Auster 81). The mirroring images of Samuel Auster and A. are connected by a legacy that consists in solitude and a certain tendency to invisibility. A. fears he will become an invisible man himself, locked up in his room, not too differently from the way in which Samuel Auster was secluded in his house.

The family house and the writer's locked room share, at least initially, some common features. The former conveys the father's interiority; according to Auster, "negligence" was what governed him, "not memory" (9). His father is not one to cling to melancholic fits or nostalgic evocation of times past, but simply drifts through time, not making any attempts to preserve the past. Similarly, A.'s life "no longer seemed to dwell in the present" (Auster 79). He experiences temporality in a somewhat distorted fashion: "Even as he stood in the present,

he felt himself to be looking at it from the future, and this present-as-past was so antiquated that even the horrors of the day . . . seemed remote to him" (Auster 79).

The distorted perception of temporality, in the case of the father, signals a deeper fracture within the subject. The succession of events in his life, events that do not leave an imprint on him, appear to be perpetually bound to the present. In other words, the existence of a foundational trauma that has hindered Samuel Auster's subjectivity formation is in turn the reason behind his refusal to narrate himself and seek himself in the other. Personal identity, Paul Ricoeur affirms, "can be articulated only in the temporal dimension of human existence" (*Oneself* 114). Sameness or *idem* presupposes permanence in time, but this dimension is also common to selfhood or *ipse* (*Oneself* 117; 118). Ricoeur goes on to argue that human character "is me, myself, *ipse*; but this *ipse* announces itself as *idem*," that is, as a selfhood that is continued over time (*Oneself* 121). The two factors that contribute to buttress permanence in time are, for Ricoeur, the notion of character and the keeping of one's word as the means to convey self-constancy, in turn inscribed in the sphere of the *who*, never the *what* (*Oneself* 121; 123). The character relates to diverse sets of acquired identifications, in the manner of the Freudian superego. These acquired identifications can only emerge in a relational context as "the identity of a person or a community is made up of these identifications with values, norms, ideals, models, and heroes, in which the person or the community recognizes itself. Recognizing oneself *in* contributes to recognizing oneself *by*" (Ricoeur, *Oneself* 121; original emphasis).

In the case of Samuel Auster, neither his character nor his word connects him to the realm of the other. By preventing any meaningful relationships to develop, Samuel Auster severs himself from the relational sphere that is paramount to human subjectivity formation. In turn, his solipsism provokes a temporal fracture: persistence over time, the cornerstone of narrative identity that marks the union of *idem* and *ipse*, thus comes undone. As Auster

reveals in "Portrait," the original traumatic event behind this fracture is the murder of Samuel Auster's father by his mother when he was a child (37). This event, made known to Auster through a series of fortuitous coincidences, is the key that explains his father's mystery: "I do not think [these facts] explain everything, but there is no question that they explain a great deal. A boy cannot live through this kind of thing without being affected by it as a man" (38). It is, nonetheless, a foundational event for Auster himself: "I read these articles as history. But also as a cave drawing discovered on the inner walls of my own skull" (39).

The second photograph reproduced in *The Invention of Solitude*, a family portrait of Auster's grandmother, father, and uncles, captures the disturbing realization of the hidden trauma finally coming to light. Here the *punctum* is none other than the phantasmagorical presence of Auster's grandfather revealing himself:

The first time I looked at the picture, I noticed that it had been torn down the middle and then clumsily mended . . . I assumed the picture had been torn by accident and thought no more about it. The second time I looked at it, however, I studied the tear more closely and discovered things I must have been blind to miss before. I saw a man's fingertips grasping the torso of one of my uncles; I saw, very distinctly, that another of my uncles was not resting his hand on his brother's back, as I had first thought, but against a chair that was not there. And then I realized what was strange about the picture: *my grandfather had been cut out of it. The image was distorted because part of it had been eliminated*. My grandfather had been sitting on a chair next to his wife with one of his sons standing between his knees – *and he was not there. Only his fingertips remained: as if he were trying to crawl back into the picture from some hole deep in time, as if he had been exiled to another dimension*. (Auster 35–6; emphasis added)

For Adams, the *punctum* is precisely the portrait of an invisible man, the grandfather, within another portrait of an invisible man, the father (33); to this I would add that this game of nesting dolls is prolonged in "Book," where it becomes apparent that there is a third portrait of an invisible man comprising the two former ones: the portrait of A. Like the trick portrait of the father in Atlantic City, the structure of the book emerges as a séance of sorts in which the Auster men—in fact, the Auster fathers—are finally reunited and (seemingly) engaging in some kind of exchange. However, upon closer examination, we discover that this is just another trick. Auster uses his father's and grandfather's portraits as mirroring images of his own self, since he needs to invent a reciprocal narrator for himself.

The history of the Auster men seems to repeat itself as they all seem condemned to disappear. While trying to piece together his father's portrait, Auster discovers that his grandfather also became an invisible man as a consequence of his having been erased from the family history. Adams aptly points out the similarities between Auster's description of his grandfather's "coming back into the picture, crossing back from the inner to the outer surface," and A.'s description of his own liminal state between being and disappearing at the beginning of "Book" (33). Three generations of Auster men thus appear trapped within the imprecise plane delimited by solitude. Solitude stands out as the bequest that is being passed on from father to father as an intergenerational burden. Auster's grandfather is merely an absence, a phantom presence. His son chooses to make himself disappear in order not to deal with the traumatic burden of his murder, but this decision likewise affects his capacity to establish relations with others and ultimately isolates him. Finally, Auster reflects on the meaning of solitude associated with family trauma and attempts to break the cycle by recontextualizing solitude not as a form of isolation, but as a means of reaching out to others in its own terms. This invented solitude is the legacy that Auster intends to pass on to his son Daniel.

Before I move on to examine the ways in which Auster remakes solitude in "Book," I would like to discuss other formulas of coping with solitude that are mentioned in "Portrait." I have already explained the refusal of Samuel Auster to engage with others, and how this leads him to a state of isolation wherein his self, the *who* for Hannah Arendt, is never revealed—neither to others nor to himself. In my view, the fracture between *idem* and *ipse* is what prevents all possible communication between him and his son. John D. Barbour remarks that Samuel Auster's "coldness and remoteness created a lot of uneasiness and pain in his son," who nonetheless struggles to do justice to his father's trauma ("Judging" 75). Still, his insight into the family's traumatic past does not lessen Auster's continuing sense of having been damaged by his father's remoteness, according to Barbour ("Judging" 76). This is what ultimately prompts Auster's reaction to redefine solitude and hence his relationship to his father (Barbour, "Judging" 76).

The trauma of the father's murder reverberates throughout Samuel Auster's life, although he succeeds at his painstaking efforts to conceal it, keeping his son in the dark. Despite not knowing the reason behind it, Auster affirms that there was an "anger" inside his father, "[l]ike the house that was well ordered and yet falling apart from within" (32). In order to avoid this potentially destructive force within him, he is said to have nurtured "a kind of automatic behavior that would allow him to pass to the side of it," relying heavily "on fixed routines [that] freed him from the necessity of looking into himself when decisions had to be made" (Auster 32). Thus, he resorted to the kind of passive behavior that Arendt describes, a way for him to evade presenting himself as a *who* in front of others.

Avoidance and deception are the coping mechanisms ingrained in Samuel Auster's version of solitude. Incapable of integrating the traumatic event into his own subjectivity, he chooses to run away from it instead. Similarly, Auster's grandmother also runs away—quite literally, as it turns out—yet she struggles to start anew despite everything that has happened.

The family was constantly on the move, and this "nomadism," as Auster calls it, "walled them off entirely" (51). It is highly symbolic that the only present she ever gave Auster was "a second- or third-hand children's book, a biography of Benjamin Franklin" (55), the quintessential American self-made man. In some ways, the Austers also made themselves from scratch after Auster's grandfather's murder. After the trauma of the father's death, the image of the family that stuck together is strikingly similar to that of the band of brothers described in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*:

> The four brothers stuck together. There was something almost medieval about their loyalty to one another. . . . I think of them not as four separate individuals but as a clan, a quadruplicate image of solidarity. . . . My father's feelings were unbending: he never said a word against any of his brothers. Again, it was the other defined not by what he did but by what he was. . . . Brotherhood was the first principle, the unassailable postulate, the one and only article of faith. Like belief in God, to question it was heresy. (Auster 52)

The mother is nonetheless an almost patriarchal figure amidst this band of brothers: "At the center of the clan was my grandmother, a Jewish Mammy Yokum, a mother to end all mothers" (Auster 53). She is described as someone who "lived for her children" but also as a "tyrant," a person who "demanded allegiance and . . . got it" (Auster 53). Life goes on for the Austers, but the uncertainties of this nomadic stage of their lives leaves a profound mark on Samuel: "he learned never to trust anyone. Not even himself" (Auster 54).

The only thing that appears to anchor Samuel to his life is work: "Up early every morning, home late at night, and in between, work, *nothing but work*" (Auster 56; emphasis added). Even though this might coincide with the hegemonic ideal of the breadwinner who strives to provide for his family (see chapter 1), Auster remarks that his father did not seek money itself, "but what it represented . . . a way of making himself untouchable. . . . Money

in the sense of protection, then, not pleasure" (56). His outlook, which makes him prone to sympathize with his tenants, situates him in a difficult position regarding his son. Auster ponders on his father's perception of him only to conclude that he must have been as intangible to his father as his father was to him:

> I realize now that I must have been a bad son. Or if not precisely bad, then at least a disappointment, a source of confusion and sadness. It made no sense to him that he had produced a poet for a son. . . . His most common description of me was that I had 'my head in the clouds,' or else that I 'did not have my feet on the ground.' Either way, *I must not have seemed very substantial to him, as if I were somehow a vapor or a person not wholly of this world*. In his eyes, you became part of the world by working. By definition, work was something that brought in money. If it did not bring in money, it was not work. *Writing, therefore, was not work, especially the writing of poetry*. (Auster 64–5; emphasis added)

In sum, it appears that one of the only features that anchored Samuel Auster to the plane of reality—the only thing that made him *visible*, it could be said—was his perception of money as a saving device, a guarantee of protection and safety. Conversely, his son's choice of becoming a writer distanced him from the pragmatist outlook of his father. Still, we are told that "some kind of bond remained between us" (Auster 65); even if his father did not understand or share Auster's kind of chosen solitude, the life of the writer, he attempted to keep in touch with him by reading his works. He imagines him reading his poems in the public library, "hunched over words that must have been incomprehensible to him," and adds that he has tried to "keep this image in mind, along with all the others that will not leave it" (Auster 65).

Writing is a link, albeit tenuous, that connects Auster to his father in an unexpected fashion. In spite of their different, almost opposite stances regarding work, father and son

might have had a chance of bonding via literary creation. In a rare moment of shared intimacy, Auster recalls an occasion on which his father yielded to his petition and told him a story from his youth:

> Tell me a story. It must have begun like that. And because he was not doing anything . . . he did just what I asked, launching into a story without missing a beat. I remember it all so clearly. . . . He told me of his prospecting days in South America. It was a tale of high adventure, fraught with mortal dangers, hair-raising escapes, and improbable twists of fortune . . . His language was flowery and convoluted, probably an echo of the books he himself had read as a boy. *But it was precisely this literary style that enchanted me. Not only was he telling me new things about himself . . . but he was telling it with new and strange words. This language was just as important as the story itself.* . . . Its very strangeness was proof of authenticity. (23; emphasis added)

The content of the story does not really matter when compared to the form; somehow, it is the form, the "new and strange words" Samuel Auster uses to craft his tale, which legitimates the content and not the other way around. Even after realizing, years later, that the story must have been made up, Auster confesses that he was reluctant to let go because it gave him "something to hold on about my father," some sort of "explanation for his mysterious evasions, his indifference to me" (23). The power of literary language repairs, to some extent, the communication breakdown—even if truthfulness is the price to pay.

Upon remembering an occasion on which his father went to see him play baseball, Auster recalls his realization that nothing he did could impress his father: "Whether I succeeded or failed did not essentially matter to him. I was not defined for him by anything I did, but by what I was, and this meant that his perception of me would never change, that we were fixed in an unmoveable relationship, cut off from each other on opposite sides of a

135

wall" (25). The image of the wall reinforces the ideas of radical separation, thwarted recognition, and the incapability of Samuel Auster to become the reciprocal narrator that his son seeks. The alternative to stagnation, as I will explain in what follows, comes from invention—with words that possess the power to move what was static before.

The invention of the self

In "The Book of Memory," the second part of the memoir, Auster carries out a twofold task. First, he needs to reinvent, or rather, re-signify, what solitude stands for; he ought to do so for his son's sake. Second, he needs to put an end to the threat posed by solipsism and the possibility of becoming invisible, which he fears will be his unavoidable fate, following in his father and his grandfather's footsteps. Both sides of this task are ultimately a quest to redefine fatherhood from the father's perspective as much as from the child's. In turn, the redefinition of fatherhood appears to be inextricably linked to the notion of selfhood. Auster's identity cannot be reduced to his status of being someone's child or someone's father, but both aspects do constitute the twin pillars on which his identity rests—or, at least, the rendition of his identity that is constructed in *The Invention of Solitude*.

After having attempted to pin down his father's identity in "Portrait of an Invisible Man," Auster hides himself behind a third person narrator that will grant him a certain degree of detachment from the events described in "The Book of Memory." Nevertheless, this is just another trick; in fact, not too different from Samuel Auster's trick photo in Atlantic City. By shifting from a first-person narrator to a third-person narrator, called simply A., the focus seems to move away from the narrator we have encountered in the first part of the book. Auster voluntarily becomes invisible in the text so that his self—or rather, the self we encountered in the first part—can be effectively disassembled.

136

However, Auster's disappearing behind the curtain that is A. can also serve as an indicator that the character-narrator struggles to pin down his own self just as he could not pin down his father's self. Throughout "The Book of Memory," A. seems to be losing touch with the outside world, as it is repeatedly stated that his life "no longer seemed to dwell in the present" (Auster 79; 86; 91): "Even as he stood in the present, he felt himself to be looking at it from the future, and this present-as-past was so antiquated that even the horrors of the day . . . seemed remote to him" (79). Away from his family, voluntarily confined in a room where he sits down and writes, A. cannot even understand himself anymore: "He writes until he has covered the entire page with words. Later, when he reads over what he has written, he has trouble deciphering the words. Those he does manage to understand do not seem to say what he thought he was saying" (Auster 79).

In this state of isolation that includes isolation from others as well as from his very self, A. engages in the task of examining his memory. Introducing a third-person narrator guarantees that A.'s isolation is preserved, as the gap between (implied) reader and narrator only broadens, as well as the distance between the narrator and the events being narrated. In spite of its desired impersonality, third person-narration in "The Book of Memory" is a sham, one we readers are perfectly aware of, since we have just finished reading the first part of a book written by Paul Auster whose narrator is also named Paul Auster. It is not by chance that one of the main intertexts in *The Invention of Solitude* happens to be the story of Pinocchio, a puppet. A. fulfills the function of being Auster's wooden boy, a projection through which Auster vicariously experiences the configuration of selfhood that is being composed in the book. In other words, if selfhood is constantly in the making, it would be pointless to try to pin it down in a definitive manner. A. emerges as the identity being composed by someone who works from behind the scenes, the written legacy of a man who

invents a self that suits his needs, not necessarily the real man, but an invention created by him.

It is precisely through the use of a third-person narrator that the importance of truthfulness and veracity is further downplayed. Up to this point, in the first section of the book, truthfulness had been an apparent concern. In "Portrait," Samuel Auster emerges as a figure composed by tiny fragments and anecdotal knowledge. His background story evades the author, who is forced to work with whichever scraps he manages to gather. The resulting portrait underscores that truthfulness is nothing but a chimera. Some things in Auster's account may be true, factually speaking, yet the focus is not put on whether some fragments make more sense than others, nor does the story try to reproduce an exact chronology of his father's life. Instead, Auster is trying to make sense of his father (who he was to him, what role he played in the formation of his own identity) so that he can later make sense of himself. That is to say, instead of seeking to validate memories in an attempt to unveil some objective truth, *The Invention of Solitude* as a whole is constructed as a practice of sense making.

Once this distinction is drawn, it becomes easier to understand the shift from first person-narration to third-person narration as the tentative self being created—*invented*—by the author. The resulting self that stems from this process is a product of thorough reflection: "He *decides* to refer to himself as A." (Auster 79; emphasis added). A. is the sole dweller in the physical room "at 6 Varick Street" (Auster 80), but as it turns out, he is one among many that populate the room that is his memory. As a double location for both the physical body of A. engaged in the act of writing and the mental projection of A.'s memory engaged in the act of remembrance, the room is not "hermetic," but is instead open and connected to the outside world: "To follow with [Giordano] Bruno's notion that the structure of human thought

corresponds to the structure of nature. And therefore to conclude that everything, in some sense, is connected to everything else" (Auster 80).

A. exists as the sum of the memories being collected and written down in the successive books of memory that compose the overarching "Book of Memory." He willfully embarks on a quest to understand the "world," which has now "shrunk to the size of his room for him" (Auster 83). Like the endless repetitions of a fractal image, the study of his own subjectivity will lead him to uncover the secrets of the outside world, and the other way round: everything happens to be interconnected. He is driven by the certainty that if he manages to understand those secrets within the confines of his room, he will be able to transfer that understanding to other aspects and places of his life as well: "he cannot be anywhere until he is here. And if he does not manage to find this place, it would be absurd for him to think of looking for another" (Auster 83).

Studying his self in the present leads A. to revisit his memories, a task which turns out to be marked by the materiality of the world he attempts to conjure. The spatial character of memory is frequently invoked—in fact, much more so than its temporal dimension. Memory is defined as "the space in which a thing happens for the second time" (Auster 87) and, as such, cannot be separated from the physical world in which the space exists: "Memory as a room, as a body, as a skull, as a skull that encloses the room in which a body sits" (93). The connection between the inner world of memory and the outer physical world is open both ways: "To wander about in the world, then, is also to wander about in ourselves. That is to say, the moment we step into the space of memory, we walk into the world" (Auster 178).

Given that memory prompts a thing to happen for the second time, we tend to experience the act of remembrance as *déjà vu* rather than an actively accessed moment stored away in our mind. In other words, memory is often activated by means of association: something reminds us of something else. Throughout "The Book of Memory," the impression

of interconnectedness is conveyed by different formal devices, most notably a feature I call rhyming concepts. This notion is sometimes expressed through the repetition of words or syntactic structures, such as in "As in the phrase: 'he wrote The Book of Memory in this room'" (Auster 80) and "As in the phrase: 'she [Anne Frank] wrote her diary in this room'" (87). Often, the structures being repeated are rather similar, but not identical; likewise, they can be placed close to each other, but generally not too close. The recurrence with which rhyming concepts occur creates a hazy sensation of *déjà vu*—or rather, *déjà lu*—in the reader. Rhyming concepts also become apparent in the repetition of themes (e.g., stories having to do with almost impossible coincidences) or characters (e.g., Anne Frank, Pinocchio, or Jonah).

In my view, rhyming concepts represent A.'s attempt to recreate the way memory works, hence stressing through formal aspects that everything is in fact interconnected. Moreover, I think that rhyming concepts fulfill the function of demonstrating the futility of coincidence by showcasing that meaning is always fabricated, that it is the result of sense-making practices. Throughout "The Book of Memory," A. aims to emphasize that coincidence in itself is meaningless; or, rather, coincidence is only the byproduct of invention. Meaning is constructed *a posteriori*, as we try to make sense of seemingly related events. A. reveals himself to be a skillful artificer, fabricating a complex tapestry of crossed references whose ultimate goal is to prove that fate can be rewritten as many times as desired.

As a boy, A. becomes aware of the power of words once he realizes "he could play with words" (171), but also that his playing "was not so much a search for the truth as a search for the world as it appears in language":

> Language is not truth. It is the way we exist in the world. . . . A. would contend that it is
> possible for events in one's life to rhyme as well. . . . If these two elements were to be
> considered separately, there would be little to say about either one of them. The rhyme they
> create when looked at together alters the reality of each. . . . [T]wo (or more) rhyming events

set up a connection in the world, adding one more synapse to be routed through the vast plenum of experience. (Auster 172–3)

A.'s vision of rhyming events requires a narrator/authorial figure of some kind that unearths the connection, or rather, arranges the elements in a certain order. The agent who first discovers the similarities is responsible for their interpretation, which is to say, for their creation.

The solitude of the writer

At the beginning of "The Book of Memory," A. is alone in a room. As we soon discover, his isolation began after his divorce nine months ago. He has been cut off from the family, like his grandfather before him. Confined in his room on Varick Street, he is haunted by the thought that ours is a world "in which everything is double, in which the same thing always happens twice" (Auster 87). In order to get rid of this frightful prospect, A. revisits his memory in search of clues that demonstrate he is in control of his own narrative. As seen before, if coincidence is nothing but the purposeful invention of links and parallelisms, then there must be a creative force behind it. The writer thus emerges as a figure capable of invention, that is, an individual with the capacity to create meaning, endowed with the authority that comes with it. In this sense, "The Book of Memory" chronicles the invention of the inventor.

It has been suggested that the history of the Auster men seems to repeat itself as they all seem condemned to disappear. While trying to piece together his father's portrait, Auster discovers that his grandfather became an invisible man as a consequence of his having been erased from the family history. Adams aptly points out the similarities between Auster's description of his grandfather's "coming back into the picture, crossing back from the inner

141

to the outer surface," and A.'s description of his own liminal state between being and disappearing at the beginning of "Book" (33). Three generations of Auster men thus appear trapped in the imprecise plane delimited by solitude.

Solitude stands out as the bequest that is being passed on from father to father as an intergenerational burden. Auster's grandfather is merely an absence, a phantom presence. His son chooses to make himself disappear in order not to deal with the trauma caused by his murder; this decision nonetheless affects his capacity to establish meaningful relations with others and ultimately isolates him. Finally, Auster reflects on the meaning of solitude associated with family trauma and attempts to break the cycle by recontextualizing solitude not as a form of isolation, but as a means of reaching out to others in its own terms. As I have previously mentioned, this (re)invented solitude is the legacy that Auster intends to pass on to his son Daniel.

Let us take a closer look at A.'s task to rewrite the family's burden. John D. Barbour points out that "Solitude is both the cause of estrangement between Auster and hisfather and a common experience that links them," although this version of solitude is seen in a negative light ("Solitude" 19). A more positive version of solitude is created in the second part of the book that counterbalances those negative aspects: "[Auster] interprets solitude in a more positive way by showing its potential role in fostering creativity and its very different place in Auster's relationship to his own young son" (Barbour, "Solitude" 21). Thus, even though he is alone in the room, his memories provide him with the pieces that he will need to complete his task.

Where does one begin to unravel and re-signify the past? For A., the question of paternity is central to this mystery. As both father and son, A. feels compelled to examine what it means to fulfill either of these roles; yet this time he searches for examples of positive solitude, potential reciprocal narrators that he will need to be alone without becoming

detached from the world. Some of these figures are friends and acquaintances, such as S.; others are artists and writers with whom A. shares a sort of kinship defined by their lonesome attempts at exploration from an enclosed space.

All these potential reciprocal narrators are intertwined in A.'s memory. In a way, each of these narrators is a constituent part of A.'s self insofar as he has chosen them to become his reciprocal narrators. Let us bear in mind that reciprocal narrators, according to Adriana Cavarero, were needed in order to unearth parts of ourselves that are otherwise impossible to access. We require the other's act of narration to shed light on those hidden corners of the self. A.'s list of reciprocal narrators in "The Book of Memory" includes secluded authors like himself (Anne Frank, Hölderlin, Emily Dickinson), secluded characters (Jonah, Pinocchio's father), fathers who lost their sons way too early (Mallarmé and his son Anatole, Rembrandt and his son Titus), and also alternative father figures like S. A kaleidoscope emerges from these connections that are being created to fit into A.'s narrative.

A.'s selection of reciprocal narrators corresponds to his needs to make sense of some of his personal experiences. He accesses the repository of narratives he has had access to and selects those that fit his experience. In a way, it is as if those narrators lent their stories to A. so that A. can make sense of things that he would not otherwise know how to put into words.[2] The combination of those different stories ultimately gives shape to A.'s unique story. Pascal Bruckner contends that:

> Through writing we can choose those fathers to compensate for our own, discover a spiritual link, go beyond ourselves. Memory is immersion in the past of all those others who comprise us. The narrator distinguishes, one by one, these voices that speak through him that must be quieted before his true inner voice can be heard. But this goal is impossible to attain: the palimpsest self, like an ever-unpeeling onion, resists categorization. (31)

I agree with Bruckner that memory inevitably leads us to the "others who comprise us." It is in this sense that A.'s memory journey in "Book" reveals who he is by presenting us the myriad others that comprise his self. And whilst it is also true that the "palimpsest self," as he calls it, cannot be pinned down, I believe that the process undergone by A. allows him to process his legacy, that is, his bequest of solitude made palimpsest-self. After having tried to make sense of his father and their mutual relationship in "Portrait," it is through distance—the distance introduced by third-person narration, but also by the sheer variety of the characters that populate "Book"—that A. is finally able to subjectivize his inheritance.

Let us bear in mind that, according to Massimo Recalcati, for an individual to come to terms with their inheritance they must process it and make it their own. Either rejecting the past from whence we came or embracing it without reservation will cause the process to fail. Throughout "Portrait," Auster has struggled to make sense of his father; but it is only by a twofold movement of uprooting and return that he manages to embrace him and his bequest. The uprooting is meant to put some distance between the individual and their inheritance, something that A. manages to do by resorting to stories other than his father's, stories that nonetheless allow him to understand him and the relation they had by proxy, but also by using a third-person narrator, as discussed in the previous section.

It is only after the separation that the author can go back and subjectivize his inheritance. A. does so by resignifying solitude, and thereby fatherhood: by assimilating solitude as a positive feature, Auster is capable of accepting his father's bequest on his own terms. Only once this process is completed can Auster become a father in his own right. In Bruckner's view, this involves "giving birth to his own parent through words," a process whereby "the author repairs a broken communication and makes it possible for himself, in turn, to become a father" (27). For Debra Shostak, the son's creation also allows him to establish a healthy distance with the trauma of paternal absence:

Sam [Auster] does not escape melancholia, but the narrating Paul [Auster] has room to do so, to differentiate himself from his object . . . Auster concludes with the "sweet and ferocious little body" (69) of his own sleeping son, Daniel. In doing so, he moves beyond solitude toward the *other*, projecting a future in which Daniel reads these pages—a record of the past now safely enclosed in its writing and available to understanding. . . . Paul must arrive at two insights: he must learn the history of the lost other who is his father; and he must recognize that he has himself become a lost object of desire, a missing person. Only then can he detach from the repetition of that absence, accept his loss, and reconstitute a provisional self by embracing the unpredictable present in the figure of his own son. ("Country" 70–1; original emphasis)

The key to overcoming the trauma of paternal absence lies in Auster's capacity to break away from his father's harmful version of solitude. In this regard, this attitude bears great resemblance to the Levinasian idea that the son represents the promise of futurity for his father. Samuel Auster's detachment failed to project that futurity into his son, for trauma alters temporality in a profound manner.[3] However, by confronting trauma and writing it out, Auster is able to reverse his own trauma so that solitude becomes a productive force.

Throughout this process, Auster's son Daniel represents a pole of attraction that slowly guides Auster back to the outside world. Rubin contends that the worse Auster feels, "the more intensely he yearns to come to terms with himself; yet the deeper he digs, the more elusive the self becomes as he increasingly discovers more of the outside world of which the self is made" (66). This is acknowledged by A., who concludes that memory involves "an immersion in the past of others, which is to say: history—which one both participates in and is a witness to, is a part of and apart from" (139). I agree with Lily Corwin that it is through memory and writing that Auster is placed "squarely, actually, in history, alongside other

humans" (77). Writing, in particular, is understood by Corwin as "a reaching out, a dialogue with readers, an affirmation of someone out there other than the self. . . . We can, and must, write about life, about death, about memory, about solitude, but the writing is the meaning itself, not the search for meaning" (77).

Likewise, Corwin maintains that it is through an I-I dialogue ("the I of A. and I of memory") that A. is able to "remember himself, and thus to create an identity" (75). She further argues that, in Rimbaud-esque style, "[a] certain kind of solitude forces one to see oneself as other; the I that tells of the solitude is not the same I that experiences it" (Corwin 76). In my view, this dialogue does take place, only that the other interlocutor is not A. but all the reciprocal narrators he has unearthed in "The Book of Memory." In fact, A. borrows the stories of those characters in an attempt to make sense of himself and his relation with others. It could even be argued that all those narrators (Anne Frank, S., Hölderlin, Pinocchio, Jonah, Van Gogh…) provide him with other models of solitude different from that which he intimately knows. The filtered combination of all those narratives results in none other than A., that is, the version of Auster's self that is being recorded and preserved in "The Book of Memory."

For Corwin, the solipsistic "I-I dialogue" that Auster maintained with himself "is renounced in favor of writing, an uncertain but joyful and necessary form of relationship with history and with other humans" (Corwin 78). The conclusion of the book, "Remember," becomes not only an imperative to record what once was so that it does not disappear altogether, but an open window towards life with others: when we remember, we inadvertently become surrounded by others, others that co-write us, co-author us.

Fathers, sons, saviors

The act of remembrance can be in itself a traumatic, painful process. Nevertheless, this is something that Auster does not (only) for himself, but for his son Daniel. It is interesting to note that, as Shostak affirms, "the matter of recognition" is central "to the father/child relationship constructed by the dominant fiction" in *The Invention of Solitude* (*Fictive* 19). Even though (re)creating some events—or absence thereof—is indeed a challenging task to undertake, Auster nonetheless insists on the importance of recognition: he does recognize both his father and his son, that is, he tries to establish a dialogue with them so as to emerge as a potential reciprocal narrator to them. In the case of his father, this is obviously a posthumous task, but one that nonetheless heals the wound left open. Barbour considers *The Invention of Solitude* to be a symbolic act of reconciliation, a search for common ground between the estranged father and the solitary son:

> How does the son save the father? In *Pinocchio*, by rescuing him from the whale. But Auster's father is dead; a reunion can come about only in a symbolic form. Auster's memoir represents a symbolic rescue and reunion with the author's father. In it he explores a bond he shares with his father: their common experience of solitude. Auster knows the pain of solitude, and this gives him, if not forgiveness, at least empathy for his father's isolation. Moreover, he "saves" not only his father but himself as well by giving solitude a new and positive meaning. He "becomes real" as he discerns in solitude not soul-destroying isolation, but an experience that can foster experiences of imagination, creativity, and even intimacy with his own son. Auster saves his father and himself by inventing a new meaning for solitude. ("Judging" 76–7)

For Auster to save his father (and himself), he has to emerge as the authorial power whose story will restore the order he seeks. In this case, the order he seeks can be found in another

story, that is, *Pinocchio*. As mentioned earlier, *Pinocchio* stands out as the key intertext with which *The Invention of Solitude* converses. Auster is a Pinocchio of sorts insofar as he feels not fully in control of his actions: the crushing weight of his father's bequest makes him wonder whether he will vanish, too. This can only be prevented by his seizing (discursive) control in order to save his father and himself, as Barbour points out in the quotation above.

Auster insists on the idea that "the son saves his father" (146). Like Pinocchio saving Gepetto from the belly of the shark, Auster inadvertently seeks redemption, too.[4] Reuniting with his father and saving him from the belly of the shark is what makes Pinocchio turn into a real boy in the original story. Due to his father's aloofness and detachment, Auster has never managed to turn into a "real boy," a real son who fulfills his filial duty to his father by rescuing him from the sheer darkness of solitude and miscommunication. It is through his act of creation—of invention—as a writer that he is finally able to reach his father, albeit posthumously.

Yet all of Auster's authorial power and will to save his father would amount to nothing without his son Daniel. Following his divorce, A. finds it "intolerable" to even think of being "separated from his son" (Auster 107). Later on, when his son is diagnosed with pneumonia, he ponders the possibility of the boy's death: "Merely to have contemplated the possibility of the boy's death . . . was enough for him to treat the boy's recovery as a sort of resurrection, a miracle dealt to him by the cards of chance" (Auster 115). Following his son's recovery, he resumes the translation of some poems that Stéphane Mallarmé had written "at the bedside of his dying son, Anatole" (Auster 116). It is through the activity of translating the poems that A. fully comprehends his paternal role:

> The act of translating [Mallarmé's poems] was not a literary exercise. It was a way for him to relive his own moment of panic in the doctor's office that summer: it is too much for me, I cannot face it. For it was only at that moment, he later came to realize, that he had finally

grasped the full scope of his own fatherhood: the boy's life meant more to him than his own; if dying were necessary to save his son, he would be willing to die. And it was therefore only in that moment of fear that he had become, once and for all, the father of his son. Translating those forty or so fragments by Mallarmé . . . had become the equivalent of offering a prayer of thanks for the life of his son. (Auster 116–7)

The son saves the father. Perhaps for the first time, Auster realizes that his son's life is so precious to him that he would do anything for him, even dying. So far, Auster occupied the role of the son that ought to save the father, but now he is ready to assume the passive role— the father waiting to be saved by the son, trusting that the son will rescue him from the darkness. It is in this desperate act of faith towards the son, and not the father, that Auster understands the scope of paternal redemption: it works either way. Once he learns to be a father, he is ready to become a son—which will in turn help him in his paternal role. This continuous process can be articulated within the frames of sense-making provided by the stories of others.

At last, it all converges in the act of writing:

Every book is an image of solitude. It is a tangible object that one can pick up, put down, open, and close, and its words represent many months, if not many years, of one man's solitude. A man sits alone in a room and writes. Whether the book speaks of loneliness or companionship, it is necessarily a product of solitude. A. sits down in his own room to translate another man's book, and it is as though he were entering that man's solitude and making it his own. But surely that is impossible. *For once a solitude has been breached, once a solitude has been taken on by another, it is no longer solitude, but a kind of companionship.* Even though there is only one man in the room, there are two. (Auster 145; emphasis added)

Writing is the final answer to the questions that had been raised so far. It is through experiencing what others before him have written—or said, or composed, or painted—that Auster can interpret the events in his own life, and it is through writing that he is able to preserve his father's memory. It is likewise through writing that he manages to make sense of himself. And last, but not least, *The Invention of Solitude* is proof that Auster can and has indeed managed to breach his solitude through writing, thereby turning it into companionship, history, and even ethics.

In the end, *The Invention of Solitude* deals with the process of coming to terms with a parent's life and death, and the consequences of the latter for one's sense of self. Yet, most importantly, it is a book that opens onto the future, towards the son: the mere existence of the book is a testimony that Auster recognizes him, that he sees him—unlike his father, who was never able to see Auster. At the very end of "Portrait," Auster watches his son in his sleep, presumably during a writing break sometime during the small hours of the morning: "To wonder what he will make of these pages when he is old enough to read them. . . . To end with this" (73). Auster's job is done. He has given birth to both himself and his father through words. Nevertheless, his act of invention is not monolithic: he longs for his son's interpretation, his own invention. It is here that the ethical role of the writer in this book becomes apparent: the author writes for other(s) so that every solitude can be breached.

By introducing the possibility of reciprocal narration, the father-child bond is established as truly ethical. Furthermore, this also downplays the projection of wholeness and paternal potency assumed by the dominant fiction. Auster moves from a position of lack (of a reciprocal narrator) to a position where he emerges as the reciprocal narrator of his son. In a way, it could be argued that he decides to endure the arduous identity formation process presented in "Book" in order to secure a reciprocal narrator for Daniel. He is willing to dive deep into the traumatic relationship with his father if that means he will prevent his son from

growing up without a father's recognition. In turn, Auster's desire to make a better future for his son makes him realize the similarities between his father and himself, which leads him to assimilate and even embrace his bequest of solitude and invention.

Coming to grips with one's selfhood is an arduous process, and it is even harder to come to terms with one's parent's. *The Invention of Solitude* foregrounds this through an approach to personal identity that is dependent on the existence of a dialogical attitude towards the other. This other, as we have seen, includes individuals with whom we share our life but also any narrative that might help us shed light on personal experiences that had been hitherto left unspoken. To approach fatherhood in this manner certainly downplays the projection of wholeness undergirding the dominant fiction of paternal might (see chapter 2). On the other hand, it is also true that the core of Auster's memoir consists in seizing (narrative) control of the story so that the self's voice can finally emerge, which may raise questions as to whether authorship and authority must always go hand in hand.

Here the continuum between subsumptive and non-subsumptive logics of narrative proves a useful instrument to categorize this and other similar narratives. Assessing the degree to which narratives buttress or undermine the dominant fiction may offer valuable insight on the changing status of father figures. It would be far too simplistic to conclude that the vision of fatherhood in *The Invention of Solitude* openly challenges patriarchal visions of paternity. However, its depiction of paternal vulnerability and dependability on others makes it a noteworthy example of how individual acts of storytelling can erode certain assumptions about father figures. This effect is achieved throughout the text by showing the inadequacy of the framework provided by the dominant fiction: the fantasy of wholeness that presents the father as the author of the child is reversed as it is the child who becomes the author of the father.

Notes

1. The question of using parental memoirs to explore the subject's selfhood is addressed in depth by Porter.

2. It is worth noting that this mimics the structure of conceptual metaphors, mental structures that facilitate our understanding of new, abstract concepts by identifying elements in the new concept that can be understood in terms of something else that we are already familiar with. For further reading, see Lakoff and Johnson.

3. Here I draw from Dominick LaCapra's idea that trauma possesses a belated temporality: "in post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realize one is living in the here and now with future possibilities" (699). For further reading, see LaCapra.

4. Auster is very insistent on the fact that the whale in the Disney film adaptation was originally a shark in Collodi's story.

CHAPTER 4 – Queer Archon versus Patriarchal Author: Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

Alison Bechdel's memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* became a major success following its publication in 2006. Often compared to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, it has received considerable attention from an academic perspective due to its complex narrative strategies, its rich intertextual references, and its exploration of identity and memory via visual narration. Here Bechdel chronicles her ill-fated relationship with her late father, Bruce Bechdel, a man with a multifaceted personality obsessed with historical restoration, appearance, high culture—especially visible in his taste in literature—and younger men to whom he feels unrepentantly attracted. Throughout the memoir, the author unravels these and other related issues while also putting herself in the spotlight. The result is a hybrid text mixing autobiography, *Bildungsroman*, a coming-out story, and memoir through which Bechdel resolves to pin down her father's identity. This exploration will inadvertently help her to shed light on her own identity; the resulting memoir thus becomes an insightful account of memory, loss, and artistic creation.

What makes *Fun Home* even more of a challenge in the critic's eye is the intersection between the verbal and the visual account that takes place in comics.[1] Following Will Eisner's definition of comics as a sequential art, Scott McCloud defines it in *Understanding Comics* (1993) as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). The word choice is interesting as it draws more attention to the visual aspect and the reader's relation to the medium. The medium's semiotics includes elements such as panels, gutters, captions, and speech bubbles; it also features a considerable number of bleeds, types of transition from one panel to another, and many other elements that configure the comics' visual syntax.[2] As

Hillary Chute stresses, in comics "pictures are part of the writing and the drawing moves rather than merely illustrates the narrative" ("Comics" 108). It is fundamental to bear this double narrative dimension in mind when analyzing comics, as I will try to demonstrate throughout this introductory section.

It is likewise relevant to consider this double dimension when addressing the relation between comics and life writing. Gillian Whitlock has coined the term "autographics" in order to convey the distinctive nature of such stories. By doing so, she means "to draw attention to the specific conjunctionsof visual and verbal text" present in this particular genre, but also "to the subject positions that narrators negotiate in and through comics" (966). Moreover, as Julia Watson suggests, the specificity of the term autographics draws attention to the "multiple possibilities for interpreting experience, reworking memory, and staging self-reflection" that are distinctively found in graphic memoirs as opposed to conventional memoirs (28). In this respect, it is also worth mentioning that comics makes it possible to "spatialize memory," in Chute's words, as comics relies on space to represent time and hence "locates the reader in space" ("Comics" 108). All these aspects represent points of divergence with regard to traditional verbal-only memoirs.

Besides spatializing memory, autographics introduces a further split into the autobiographical self that goes beyond the more conventional observer-observed distinction. Reading autographics we encounter autobiographical avatars, an additional distinction to be added to the threefold split devised by Philippe Lejeune in "The Autobiographical Pact" (1975). Lejeune distinguishes between author (the material creator behind the text), narrator, and character; all three appear in the autobiographical text as separate entities that nonetheless point back to the same extratextual individual, something that Lejeune describes as a shared identity of name (61). In comics, and more particularly in autographics, the autobiographical avatar is a cartoon representation of the character; or, as Watson puts it, "the

drawn personae of cartoonists in graphic memoirs" (28–9), cartoonists being in this case analogous to Lejeune's notion of the author's persona.

As "drawn personae," avatars can be generally situated in the intradiegetic level in terms of narrative layers, but they may also appear as representations of the narrator—hence being situated in the extradiegetic level of the narration. Whitlock observes that in Satrapi's and Spiegelman's work, for instance, "their autobiographical avatars actively engage with the conventions of comics" (971). In the case of *Fun Home*, the autobiographical avatar is further split into (roughly) three different versions: we find child Alison, teenage Alison, and young adult Alison, each one associated with particular episodes within the memoir's chronology. Moreover, the narrator Bechdel engages with all of them at different levels: she may comment on their actions, offer greater insight on their motivations, or detach herself from anything the avatars are doing by introducing digressions. It is important to stress that the narrator does not have a corresponding avatar in *Fun Home*; unlike the characters, whose presence is registered in the visual as well as the verbal layer, the narrator's voice is confined to the verbal narrative level.

Now that some of the medium's specificities have been conveniently addressed, let us move on to the text itself. There are several objectives that I pursue in the present analysis. In consonance with the rest of my research, I am primarily interested in examining the way in which both the father figure and the father-child bond are represented in *Fun Home*. Likewise, I also study the ethical potential of the text, and whether it manages to convey an alternative model of paternity to that of the patriarchal-bound inheritance process that I have discussed in chapter 2. Here I draw on the concept of non-subsumptive narrative understanding that Hanna Meretoja develops in *The Ethics of Storytelling* (2018). One of my goals is to determine to what extent *Fun Home* follows a non-subsumptive logic that succeeds in questioning traditional notions of truth, memory, gender performativity, and even time

representation. In this regard, I would like to shed light on the relation between subsumptiveness and comics. In particular, I contend that comics is an ideal vehicle for non-subsumptive narratives as the peculiarities of the medium offer a plethora of possibilities for representing time, space, and identity in a non-linear, fragmentary manner that contributes to underscore their constructed nature. I address this in the first section of the chapter, entitled "Afterwardsness and the graphic representation of memory."

In subsequent sections I discuss the notion of non-subsumptive narrative in relation to the identity-formation process, in particular concerning Bechdel's exploration of her father's identity and the manner in which her own subjectivity is affected (and changed) as a consequence of her research. I consider the effect this has on the father-daughter bond and examine the posthumous remaking of the filiation bond. In my view, Bechdel's processing of grief after her father's death is sustained by her acceptance of the artist role, which she assumes by authoring both her father's self and her own. Likewise, I counter those views that see artistic affinity as an alternative to heteronormative filiation. I deal with these issues in section 2, "'Inversions of one another': the filiation process in *Fun Home*."

Finally, I bring all these aspects together in sections 3 and 4, "Artistic agency and the non-subsumptive potential of *Fun Home*" and "The queer *archon*." I argue that *Fun Home* as a non-subsumptive narrative shares many of its codes and elements with the overarching subsumptive narrative of paternity and filiation. Drawing from Jacques Derrida, I examine the ethical implications of such an overlapping, and strive to elucidate whether the autography accomplishes the queering of the patriarchal narrative with which it engages. I aim to demonstrate that *Fun Home* subverts and partially undoes the fatherhood narrative that has become reified in our narrative unconscious, but does not succeed in providing an ethically sound alternative to patriarchal-based representations of paternity.

Afterwardsness and the graphic representation of memory

Written several years after Bechdel's father's death, the story in *Fun Home* unfolds progressively—and obsessively—around a kernel composed by three landmarks in Bechdel's life: her coming out as a lesbian, her discovery of her father's homosexuality, and his unexpected death soon afterwards. Meanwhile, *Fun Home* also chronicles diverse events taking place during Bechdel's childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood which, to a greater or lesser extent, contributed to shape her sense of self. The interweaving of these two aspects, the biographical and the autobiographical, is essential to the story.

Some critics see the memoir as a coming-out story as well as a coming of age story. For Monica B. Pearl, Alison's realization that she is a lesbian over the course of the narrative is a turn "typical of the coming out story," yet in another "spin on the typical coming out tale, *Fun Home* is a story of the protagonist discovering her father's homosexuality as well" (286). Sam McBean acknowledges this same shift, and notes that "[w]hile Bechdel does narrate her journey from a young girl who desires masculinity to her eventual identification as a lesbian, this story is told alongside her attempts to understand . . . her father's sexual relationships with young boys and his later suspected suicide" (103). Watson describes *Fun Home* as an "autobiographical Künstlerroman," and compares it to James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, one of Bechdel's most telling intertextual references (30).

Some critics underscore the importance of secrecy as the memoir's touchstone, and in particular secrecy surrounding Bruce's closeted homosexuality.[3] Others acknowledge the relevance of secrecy in the story, but approach it from the perspective of trauma. Namely, for Ann Cvetkovich, Bruce's death functions as the "'unrepresentable' trauma to which the text insistently returns" (112). My approach to *Fun Home*, albeit influenced by these readings, aims to bring to the fore the question of fatherhood by analyzing the construction of the father-daughter relationship and the theme of art and filiation. I wish to draw attention to the

157

ethical and reparative status of *Fun Home* and the consequences that such a status entails. In my view, the reparative effect of *Fun Home* is only achieved through an ethical approximation to her father in the role of the other by means of what Cvetkovich calls a sympathetic act of witness (113). This act of witness enables Bechdel to process her father's traumatic death and come to terms with her past. Reversing the typical Oedipal scheme, Bechdel achieves her symbolic independence not by killing the father, but by bringing him back from the dead through her art—as "a sort of inverted Oedipal complex," as she herself puts it (230).

We have already seen that different narrative practices can be placed in a continuum whose extremes are represented by the subsumptive and non-subsumptive orders of narrative understanding (Meretoja, *Ethics* 91). Non-subsumptive narrative practices have the potential to "consciously challenge stereotype-reinforcing hegemonic narrative practices" (Meretoja, "Appropriation" 107). In what follows, I contend that *Fun Home* can be understood as a non-subsumptive narrative insofar as it willingly foregrounds and considers different perspectives and possibilities, thereby destabilizing, and even hindering, fixed interpretations. Likewise, I would like to draw attention to the ethical potential of comics as a medium. Some critics have stressed that the hybrid nature of comics is especially apt to deal with subjects of trauma or disaster that are otherwise too slippery to be conveyed. For instance, Chute suggests that comics "makes readers aware of limits" in situations in which the boundaries of communication break:

> With its juxtaposed frames, comics constantly calls readers' attention to what they see, or don't see, and why. . . . Comics is a form about visual presence, a succession of frames, that is stippled with absence, in the frame-gutter sequence. We can say that its very grammar, then, evokes the unsaid, or inexpressible. Comics highlights the relation between words and images

158

. . . The layers of meaning in handmade images often convey, strikingly, what words alone cannot. (*Why* 34)

Similarly, Whitlock emphasizes "the extraordinary potential of the comics in autobiographical narratives of trauma" (966). She situates this potential in the comics' grammar, "based on panels, frames, and gutters that translate time and space onto the page in black and white" (968). Besides the hybrid narrative product of visual and verbal layers, comics' grammar is likewise characterized by the "extraordinary demands" that it makes "on the reader to produce closure" (968). In *Understanding Comics* closure is defined as the process whereby readers fill in the gaps left in between panels: "Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (McCloud 67).

The principle of closure demands readers' active participation in the completion of the story by imagining possibilities of what occurs in the gutter space between panels. In this sense, any comics might be regarded as an example of non-subsumptive narrative understanding, since it promotes a dialogical engagement with the text that is likewise based on the hermeneutic circle. Our interpretation of the story can be thus conceived as an ongoing process in which the information we acquire through reading affects our final interpretation of the narrative as a whole. *Fun Home* is no exception to this. However, its medium alone is not the only reason why it should be regarded as a non-subsumptive narrative. Central to the story are the themes of identity and memory, but also secrecy, time, and causality. Bechdel's father's elusive absence invades the memoir, becoming a fundamental void that Bechdel obsessively tries to fill in. McBean highlights the uncertainty surrounding Bruce's death, a possible suicide that is nonetheless never corroborated (105). In addition, Bruce's

homosexuality functions as another absence, an accusation that "dared not speak its name" (Bechdel 175).

Due to the centrality of these two unrepresentable events, it might be said that the story is founded on an epistemological void. This affects the plot insofar as it develops in a web-like manner, rather than progressing linearly, in a manner that Pearl names "layered telling" (289). Chute also underscores the connection between Bruce's death and the "labyrinthine" treatment of time in *Fun Home*: "instead of having a chronological structure," the autography is "[t]old in a nonlinear fashion" and "repeatedly circles in to central themes and questions" (*Why* 370). Further on, Chute establishes a connection between nonlinear telling and the autography's central themes, as she claims that "*Fun Home* is rather a drama of archival discovery and interpretation, as Bechdel searches for and discovers evidence about her father's life as a gay man" (*Why* 370).

Archival discovery is a central element of a memoir subgenre that Roger J. Porter calls "The Child's Book of Parental Deception," whose main theme is the exposure of a parent's secrets by adult children who endured "parental mystery and equivocation" (2). Porter considers that the use of "memory, documents, or archives, any of which might yield up the nature and significance of buried family secrets" is paramount to this subgenre (3). Thus, memory tends to be replaced by a thorough archival investigation due to the deceitful nature of the parents' conduct: any memories of them become contaminated, purportedly, with that same deception (Porter 4). Since "[e]lusive parents leave memory voids," authors tend to rely instead on "external records, . . . forms of material and archival evidence such as documents both public and personal" (Porter 10).

Porter's analysis of *Fun Home* as an example of the parental deception memoir subgenre emphasizes the fabricated nature of truth. In his view, the fact that Bechdel is "so used to living in a world of fabrications" affects her capacity to discern or be sure of

"anything she herself feels": "Absorbed by the problematic nature of her own observations and insights, she finds it difficult to expose others' secrets when the certainty of her own truth is unclear" (166). However, I think these observations are a bit too imprecise. Bechdel is not too fixed on exposing others' secrets because that is simply not her main goal in writing this memoir. Secrecy is relevant in *Fun Home* insofar as Bechdel needs to learn how to process it on her own terms, without her (late) father's help. Her efforts are oriented not to discovering Bruce's "truth," but rather to offering a faithful account of how the events surrounding her coming out and her father's death affected her:

> I couldn't tell the story chronologically. I tried to put the events in order and there were so many things that I wanted to say about each of them that I kept going off on these tangents and I realized that wasn't going to work. *What interested me most about the story was not what happened but my ideas about what had happened*. (Mautner n.p.; emphasis added)

In a way, it could be argued that Bechdel's quest is concerned with truth in a deeper epistemological sense. It is mentioned that she had already found out about her father's secrets prior to his death or immediately afterwards. In my opinion, the process we readers witness throughout *Fun Home* is less concerned with the disclosing of secrets than it is with the interpretative efforts that Bechdel makes in order to process her ambivalent feelings towards her father. Put differently, she acknowledges the impossibility of finding out the truth about her father. Or, rather, she does find the truth in a more mundane sense through her use of the archive. By means of her archival research she encounters tangible proof of her father's affair with Roy, the family's babysitter. She also discovers that he faced charges for buying beer for a minor, or that he cross-dressed while in college. These bare facts do not reveal much by themselves, and offer Bechdel little to no answers to the central quest of (re)interpreting her relationship with her late father.

Thus, *Fun Home* can be understood as the author's attempt at recording her personal reinterpretation process. The first chapter introduces both Bechdel and her father respectively as a truth-teller (or, at least, truth-seeker) and a liar, thereby stressing their radically opposite nature. Nevertheless, it soon becomes clear that this binary is not really fruitful as it leaves no room for other voices—most notably, Bruce's. The first half of the memoir revolves around showing, and illustrates a process that Valerie Rohy defines as "a case of documentary obsession" (341). We readers are shown the family house and the funeral home; also, the family records, including newspaper clips, passports, old photographs, maps, and other memorabilia. Throughout this section, the narrator's voice sometimes comments on what is seen in the visual plane. However, she often pursues her thoughts on the events without keeping up with the visual track, hence establishing two distinct narrative levels.

The archive provides Alison with an opportunity to (re)discover past events as recorded faithfully; in this regard it can be seen to fulfill the role of a prosthetic memory of sorts. Moreover, it somehow replaces Bruce's testimony after his death. Since Bechdel no longer has the possibility to engage in conversation with her father, she resorts to the archive in search of what I would call a surrogate firsthand testimony, composed of a wealth of different elements through which she hopes to gain access to her father's experience of the original event. However, the archive cannot speak for Bruce. Bechdel's attempts to interrogate the archive as a means of knowing and understanding her father are linked to the notion of afterwardsness or *Nachträglichkeit*.[4]

In *Memory, Narrative, Identity* (2000), Nicola King applies two theories of memory to the study of autobiographical texts. The former, described as analogous to an archaeological excavation, "assumes that the past still exists 'somewhere', waiting to be rediscovered by the remembering subject, uncontaminated by subsequent experience and time's attrition" (King 4). In the first part of the memoir, Bechdel's attitude towards the

archive resembles that of a zealous curator. She situates the coordinates in which Bruce's life developed, and collects her materials hoping to shed light on her father's hidden life. In this regard, her approach to memory bears a noteworthy resemblance to Walter Benjamin's description of retrieved memories "as treasures in the sober rooms of our later insights—like torsos in a collector's gallery" (576). In fact, it can be likewise argued that Bechdel conducts herself as a (wo)man digging; paraphrasing Benjamin, she certainly returns again and again to the same matter, trying to make memory yield its long-sought secrets through a most meticulous investigation (576).

The other theory of memory used by King corresponds to the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*.[5] According to this theory, memory is understood as a process of "continuous revision or 'retranslation', reworking memory-traces in the light of later knowledge and experience" (King 4). *Nachträglichkeit* describes the process whereby a subject relives and completes, usually as an adult, a childhood event that was not fully understood when it first happened. What determines which experiences undergo this process of deferred revision, according to Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, is whether "it has been impossible in the first instance to incorporate [the lived experience] fully into a meaningful context" (112). Thus, the original event is often an "early, partly understood event" which is later interpreted in successive reworkings taking place through memory (King 17–8). As Robert Eaglestone notes, *Nachträglichkeit* is "theoretically complex" and simultaneously "experientially easy, as each of us lives it, often unnoticed, each day," in a way that makes it "part of our daily experience" (12; 17).

Some critics see clear examples of *Nachträglichkeit* in *Fun Home*. Cvetkovich argues that *Nachträglichkeit* enables Bechdel's act of witness insofar as she goes back and forth to discover hints of her father's homosexuality that she had overlooked as a child (114). Therefore, the archive also functions as a repository of all those missed clues that Bechdel

incorporates into her knowledge about her father. This process is particularly relevant in the case of Roy's photo, one of the book's elements that have elicited more critical attention. Placed at the exact middle of the book, we find the painstaking reproduction of a snapshot featuring the family's babysitter Roy; the fact that it is the autography's only double-page spread attests to its relevance (Bechdel 100–1). In it, Roy appears posing in his underwear, lying on the bed of the motel room that he and Bruce shared during a family holiday to the Jersey Shore. This image has been described by Bechdel as "the core of the book" in a literal and symbolic sense insofar as its finding spawned the memoir:

> About a year after Dad died, right after I got out of college, I was at home, sort of organizing all my stuff. That's when I ran across this photograph. It was a stunning glimpse into my father's hidden life, this life that was apparently running parallel to our regular everyday existence. And it was particularly compelling to me at the time because I was just coming out myself. *I felt this sort of posthumous bond with my father, like I shared this thing with him, like we were comrades*. (Chute, "Interview" 1006; emphasis added)

With Roy's photo comes the realization that there is no sense in interrogating the archive in search of predefined meanings. Rather, it is the witness who ought to interrogate herself about her reaction to—her interpretation of—the event being witnessed. There is no *a priori* meaning in the archive except that which one creates through actively engaging in the interpretative process. To inscribe one's act of witnessing into the other's memory—here presented as a snapshot frozen in time—reveals and further underscores the palimpsestic quality of memory.

What is most striking about Bechdel's finding is the bond that stems from this "stunning glimpse" into her father's privacy. In other words, the realization of this posthumous bond is what fosters her interest in further exploring other interpretations besides

the one she had already set her mind on—namely, that Bruce was a deceitful liar. The posthumous emotional bond is likewise a product of afterwardsness. According to Jean Laplanche's version of the concept, afterwardsness is the process whereby a subject is able to rework and assimilate lived experiences that they have not been previously able to grasp completely. The key difference regarding the Freudian version is that the hidden significance revealed through afterwardsnessis a message sent by the other, a message that ought to be translated. Once the other dies, the true significance of the event becomes irretrievable. If Bruce plays here the role of the other, then the meaning of his message becomes irretrievable after his death—hence why the archive cannot speak for him. Afterwardsness loses its capacity to provide a complete translation of the original event without the subject's original, firsthand testimony. In Laplanche's words:

> For the person in mourning, that message has never been adequately understood, never listened to enough. Mourning is hardly ever without the question: what would he be saying now? What would he have said? Hardly ever without regret or remorse for not having been able to speak with the other enough, for not having heard what he had to say. (254)

The original significance of the events that Bechdel perceives as meaningful is therefore irrelevant. Consequently, the alleged meaning of the other's message is left for the subject to complete through an act of interpretative imagination—that is, of creation. Through her attempts to interpret the photograph's clues and meaning, Bechdel interrogates the image and comes to realize that the posthumous bond is sustained by her identification with her father: "Perhaps I identify too well with my father's illicit awe" (101). This moment of identification is inscribed on the panel, over the snapshot.

Although she cannot engage in a conversation with her father, Bechdel nonetheless interrogates the image and develops different possibilities, in what we might call an exercise

of her narrative imagination. Specifically, she wonders whether she would have made different choices regarding her sexual orientation and gender performativity had she been born in her parents' time, whether she would have "had the guts to be one of those Eisenhower-era butches" or whether she would have married, like her father did (108). By imagining those scenarios, she tries to assume her father's gaze. Through an act of narrative imagination, she tries to compensate for the absence of her father's voice. Even though it is impossible to establish a posthumous dialogue with him, the exploration of hitherto unspoken alternatives tries to compensate for the otherwise monologic nature of her account. In doing so, *Fun Home* achieves its full self-reflexive potential while fostering non-subsumptive narrative understanding.

Let us bear in mind that non-subsumptive narratives can "promote awareness of the multitude of perspectives from which the world can be looked at, of how each narrative is told from a certain limited, ethically and politically charged perspective, and of how every story can be and often needs to be told anew from a different angle" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 303). Meretoja distinguishes between "dialogical" and "monological" narratives insofar as the latter pretend that they mirror reality, whereas the former emphasize that they offer interpretations of it (*Ethics* 303). I believe that *Fun Home* is a rather monological narrative insofar as Bechdel does not leave room for other voices to be heard, although she compensates for this by actively promoting the reader's engagement through a number of visual and textual mechanisms.

An example of this can be found in her use of ocularization. According to Nancy Pedri, since in comics "the action is often reflected through a character's emotional state even though the character is visually depicted from an external viewpoint," it sometimes becomes difficult to tell one apart from the other (9). This has led to the use of two different terms: focalization—defined as "the framing of information"—and ocularization, i.e., "the framing

166

of vision": "Instead of introducing a subjective filtering of information, the shift in ocularization presents an objective seeing" (Pedri 9; 19). The reproduction of this snapshot is shocking not because of the subject it captures, but because it offers Alison the chance to take a peek at her father's private existence: not a surrogate testimony, but a closer look at the real thing. She chooses to share it with us readers through a shift in ocularization, letting us see what she sees. Pedri suggests that the presence of Alison's hand in the panel, added to the over-the-shoulder effect that the ocularization shift entails, is aimed at creating a sense of "authentic personal experience that has been filtered through Alison'srecollection as well as her artistic rendition of that recollection" (20). The desired effect, as Pedri has it, is to accentuate "the truthfulness and authenticity of [Alison's] past experience by firmly situating the telling in Alison's personal experience" (20).

In my view, Pedri's reading underscores the fundamental paradox that fuels *Fun Home*: while Bechdel aims at capturing her process of coming to terms with her father's lies as objectively as possible, she cannot escape the inherent mediatedness of the resulting account—and she does not hide it either. Some authors see this recursiveness as "provid[ing] a mirror for the reader'sown engagement and complicity in the act of looking" (Pedri 20; see also Warhol 6–7 and Watson 40–41). Meanwhile, the fact that the alleged objective material we are shown—a photograph, in this case—is a clearly redrawn version of the original further accentuates authorial mediation. By choosing not to avoid this paradox, but to underscore it instead, *Fun Home* manages to promote non-subsumptive narrative understanding.

As an observer of Roy's photograph, Bechdel assumes her father's gaze and thereby becomes a sympathetic witness to her father's hidden sexuality (Cvetkovich 113). For Chute, the drawing of Roy's photo synthesizes "the concomitant identification *and* disidentification Bechdel feels toward her father":

While she meticulously reproduces the details of the once-hidden photograph, a kind of dutiful tribute to and inhabitation of her father's illicit desire, she also overlays eight distinct text boxes, full of her own words, over the photograph. The placement of the irregular boxes . . . over the drawing of the standard-size photograph reflects both Bechdel's confusion and also her own medium's disruption, with the overlaid layers of meaning offered by comics, of her father's perfectly framed, wordless moment. (*Why* 374; original emphasis)

The process of identification/disidentification, as Chute suggests in the previous quotation, takes place through drawing. Likewise, Cvetkovich argues that by assembling an archive that is not formed by reproductions of the originals, but by redrawn versions of the same material, Bechdel creates her own "archive of feelings" and thereby her "act of drawing . . . becomes an act of witness" (119–20).

The archive of feelings, in its (re)created dimension, conveys the father-daughter relationship in a way that can be only produced in the hybrid visual-verbal medium of comics. As Watson suggests, "[Bechdel's] act of self- and paternal creation through autographical narration is a story of relationship and legacy that depends on graphically embodying and enacting, not just telling, the family story" (52).[6] Through an act of drawing and redrawing, telling and retelling, Bechdel appropriates the material and thus the story, and consequently is able to process it and incorporate it via the aforementioned process of identification/disidentification. Drawing holds great value as an epistemological tool: only through drawing can Bechdel get hold of the world around her. Creation turns into a means for knowledge and self-knowledge. As Marjorie C. Allison has it:

Bechdel, as an artist and a person, needs to understand her father and her relationship to him. She needs to understand the translation of his life and experiences as a gay man into her life

and experiences as a lesbian. Perhaps even more fundamentally, she needs to understand the translation that occurs between parent and child, which traits and beliefs get translated into a new person and which ones do not. (79)

In the following section, I move on to discuss how the aforementioned "posthumous bond" is articulated. I seek to demonstrate that, although the autography actively tries to expose its own mediated nature, it cannot help but repeat certain ingrained subsumptive practices as Bechdel assumes control of the narrative.

"Inversions of one another": the filiation process in *Fun Home*

Fun Home chronicles the author's identity-formation process as she tries to navigate her complicated relationship with her father. I believe fatherhood functions as a lens that Bechdel applies to the observation of her life and self, thereby being able to reconstruct an alternative bond with her father. The creation of this alternative bond allows her to incorporate him into her personal queer canon-genealogy, as I explain later on. It is worth noting that Bruce and Alison's bond may be read as a counterexample to more traditional filiation processes, since it is constructed (partly, at least) on the margins of heteronormativity. Alison's queer affinity with her father stems from Alison's desire for knowledge and understanding, as well as from her sympathetic act of witness.

Even though the reparative effect of *Fun Home* is generally achieved through an ethical approximation to her father in the role of the other, several problems arise from Bechdel's standpoint. Overall, this is a rather sympathetic text insofar as Bruce Bechdel's life and deeds are concerned. In its attempts to shed light on Bruce's troubled existence, it is sometimes forgetful of the plight of others around him, namely his wife and (often) underage lovers. The voice of the narrator limits, or silences altogether, other accounts in what ends up

turning into a highly monological text. *Fun Home* stages the struggle for control over the familial narrative, a struggle from which Bechdel emerges victorious, it could be argued, as she effectively replaces her father as the authorial voice crafting the story. Yet what begins as a struggle against the patriarchal authority embodied by Bruce becomes its own problem when Bechdel becomes the one in command of the narrative. Another question arises as to whether the new master narrator is able to challenge the same patriarchal narrative she sought to counter.

Let us bear in mind that, according to narrative hermeneutics, "[w]e are entangled in systems of meaning that precede us and shape our experiences, thoughts, and emotions" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 74–5). Among the plethora of sense-making practices to which subjects have access, there are some that tend to reinforce the normativity inherent in cultural narratives: "[Normative cultural narratives] present us with cultural ideals and norms and suggest that while certain things are possible, likely, desirable, or acceptable for us—given our gender, race, class, age, looks—others are impossible, unlikely, undesirable, or inacceptable" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 83). When unacknowledged, the use of these narratives "can lead us to repeat harmful emotional patterns that we have blindly inherited from our family and cultural traditions" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 299).

Some critics have argued that Alison and Bruce's bond disrupts heteronormative biological filiation by invoking other kind of ties, such as artistic affinity.[7] In my view, the memoir's take on filiation as artistic affinity is far from subversive, as it perpetuates, albeit perhaps inadvertently, a patriarchal pattern of domination. Let us bear in mind that Bechdel replacing Bruce as the master storyteller is a consequence of her gaining control over the family story now that her father is dead. While she does succeed in becoming the creator and interpreter of the story, she achieves this by replicating the same scheme that characterizes Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence (see chapter 2). As a result, she perpetuates the violence

170

that her father had exerted over her mother and his former lovers, whose voices are—yet again—silenced in Bechdel's story.

Before I address this issue in depth, I think it convenient to explain the ways in which Bechdel represents her father and their mutual bond in the autography. The first chapter in *Fun Home*, entitled "Old Father, Old Artificer," introduces the multifaceted father figure by situating his lies and constant deception in stark opposition to his daughter Alison's quest for truth and knowledge. However, what is at first presented as a rather black-or-white opposition between father and daughter will progressively become more and more nuanced as the story unfolds. In this chapter, Bechdel introduces a series of binary oppositions—between truth/functionality and lies/ornament—and uses them to set up "the ultimate location of 'constant tension' in the house: within her father, Bruce Bechdel," according to K.W. Eveleth (91). Those binary oppositions are underpinned by a series of associations among certain semantic fields. Namely, Bruce's craft is associated with embellishments, which are in turn connected to lies, and hence to secrecy. At some point, Bechdel explains that her father "began to seem morally suspect" to her even before she knew that "he actually had a dark secret" (16).

In this first chapter, the house stands out as a sort of extension, or perhaps reflection, of Bruce's identity. Jennifer Lemberg notes that "[t]he family's house and [Bechdel's] father's internal conflicts are directly linked in the narration as well as the composition of the memoir" (131). Porter suggests that Bechdel introduces the house as her father's obsession as well as his sublimation, and also as a sign of his closeted homosexuality: "That house is at once the environment in which he acts out his questionable identity and a metaphor for that identity . . . [H]is pose as ostensibly straight is no less fraudulent than the faux gothic of the house" (162). But besides its function as a sign of Bruce's homosexuality, the house and its ornaments also illustrate Bruce's labyrinthine, often contradictory personality.

171

Bechdel compares her father's personality to the myth of Icarus, Daedalus, and the Minotaur. Each of these three figures symbolizes a different aspect of Bruce's existence. In an analeptic reference to his homosexuality being publicly exposed and his early death, Bechdel advances that "it was not [her] but [her] father who," like Icarus, "was to plummet from the sky," thereby stressing the tragic dimension of her father's fate (4). Bruce's creative talent is acknowledged by Bechdel through the comparison with Daedalus. Yet, even though she admires her father's "dazzling displays of artfulness" (9), she cannot avoid holding it in contempt since "the scrolls, tassels, and bric-a-brac that infested [their] house . . . were embellishments in the worst sense. They were lies" (16). Like Daedalus, he is the accomplished creator of a labyrinth—the family house—and is described accordingly as remaining "indifferent to the human cost of his projects" (Bechdel 11). At the same time, Bruce is described as both the designer and the Minotaur hidden in the maze from which "escape was impossible" (Bechdel 12).

Yet, despite the comparison between Bruce and Daedalus, Bechdel accuses her father of using "his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not" (16). Bruce's artistry is therefore regarded as non-productive. He does not create new things, but only coats them, thereby deceiving others—and maybe himself, too. It is interesting to note that the father is initially relegated to a sort of artisan's role, as opposed to artist. In an inversion of paternal roles, Bechdel will acquire the status of artist, hence becoming a new Daedalus while her father finishes his days as the fallen Icarus of the story. For Eveleth, Bruce's "devotion to artifice . . . inspired in [Bechdel] a binary opposition to embellishment" (90). She further adds that "[t]hose binaries include "gender performativity ('Butch to his Nelly') and artistic taste ('utilitarian to his aesthete') before finally coming to rest on the penultimate temptation: to call his version of reality false and hers real" (90–1).

The increasingly bitter tone in Bechdel's early descriptions of her father weaves an atmosphere of suspense that culminates in her revelation that her father had "sex with teenage boys," an event that she cannot quite reconcile with the rest of her father's existence as a part-time English teacher and curator in rural Pennsylvania (17). Further on, she also anticipates Bruce's death, firmly stating that he "killed himself" when she was twenty (23). According to Porter:

> Seeking to make his external world perfect obscures [Bechdel's] father's confusion about his identity and contributes to his daughter's own uncertainty about how to represent him: as a conscious liar or someone whose secrets signify a lack of self-knowledge. . . . By assuming dualistic roles and identities—devoted husband and pederast—he creates confusion in the family and appears to his daughter more illusion than reality. (162)

In her brilliant analysis, Rohy observes that the first chapter maps "the spaces of the father's life" as much as it introduces Alison in stark opposition to "all that her father and the Victorian house represent" (346). Further on, she comments on the game of oppositions that is established at first, and how these oppositions start to converge once Alison's certitudes begin to shatter. For Rohy, the chapter's numerous oppositions (between "reality and fiction, truth and lies, nature and artifice, original and simulacrum") can be sorted into two opposing semantic fields: first, that of "utility, authenticity, and nature," the same in which Alison situates "documentary truth"; and second, that of "artifice," hence, lies (346). Afterwards, however, the memoir's narrative arc advances "from simple dichotomies to complex interrelations, from differences *between* to differences *within*" (344; original emphasis).

Indeed, Bechdel's adamant position regarding truth does not last long. The confidence initially displayed in the first chapter soon gives way to a more cautious tone. For instance, she recognizes that "[t]here is no proof, actually, that [her] father killed himself" (27).

173

Likewise, she imagines that her father did engage in sexual intercourse with teenagersbut does not have any actual proof to sustain her accusation. The more the narration progresses, the more Alison refrains from making moral judgments or calling her father a liar again. In a way, she also distances herself from an initial position where she assumes that her father must have had a real self—or, at least, a *more* real self—that she did not quite know. The proliferation of contradictory identities is later integrated into a single, broader vision, as Bechdel comes to accept that her father lived a very complex and multifaceted existence.

As the story unfolds, not only does Bechdel learn to accept her father's conflicting identities, but also willingly incorporates ornament into her art, thereby blurring the very binary oppositions between ornament and utility, truth and lies, that she had established in the first chapter. For Eveleth, Bechdel's embrace of labyrinthine aesthetics in *Fun Home* is a means of expressing "queer potentiality":

> *Fun Home* is somewhat like a meditation on the paradoxical collapse of artifice and utility that occurs in a maze, and its multiple allusions to mazes . . . point to what I think is the more pressing and perhaps more worthwhile interpretation of *Fun Home*: that this focus on the aesthetics of labyrinthine spaces engenders a pained celebration of false passages, misleading corridors, and superfluous ornamentation as elements of queer potentiality, destined to the same kind of masochistic repetition of Derridean "archive fever," the collection self-serving artifacts that always threatens its own effacement. (89)

The shift in Bechdel's attitude not only affects her art, but also her ability to register her story. For Lemberg, Bechdel's "suspicion toward appearance" is a response to her father's behavior; such behavior has "an impact on her ability to represent the world around her" (133). Lemberg links Bechdel's suspicion toward appearance to her epistemological crisis as a teenager, during which she becomes unable to register events in her diary due to her

incapacity to bridge the "troubling gap between word and meaning" (Bechdel 143). This troubling gap is partially bridged through repetition and a certain labyrinthine conception of time, in what appears to be a maneuver to unearth the truth through slow accretion. Thus, she sometimes recreates the same scene several times, often introducing new information codified in the visual level.

For instance, the panel in which she learns that her father had an affair with Roy, their babysitter, is drawn three times, each one presenting slight variations.[8] If the first panel introduces the revelation of Bruce's queer status, the second takes up again the same issue—only that this time it is Alison's queer status that is emphasized instead (Bechdel 59; 79). The emphasis is achieved through the inclusion of elements that were ostensibly missing in the former version. In the second panel the narrator speaks of an "abrupt and wholesale revision of my history," which is indeed what is taking place on the visual level: an abridged history of Alison's history represented by the bookshelf (her lesbianism, but also her love of literature, something that she shares with her father) and the drawing pad (artistic expression and creation).

By contrast, the third version of the panel only features Alison's figure talking on the phone, as she faces (again) the revelation of her father's sexuality (Bechdel 211). Even though the same image is being used, this time it appears as part of a panel sequence in which Alison speaks to her father on the phone, and then to her mother, thus introducing new information (i.e., she also spoke to her father following her coming out, and not just to her mother) that we had not been shown yet. Each time the same panel tells a different story by arranging the same elements differently.

Throughout *Fun Home*, the distance between Alison and Bruce progressively diminishes once the stark contrasts between them become blurrier. The elements that are used to bridge that distance are their shared queerness and the notions of artistic creation and

authority/authorship. As mentioned before, *Fun Home* has been categorized as a *Bildungsroman¸* a *Künstlerroman*, a coming-out story, and a memoir, among others. In my view, the theme of queerness functions as one of the overarching elements connecting these subgenres. Far from being mutually exclusive, they all come to converge in the father-daughter queer bond. Whereas the first two chapters convey the impression of yet another detective tale of parental deception, queerness introduces a twist that somehow turns the tables on our expectations. It is here where we are faced with *Fun Home*'s true core. To discover the truth is not—and has never been—Bechdel's concern in the first place, since she already knows that Bruce had "a dark secret" (16). What is really seminal to *Fun Home* is Bechdel's (re)discovery of a bond with her father.

In this regard, chapter 3 is a detailed account of Alison's identity formation *ab ovo¸* in an almost Sternian fashion. It chronicles how Bechdel's parents met, got married, and moved from the United States to Europe and back, while providing details on Helen's (Bechdel's mother) early disillusionments. In addition, it follows Bechdel's exploration of her sexuality during her college years, which leads to a foundational moment in her identity-formation process, that is, her coming out as a lesbian (Bechdel 58). Both storylines are interwoven and contrast with each other. Echoing a family trip to Europe some years later, Bechdel recalls the "freedom from convention" that she experienced, which led her to the "unspoken compact with them that I would never get married, that I would carry on to live the artist's life they [her parents] had each abdicated" (73). Throughout the chapter, her parents' dwindling freedom is therefore opposed to Bechdel's early steps towards liberation during her college years. As Watson rightly observes,

[t]his split between generations is marked in the contrast between her father's closeted homosexuality, with its elaborate denials and displacements, and Alison's coming-of-age story of discovering her own sexuality, awakened in early childhood by the sight of a "butch"

176

woman and emerging through her experiments with a range of lesbian identity positions. The father's and daughter's contrasting stories anchor the narrative transversals through which Bechdel interprets the paradoxes of her family. (34)

Before introducing the theme of inversion, which she brings up in chapter 4, Bechdel is here presenting both stories as inversions of one another. Albeit seeming opposites, Alison's and Bruce's life narratives are shown to resemble more than it might appear at first glance. This is clearly shown in the use of narrative elements that connect both stories transversally, as Watson suggests in the quotation above. In particular, libraries are the locus that is closely associated with each character's sexual preferences; they are represented as places of exploration, revelation, and identity construction.

Libraries and literature are conspicuous presences in chapter 3, in which the issue of queerness is first addressed. After the scene in which she finds out about her father's illicit "affairs with other men," Bechdel speaks of her father's line "between reality and fiction" being a "blurry one," and explains that in order to understand this, "one had only to enter his library" (58; 59). The following panel minutely reproduces Bruce's library, described as "a fantasy, but a fully operational one" (Bechdel 61). Likewise, Bruce's self-image is defined as also a fantasy, but one that was "so thoroughgoing, so authentic in its details, that it stops being pretense… and becomes, for all practical purposes, real" (Bechdel 60). The impression conveyed overall is that the library was Bruce's *sancta Santorum*, a space in the house where he was comfortable enough to stop the pretense and embrace his truest self. On the other hand, as Bechdel seems to imply, the minute staging and performance of his "country squire routine" casts doubt on Bruce's true self being indeed true (Bechdel 61). In this regard, he is compared to Jay Gatsby and Francis Scott Fitzgerald. In the manner of Fitzgerald, whose stories and personal life were inextricably bound together, Bruce's "suspension of the imaginary in the real" is considered part of his "stock in trade" (Bechdel 65). The library

becomes the space where he is able to project his desired self onto his actual existence, thereby erasing the boundaries between his dull existence and the fictive character he wishes to embody.

Bruce's library's storyline unfolds in parallel to that of Alison's coming of age and coming-out story. Her realization comes "in a manner consistent with [her] bookish upbringing," and is described as "a revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind" (Bechdel 74). Interestingly enough, the discovery takes place in a bookstore. There she is said to have "screwed up [her] courage" as she begins to buy books, only to realize that she can also borrow them from the public library (Bechdel 75). This attitude offers a huge contrast to that of Bruce, whose solitary confinement in his private library is seen as a Quixotic endeavor—a man devoured by his inability to tell fact from fiction. It is also different insofar as Alison chooses action above contemplation, and soon finds a "potent anesthetic" in the college Gay Union meetings and her relationship with Joan, her first girlfriend (Bechdel 79–80). The impression is that by doing so, Alison manages to avoid her father's old catastrophe, which "had been unfolding very slowly for a long time" (Bechdel 83). The liberation coming from Bechdel's acceptance of her sexual orientation distances her from her father insofar as she openly embraces it in public spaces, whilst Bruce remains hidden in the private domain. For instance, Alison's findings take place in the campus bookstore and the public library, in opposition to Bruce's homosexuality being freely experienced in the limited space of his domestic library.

For Alison, the possibility of maintaining a frank dialogue with Bruce about their shared queerness is never realized during Bruce's lifetime. Their exchanges take place over their shared love of literature as a vicarious form of paternal testimony. If the father's role consists in passing on a testimony that life is worth being lived with desire, as Recalcati would have it, then Bruce fails to fulfill that role. Nevertheless, he manages to somehow

translate his desire to pass on something that he cherishes by using books "as [their] currency" throughout Alison's high school years and later in college (Bechdel 200). Bruce is said to have begun "to sense [Alison's] potential as an intellectual companion" as she grew older (Bechdel 198). This newly developed affinity led them both to experience a "sensation of intimacy" that was "novel" and eases the fact that "both [were] starved for attention" (Bechdel 199).

Thus, Bechdel's gradual convergence with her father is produced in the space defined by the (private) library. Besides being the domestic space of intimacy for Bruce, where he can be at ease with himself, it becomes a space of intellectual exchanges between father and daughter. The episode involving Colette's *Earthly Paradise* is perhaps the most significant one: not having shared her "big lesbian epiphany yet," Bechdel is intrigued by the fact that her father decided to lend her that particular book (205). During their coming out conversation further on, she brings up the topic by asking him whether it was a conscious choice, to which he replies that "[i]t was just a guess. . . . I guess there was some kind of… identification" (Bechdel 220). In particular, this identification is made possible by Alison and Bruce's shared taste in (and exchange of) books. It is through literature that they come to discover the queerness in each other, a queerness they might suspect exists but never quite verify. As Bechdel remarks, "[l]ike Stephen and Bloom at the National Library, our paths crossed but we did not meet" (211). They manage to get closer to each other, but Bechdel still struggles to overcome the distance, especially at the emotional level, between the two of them.

Nevertheless, Bruce's sudden death halts their attempts at finding common ground, and the prior connection is replaced by guilt as she comes to perceive a causal connection between her coming out to her parents and his father's purported suicide. She bitterly observes that "[i]f [she] had not felt compelled to share [her] little sexual discovery, perhaps

179

the semi would have passed without incident four months later" (59). Pearl draws attention to the fact that Bechdel seems to be the only one to think that her father killed himself, and argues that:

> This book, *Fun Home*, can be read as Alison's reconciliation with her father's death, and an assuagement over her guilt, that she caused his death, that it was her very disclosure that caused it; that is, that her words after all did need to be doubted and tamed over all those years of her childhood, *that after all her words killed him.* (294; emphasis added)

Bechdel blames herself for having somehow set that chain of reactions into motion through her confession, thereby pushing her father to his death. In *Fun Home*, she refers to this episode as follows:

> I had imagined my confession as an emancipation from my parents, but instead I was pulled back into their orbit. And with my father's death following so hard on the heels of this doleful coming-out party, I could not help but assume a cause-and-effect relationship. . . . Why had I told them? I hadn't even had sex with anyone yet. (59)

Her remorse propels her to obsessively go back to her father's death, an event that Cvetkovich names the "unrepresentable trauma to which the text insistently returns" (112). Her compulsion to review past events is what ultimately turns *Fun Home* into "a recursive graphic memoir," as Pearl calls it, inasmuch as its narration "unfolds neither chronologically nor through prolepsis and analepsis, but through a layered telling, adding information and impressions over the story as it has already been told" (289).[9]

Yet it is precisely in the stagnant time of guilty repetition that Bechdel manages to break free from melancholia by reimagining her bond with her father as one of queer filiation.

In a way, *Fun Home* signifies a conscious effort to reconnect with her father through the queer filiation that was already in the making before his death. Queerness is connected to Alison's guilt just as it is connected to the redemptive act of telling that transforms her remorse into a sympathetic act of witness (Cvetkovich 113). Before that, Bechdel assumed guilt as the only possibility to maintain a posthumous bond with her father: "But that [the possibility that Bruce orchestrated his suicide] would only confirm that his death was not my fault. That, in fact, it had nothing to do with me at all. And I'm reluctant to let go of that last, tenuous bond" (86). In this regard, *Fun Home* represents an opportunity to create an alternative that is not based on a traumatic event and that simultaneously pays homage to her father's closeted queerness as a direct yet tragic precursor of her own sexual identity.

At this point, the game of opposites that was first introduced in the first chapter is again foregrounded, but this time around their initial opposition is refigured through the exploration of their likeness and even complementary nature. Bechdel explains that she and her father were both "inverts," yet also "inversions of one another" (Bechdel 98). For instance, Alison is called "butch" by her older cousins, whereas Bruce is defined as a "sissy" (Bechdel 96; 97). Ironically, she assures us that "where he fell short" of masculine attributes, she "stepped in" (Bechdel 95). It is implied that her masculinity role models were to be found on TV, but also in her father's young assistants. While Bruce's relation to them is based on an illicit sexual desire, Alison is drawn toward the virtues of masculinity they embody and her father seems to lack: "I wanted the muscles and tweed like my father wanted the velvet and the pearls—subjectively, for myself. The objects of our desire were quite different" (Bechdel 99).

Yet regardless of their differences, Bechdel sees beyond the particular objects of desire and into the illicit desire itself as the cornerstone of their shared identity, a common legacy that she belatedly receives from her father. Thus, the threads that underlie *Fun Home*

come together in Bruce Bechdel's portrait as a queer predecessor for his own child. One of these threads is represented in the guilt bond being replaced by an alternative one based on mutual connectedness "through a vast network of transversals" (Bechdel 102). There is also another thread being incorporated that comes from Bechdel's desire to know and understand her father's standpoint. Moreover, Bechdel's attempt to become a sympathetic witness is governed by a sense of affinity founded on queerness. In turn, observing his life through the queer lens also provides Bechdel with a new perspective on her father's death.

Through these acts of autographic rereading and recognition Bechdel pursues the ultimate goal of outing and reclaiming her father, as Watson puts it (44). In doing so, Bechdel inserts Bruce into a genealogy comprising many other queer referents, hence creating a queer canon of her own. If Bruce had a personal literary canon to which he could relate—a canon in which Joyce and Fitzgerald were outstanding figures—so does his daughter. Thus, *Fun Home* chronicles Bechdel's assembling of a queer canon that mirrors her vital decisions and foundational moments, identity-wise.[10] Learning the stories of others before her helped her to clear her own path; and after having found her own voice among those, she comes back to lend her voice to her father's silenced narrative. By assuming Bruce's illicit sexual desires in her role of sympathetic witness, Bechdel dignifies his muted story and thereby claims her inheritance, as Recalcati would have it.

Alison's acknowledgment of her debt with the other, including her father, comes to fruition in *Fun Home* as she composes her canon: a genealogy of others with whom she can engage in dialogue, either directly or indirectly, and whose influence on her process of identity formation she pays homage to in her autography. Meghan C. Fox underscores the fundamental "influence" that Bruce holds over Alison's "artistic development and queer sensibility," and goes on to argue that "Bechdel thus supplants the centrality of paternity as both a canonical and social structure with a model of queer kinship that offers affinity in

place of filiation," hence downplaying the importance of biological filiation (514). In this sense, it could be argued that *Fun Home* manages to represent an alternative to the patriarchal-bound construction of fatherhood as restricted to consanguinity alone. Even though there is an actual relation of consanguinity here, the emphasis on affinity as the basis of the father-child bond challenges its centrality in the construction of such bonds.

Bechdel constructs a posthumous relation of spiritual paternity as a narrativization of her mourning process. Put differently, she actively engages in the construction of a story that enables her to develop a bond with her father based on their shared homosexual status. *Fun Home* is a queer archive, one that claims Bruce's consubstantial and spiritual paternity. However, through her act of narrative creation Bechdel takes over the father-creator role, hence becoming not her father's narrator, but in fact her father's author. Is this a liberating movement, or rather, the perpetuation of patriarchal patterns? In the next and final section, I examine the characterization of the artistic process in *Fun Home* and connect it to the notions of the archive, authority, and authorship.

Artistic agency and the non-subsumptive potential of *Fun Home*

I want to conclude my analysis of *Fun Home* by exploring the ethical implications of artistic creation. I seek to shed light on the process whereby Bechdel goes from orphan daughter to master storyteller. In order to finish this process, she first needs to complete her artistic and vital emancipation from her father, but also from the heteronormative framework in which he had chosen to develop his personal narrative. When confronted with that framework, Alison is unable to generate a valid discourse, and ends up consumed by the "masochistic repetition" of archive fever (Eveleth 89; Rohy 352). However, she finds a way to subvert the terms and establish a narrative through which she is able to explore the alternatives offered by "queer potentiality" (Eveleth 89). In doing so, she eventually gains control over the stories being

told—her own, first and foremost, but also her father's. This act of storytelling transforms her into the *archon* of her own archive, one that is at once "an archive of feelings" (Cvetkovich 119), a queer genealogy, and the product of her work as a creator and artist.

Furthermore, I would like to examine the ethical implications of this artistic act of creation. I have argued elsewhere that Bechdel crafts a story for her father that is then integrated into her queer genealogy. The fact that it is Bechdel's perspective of her father's story that is conveyed here, and not his firsthand testimony, raises some interesting questions. Does her act of creation entail that she speaks for her father, or that she appropriates his personal narrative somehow? To what extent does the resulting story have anything to do with the real Bruce? And does this matter anyway? My hypothesis here is that the father figure is a lens through which Bechdel reflects on, and organizes, her own identity. Since Bruce's portrayal is never meant to be objective in the first place, its value should not be determined by its accuracy, but by the epistemological and ethical value it has for Bechdel. However, as we will see, those choices lead to certain (perhaps unintended) ethical outcomes.

I would like to begin by addressing Alison's complicated relation with representative arts, which is, as will become apparent, intimately related to her struggle for authorial power. Alison's relation to artistic expression, particularly in the case of the written word, is shown to have been conditioned by and subdued to her father's mastery of it. The fifth chapter in her autography, "The Canary-Colored Caravan of Death," focuses on her difficulties at recording her perceptions as a ten-year-old. In it, Bechdel also chronicles her first timid steps as an (initially frustrated) artist, an interest she probably develops motivated by her parents' creative—yet solipsistic—endeavors. We see Alison taking photos of the sunset and the neighboring creek, writing a poem, drawing and coloring, and drawing on a wall (Bechdel 128–30; 134). Most of these enterprises are nonetheless thwarted by her father's intromission. Her father meddles in her efforts: he corrects her choice of color in "a crayonic tour de force"

(Bechdel 131), and he also improvises "a second stanza on the spot" for a poem Alison writes, which she types underneath her own (Bechdel 129). Afterwards, she completes the page by drawing "a muddy watercolor sunset" wherein she represents "a man, *my sad proxy*, gazing on the *untimely eclipse of his creative light*" (Bechdel 129; 130; emphasis added). Further on, she adds that she "never wrote another poem" (Bechdel 130).

The crayon episode is commented on by several authors, and often linked with Bechdel's declarations that her abandonment of color was a consequence of her father's inescapable influence.[11] Nevertheless, the poem episode is generally overlooked, despite its unquestionable importance for understanding both Bechdel's and her father's attitude towards artistic creation, as well as Bechdel's ill-fated relation with words and truth. It may be the case that the coloring book scene holds greater significance in terms of her later development as an artist—after all, she is a cartoonist.

What is striking about the poem scene is that, unlike other father-daughter scenes that represent moments of emotional bonding, this one depicts Alison being obviously overwhelmed by her father's talent. This is clearly shown in the visual composition of the panel. Bruce occupies most of the space, whereas Alison's face barely emerges from the panel's lower right corner, making her look diminished in comparison (Bechdel 129). She then adds her father's stanza to her poem "limp with admiration" (Bechdel 129). It becomes apparent to her that Bruce possesses a natural inclination for doing things with words, a mastery that Alison cannot but fall short of in emulating it.

This same chapter includes the recollection of Alison's first attempts at autobiographical writing. It is Bruce who first gives Alison a wall calendar and instructs her to "write down what's happening" (Bechdel 140). Bechdel reflects on the overwhelming agitation that organizing her thoughts in a diary caused her:

The entries proceed blandly enough. . . . But in April, the minutely-lettered phrase *I think* begins to crop up between my comments. It was a sort of epistemological crisis. How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true? All I could speak for was my own perceptions, and perhaps not even those. My simple, declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic at best, utter lies at worst. . . . My diary was rapidly becoming as onerous as the rest of my life. (141–2; original emphasis)

Alison's "compulsive propensity to autobiography" is marked from the start by her fear of not being able to suture the "gaping rift between signifier and signified" (Bechdel 140; 142). Her "I think" soon transforms into "a curvy circumflex" that she draws over names, pronouns, and later over entire entries (Bechdel 143). Here her father's mastery of the written word offers a stark contrast with Alison's self-perceived shortcomings. The situation can be read as an extreme case of anxiety of authorship: Alison's fear of letting her own voice be heard is so strong that it becomes paralyzing. It is as if she purposefully gave up on verbal expression, which from here onward pertains to her father's realm alone.

For some time, Alison avoids writing, but later in her teen years finds solace in drawing and the visual. Bechdel explains that the map from her *Wind in the Willows* coloring book was her favorite page, as it mystically bridged "the symbolic and the real, . . . the label and the thing itself" (147). Her "curvy circumflex" was, after all, a drawing with which she intended to suspend the rift between signifier and signified, if only for a moment. Soon thereafter, drawing will become a tool for empowerment and emancipation. In the sixth chapter, "An Ideal Husband," Alison steadily abandons words for pictures in her diaries, or complements the former with the latter. In addition, Bechdel links masturbation and drawing as she observes that "[t]he new realization that I could illustrate my own fantasies filled me with an omnipotence that was in itself erotic" (Bechdel 170). Her sexual awakening is thus

paired with the empowerment she receives from drawing, and signals her transition towards adulthood.

This ill-fated relation with artistic creation crystallizes in *Fun Home* as Bechdel finds herself merging different parts of her experience with the goal of (re)creating her father. She resorts to both visual and verbal expression—her own area of expertise and her father's. The archive that is *Fun Home* thus becomes a mirror that reflects both the parent and the child, but it also turns into the battleground for Bechdel's reclamation of authorial power. After years of submission to Bruce's superior talents at artistic expression, she reacts to his death by tasking herself with fulfilling the role of master narrator previously held by her father: she will be the one in charge of assembling a new archive, an archive in which she makes herself present. For Nancy K. Miller, the child who writes about a dead parent tends to do so in order to demonstrate his or her authority as a writer:

> In these narratives, the parent's death seems to authorize—or at least provide a cover story— for a writer's autobiography. If not explicitly, the memoirs devoted to a dead parent are almost always meditations on a writer's authority, her right to tell this story, the path she followed to telling it. The dead parents' history, especially their family's relation to language and writing, is made to seem inextricable from the story of the living child's vocation. (3)

But before Bechdel can occupy the position of master narrator, she must overcome her own blockage—the same blockage that she experienced as a ten-year-old trying to bridge the rift between signifier and signified. Rohy sees this as an illustrative example of Jacques Derrida's archive fever; and whilst she specifically refers to the diary episode I have mentioned above, I think it can be easily made extensible to the whole of *Fun Home*. Rohy observes that Alison is torn between the "absolutely, objectively true" she prizes and the impossibility of obtaining it; her obsession "leads the diary toward destruction" as"each palimpsestic page tells two

stories, torn between historical narrative and an ahistorical repetition compulsion" (353). The same impulses "to inscription and defacement," she further adds, "signif[y] the contradictions inherent in that project," including "preservation and destruction, truth and lies, fact and fiction, history and literature, authenticity and embellishment" (353).

The archive thus becomes not a warrant of truth, but rather the exposure of the feverish process by which truth is sought. What had been a hindrance in her pre-teen and teen years—the inability to grasp objective truth—here becomes an asset. For some critics, Bechdel's archive fever engenders an alternative queer archive that is full of unrealized possibilities.[12] The whole memoir sets out to explore how telling the difference between reality and representations of it is a futile enterprise (Eveleth 96). In the end, everything that is contained in *Fun Home* has been mediated by Bechdel: in the artistic act, truth and lies cannot be told apart from each other. Likewise, the rigid binary oppositions that Bechdel had used to pin down Bruce's true self become blurred. Just like the archive contains all possibilities without settling on any of them in a definite manner, so does Bruce's portrait resist clear-cut definition:

> For Bruce Bechdel, appearing and being are one and the same, and "transformation" is the shift from one mode of being to another mode of being, not a shift from a mode of appearing to another mode of appearing while being is disconnected from those states. . . . Bruce is all of these things, and more; he is all of the performances that he puts on, and his identity—whether we say gender identity or identity as Bruce Bechdel—is a sublimation of the undercurrents influencing each of these actions. Equal parts masculine and feminine and sometimes simultaneously occupying those modes . . . Bruce's identity escapes easy location and labeling. (Eveleth 101–2)

Albeit apparently cyclical and unsolvable, the labyrinthine archive presents layers and layers of superimposed possibilities resulting from its exhaustive exploration of past selves, alternative temporalities, and contradictory modes of being. Bechdel's sympathetic act of witness allows the archive to become "a queer, utopian landscape where the potential selves do not conflict with the extant self because it can (and always is) read to suit one's needs" (Eveleth 105). For Kate McCullough, *Fun Home*'s recursive form is able to represent "a queer temporality that includes simultaneous multiple versions of the past, multiple temporalities within the present, and multiple simultaneous relationship to a given past moment" (379). In doing so, McCullough further argues, Bechdel generates a "queerly ambivalent yet healing account of Alison's life and her father's suicide" (378). In other words, Bechdel provides many possible answers to her father's mysteries, but refuses to settle for any of them altogether. This, added to her acknowledgment of the mediatedness of her own account, is what places *Fun Home* on the non-subsumptive end of the spectrum of narrative understanding, in my view.

The queer *archon*

Even though the positive aspects seem clear enough, I am compelled to address two problems that arise from Bechdel's artistic endeavor. The first one concerns the monological nature of the resulting archive. Even if Bechdel acknowledges the mediatedness of her own experience, and the impossibility of pinpointing the truth—whatever that might mean—the fact remains that her account fails to incorporate other voices apart from her own. We are never given access to the viewpoint of her mother or her father's teenage lovers. They are, at best, secondary characters whose voices, after having been silenced in Bruce's narrative, are once again omitted in Bechdel's narrative. It could be argued that the absence of plural voices is compensated by the liminal, open nature of the text. Bechdel might be in control of the

narrative, but the acknowledgment of her own limits renders that same control rather lax, hence ineffective to some extent.

However, there is a second problem that makes the former more blatant, and has to do with the control exerted over the archive. Whoever gains control of the archive can likewise gain control over the interpretation of its parts, therefore becoming the generator of meaning. This creates a situation of inequality regarding the access to the archive and the right to interpret it. In a way, the struggle for control over the narrative presupposes that there is a unified master narrative, a dominant fiction (see chapter 2). In other words, despite the identity of the master narrator, the reproduction of the struggle only perpetuates the existence of a pattern of patriarchal domination.

Here Jacques Derrida's notions of archive fever and the archon prove to be useful to understand the dynamics of this struggle. Derrida explains that the original meaning of "archive" comes from the Greek *arkheion*: "initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded" (9; original emphasis). As citizens who "held and signified political power," the archons were bestowed "the right to make or to represent the law" as well as the right to physically guard the documents in the archive:

The archons are first of all the documents' guardians. . . . *They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives*. Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect state the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law. . . . [T]he documents . . . are only kept and classified under the title of the archive by virtue of a privileged topology. They inhabit this unusual place, this place of election where law and singularity intersect in privilege. . . . They all have to do with this topo-nomology, with this archontic dimension of domiciliation, with this archic, in truth patriarchic, function, without which no archive would ever come into play or appear as such.

The archontic power, which also gathers the functions of unification, of identification, of classification, must be paired with what we will call the power of consignation. . . . *Consignation aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration.* In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret which could separate (secernere), or partition, in an absolute manner. (Derrida, "Archive" 10; emphasis added)

Applying Derrida's definitions to *Fun Home*, we have Bruce as the original *archon*, a figure of privilege: he is the family's patriarch and hence the one controlling the creation of meaning. His closeted homosexuality constitutes a perpetual threat to the order of things represented by the patriarchic function that Derrida describes here. By writing the memoir that is *Fun Home*, Alison assumes control over the archive through an act of creation: she puts her own archive together, thereby gaining the "hermeneutic right and competence" to interpret it—or, in other words, to create its meaning, because every act of interpretation is in itself an act of creation. By occupying the position previously held by her father, Bechdel alters the patriarchal order: as a woman and a lesbian, she conquers a position of privilege that was hitherto out of her reach, and in doing so can generate a palimpsest that corrects the previous narrative, controlled by her father.

By taking control of the narrative as the new *archon*, Bechdel culminates the inheritance process. Her father engrosses the list of her personal canon, being recognized as one of the interactions that has made her into the individual she is. She does not present her narrative as a journey of self-generation; on the contrary, she acknowledges what Recalcati calls the symbolic debt and succeeds in subjectivizing it via the artistic process. The very mediatedness of all the elements in *Fun Home*—the fact that she does not reproduce but actually redraws the photographs, for instance—is her own way of laying a claim on her legacy. For Hillary Chute, "Bechdel's father, as cruel and petty as he was, was both a

191

disabling *and* an enabling force for his daughter, who became the artist . . . he always wanted to be, because of him *and* in spite of him" (*Why* 382; original emphasis).

The question remains whether Bechdel's completion of the inheritance process entails a perpetuation of the patriarchal notion of the dominant narrative. As we have seen in the case of Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude*, sometimes reciprocal narration remains an unfulfilled possibility. Here we do not have access to Bruce's version of the events, and never will. When discussing this particular issue in biographical texts dealing with parents, Miller emphasizes that:

> The biography of a parent is always an act of remembering, and like all effects of memory, vulnerable to omission and distortion. . . . And yet those feelings *are* history, alive in the present tense of recollection. What makes these books so powerful as documents is the emotional record they offer of the auto/biographer at work as the scribe of memory, condemned to reconstruct the other in the face of loss—alone. (17; original emphasis)

The dead parent's memoir is marked by this lonely act of memory. As Laplanche also suggests regarding afterwardsness and mourning, after the death of the other the act of memory is condemned to become a monologue. And monologues are dangerous, for they can easily obliterate other voices. I believe it is necessary to bear this in mind when looking at the text from an ethical perspective. Miller speaks of the "children's right to produce these representations of their parents," yet also acknowledges that the exercise of their right "raises an ethical problem" as "the dead instantly lose their entitlement to privacy" (13).

In the case of *Fun Home*, Bruce's privacy is clearly exposed. Her daughter outs him, and then makes a series of decisions regarding the way she handles her father's sexuality and interpersonal relations. Bechdel's reasons for writing this particular book are seemingly reparatory. She seeks to pay tribute to her father's status as a closeted homosexual who did

not enjoy the same opportunities she had, constrained by his own sociohistorical circumstances. However, she assumes this line of thought in spite of her father's lack of confirmation. In fact, Bechdel admits that her attempts to connect Bruce's story with a larger sociohistorical framework are perhaps her way of processing her grief:

Perhaps I'm being histrionic, trying to displace my actual grief with this imaginary trauma. But is it so far-fetched? . . . Or maybe I'm trying to render my senseless personal loss meaningful by linking it, however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative. A narrative of injustice, of sexual shame and fear, of life considered expendable. It's tempting to say that, in fact, this is my father's story. There's a certain emotional expedience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia, but that's a problematic line of thought. (195–6)

To expose her father's "erotic truth" is to grant him a voice that he never found during his lifetime. Pondering her father's suicidal intentions, she concludes that: "I suppose that a lifetime spent hiding one's erotic truth could have a cumulative renunciatory effect. Sexual shame is in itself a kind of death" (Bechdel 228). Later on, Bechdel invokes the intervention of Sylvia Beach, Adrienne Monnier, Margaret Anderson, and Jane Heap in the publication of *Ulysses*, and remarks that these women "were all lesbians" (229). Bechdel comments that "[she] like[s] to think they went to the mat for this book because they were lesbians, because they knew a thing or two about erotic truth" (Bechdel 229). It seems implied that she, like these women, went to the mat for this book, *Fun Home*, because she, as a lesbian, also knows a thing or two about erotic truth—specifically, her father's. However, Bechdel soon steps back and acknowledges that:

"Erotic truth" is a rather sweeping concept. *I shouldn't pretend to know what my father's was.* Perhaps my eagerness to claim him as "gay" in the way I am "gay," as opposed to bisexual or

some other category, is just a way of keeping him to myself—a sort of inverted Oedipal complex. (230; emphasis added)

In her role of *archon* and artist, Bechdel invokes her father's complex identity and generates a narrative that suits her needs. The father-daughter bond she has chosen to showcase is sustained by shared queerness. It is almost as if she *needs* her father to be gay—as opposed to bisexual or pansexual, for instance—so that her story of origin holds together. At the same time, she admits to not knowing her father's insight regarding his sexual orientation. She thus defines her father's sexuality in the same terms she uses for herself. Not having access to her father's testimony prevents her from achieving other answers: did her father consider himself pansexual instead of gay? Indeed, Bruce seems to question the same categories with which Alison constructs her identity when he asks her: "do you have to put a label on yourself?" (211).

Despite being a queer *archon*, it can be argued that Bechdel inflicts a kind of violence on her father insofar as she imposes her interpretation on his life choices—a narrative choice that renders her closer to the totalizing aim of subsumptive narratives. In my view, she tries to counterbalance this situation by stressing her role as a limited narrator, as she repeatedly acknowledges her lack of definite answers. Aleida Assmann posits that the figure of the limitednarrator introduces "epistemological limitations," "philosophical skepticismreferring to the multiple forms of perception and cultural creations of meaning," and "reframing" as it emphasizes mediation (205).[13]

Bechdel is certainly aware of her epistemological limitations; the diary episode is an early symptom of a major concern with which she struggles throughout her adolescence and youth. With regard to reframing and mediation, she never hides the fact that she selects the pieces of evidence that make it into her archive, or the fact that most of those pieces are mediated as she resorts to drawing archival evidence instead of merely reproducing the

items.[14] Philosophical skepticism is represented by queer potential, labyrinthine aesthetics, and the use of jagged temporalities, elements through which the narrator overtly questions the validity of concepts such as truth, veracity, or lies.

However, despite the use of a limited narrator, other issues persist that are worth commenting on. In particular, as I advanced before, the portrayal of her father's relationship with his wife and his pupil-lovers raises many questions. If Bechdel's palimpsestic rewriting of Bruce's identity is an issue insofar as it exerts a form of violence over him, Bruce's interpersonal relations seem invested with an equally violent nature. Does Bechdel normalize this pattern of abusive relationships in her account? Alison's identification with her father, as well as her desire for recognition and affection, prompts a protective response in the face of these episodes. Regarding Bruce's illicit desire for underage kids, Bechdel mentions that her father engaged in relations with "his more promising high school students" with the pretext of "edifying" them, although "the promise was very likely sexual in some cases" (61), but does not really comment on how that made her or her family feel. Upon finding Roy's photo, she excuses her absence of anger by invoking their shared queerness:

> [T]he picture is beautiful. But would I be assessing its aesthetic merits so calmly if it were of a seventeen-year-old girl? Why am I not properly outraged? Perhaps I identify too well with my father's illicit awe. A trace of this seems caught in the photo, just as a trace of Roy has been caught on the light-sensitive paper. (Bechdel 100–1)

For Cvetkovich, "[t]o become a 'witness' . . . to anyone's sexuality is a difficult task . . . [that] can be further heightened when that sexuality is constructed as immoral or criminal or perverse" (114). Alison can enact the role of sympathetic witness and determine the value of the photo according to what it means to her (Cvetkovich 116–7). Of course, what it means to her is conditioned by her own public identity as a lesbian in a time and place different to

those her father inhabited. It is true, though, that Bechdel refuses to interpret her father's story as a product of homophobia "in order to problematize the present," as Cvetkovich observes (124). Bechdel recognizes that this "narrative of injustice, of sexual shame and fear" only "makes it harder for [her] to blame him" (196). Overall, she concedes that she cannot sustain much anger at him, perhaps because "the bar is lower for fathers than for mothers" (Bechdel 22).[15]

In my view, Alison's relation with Bruce is marked by her profound desire to be seen and acknowledged by her father. Moreover, this desire overlaps with Alison's perception of gender performativity. From an early age, she wants to be a boy, and is clearly attracted to hegemonic ideals of masculinity that she desires "subjectively, for myself" (Bechdel 99).[16] Herein lies, in my opinion, the ethical conundrum of *Fun Home*. Despite its celebration of queer potentiality and father-daughter bonds based on mutual affinity rather than blood, the narrative reproduces, perhaps inadvertently, a deeply patriarchal struggle for control over artistic creation and hence authority—the authority to create a narrative and interpret it. This includes the capacity to purposefully leave out other voices and odd elements. Bechdel's resulting narrative engulfs all the other side narratives available, much like her father's had done before. She pretty much plays by the same rules: she establishes her independence through her conquering of the patriarchal position as a response to the (also very patriarchal) anxiety of influence that her father provokes in her. In doing so, she is able to reverse the position and re-create the father who created her:

When they . . . are gone, we can finally make them love us the way we wanted to be loved when they were alive. By reinventing the inventor, you re-create the one, as Roth puts it, who created you. You repair the old wounds and inflict some of your own—that's the storyteller's prerogative. . . . Does your father love you? Does he think you're any good? Does he even

know you're alive? Rewriting his story is a way of answering these questions for yourself.

(Miller 162–3)

Of course, the problem here is that Bechdel's palimpsest, in answering those questions, also reproduces her father's relations of violence and domination over the peripheral characters— most notably, her mother and her father's lovers. By not granting them a voice, she perpetuates a type of discourse that follows a subsumptivelogic, although she tries to balance this with the openness and potentiality of her labyrinthine aesthetics.

Still, one might wonder why she sticks to this narrative in particular. In my view, she does so because it is the only possible conclusion for this particular story: the father dies so that the child can go on living. It is, indeed, "a sort of inverted Oedipal complex" (Bechdel 230), but also the overcoming of the anxiety of influence/authorship and the resolution of her own inheritance process. So to speak, Bechdel needs her father to be gay. She needs him to fit into the narrative she has crafted, even if that entails subsuming other voices under her own. It does not really matter whether his reality matches her daughter's account. In order to become her father's (belated) reciprocal narrator, she cannot but resort to narrative imagination. Of course, her narrative imagination is anchored in several narrative models and discourses that can be easily identified—the hegemonic masculinity ideal of the 1950s and 1960s, the discourse around the gay liberation movement of the 1970s and 1980s. These shared narratives, as well as the works in her and her father's literary canons, become their intertexts: they provide her with bits and pieces that Bechdel borrows to construct her story.

In the book's final pages, Bechdel wonders: "What if Icarus hadn't hurtled into the sea? What if he'd inherited his father's inventive bent? What might he have wrought?" (230). The caption accompanies a panel which reverses the chapter's opening photo, in which Alison is shown jumping from a pool's springboard into her father's arms (Bechdel 187). The final sequence reverses the scene so that we see it from Alison's perspective: Bruce looks up

and waits for her to jump (Bechdel 231). The visual-verbal connection suggests that Alison is Icarus, since she is the one about to jump. However, in a recursive reference to the very beginning of the story, we know that Bruce has also been compared to Icarus in the opening Icarian games' scene (Bechdel 4). The scene can be read in the light of this reference (Bruce is Icarus) or in the light of the visual clues (Alison is Icarus).

In the next (and last) page, the caption "He did hurtle into the sea, of course" draws a straightforward connection with Bruce's death, as it is superimposed to the close-up of a truck like the one that ran over him (Bechdel 232). However, in the very last panel of the story, we see Alison finally jumping into her father's arms: "But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt" (Bechdel 232). Both are Icarus, but a different kind of Icarus: whereas Bruce, like the original mythic figure, dies as a consequence of his fall, Alison jumps and survives. For Watson, this ending proves that Alison "will fly on the wings of homosexual desire that her father never trusted" (35). Watson further argues that "Bechdel's retelling of the story of her father's life, for all its duplicities and shame, as intertwined with her own" is what ultimately allows her to "fly as an artist and a woman":

> [T]his final frame invites us to imaginatively accompany her leap—into life and sexuality, reversed and interpreted autographically. The frame's dialogue box about "tricky reverse narration" references the switch of both angles of view and gestural affect from the beginning drawn photo to the final frame of the book. It also captures the larger reversal of positions in which Bechdel meshes Bruce's history with Alison's as a transmission of sexual stories that impels her comics and enables her to become the author of their stories. (50)

I think Watson's reading of the final frame is spot on. At the heart of *Fun Home* is the "reversal of positions" that involves Bruce's and Alison's role. This reversal is necessary in

order for Alison to complete her inheritance process and achieve symbolic and artistic independence from the father figure, even if it implies reproducing the same patterns of authority and anxiety over the act of (artistic) creation. On a concluding note, I believe that the non-subsumptive logic nonetheless counters the subsumptive elements. After all, Bechdel somehow relinquishes control of the narrative as she acknowledges that she does not have all the answers. Unlike Bruce, she is not an overwhelming authoritative presence: she misjudges situations and makes mistakes in her telling, and never hesitates to acknowledge her shortcomings as narrator. The road to dismantling the patriarchal dominant fiction embedded in our narrative unconscious is, after all, a rocky one.

Notes

1. I will hereafter refer to the medium as "comics" in the plural, following McCloud, Chute, and others, whom in doing so emphasize the difference between the physical artifact (i.e., a comic book) and the medium (i.e., *Fun Home* is an autobiographical comics). In other words, I will use the plural word "comics" as a singular noun (as in "Comics is a hybrid medium"). Moreover, by doing so I mean to draw attention to the fact that the word "comics" is a legitimate way to address the medium as opposed to "graphic novel" or other inaccurate yet somehow privileged terms. I believe that this sort of terminology introduces a faux hierarchy between high-brow and low-brow comics, and therefore have chosen not to use it in my research. For further discussion about the use of the term "comics," see McCloud and Chute's "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative."

2. For a thorough—and enjoyable!—discussion of comics semiotics, see McCloud.

3. See Porter.

4. Even though *Nachträglichkeit* and afterwardsness roughly refer to the same concept, the former is used when discussing the original Freudian concept, whereas the latter is associated with Jean Laplanche's revision of the same concept. Laplanche uses the German term when he addresses Freud's original notion, and the French term *après-coup* (translated in English as afterwardsness) when he discusses his own theoretical developments. Here I will maintain the same terminological distinction for clarity's sake.

5. I have tried to summarize the most relevant features of *Nachträglichkeit* insofar as they will later help me to shed light on the text I analyze. Given my limited knowledge of psychoanalysis, I am aware that my

review might not be too thorough. For a more complete and informed overview of the concept, including its evolution after Freud, see Eickhoff.

6. It is worth mentioning that Alison Bechdel did, indeed, reenact those scenes quite literally, as she based most of her drawings for *Fun Home* on either family photos or reference shots she took dressed as the characters she intended to draw (Chute "Interview" 1009–10). Cross-dressing and embodiment are therefore central to the memoir for many different reasons. For more on gender and embodiment in *Fun Home*, see Cvetkovich and Watson.

7. See, for example, Fox and McCullough.

8. All three versions are overhead shots, but two of them are close-ups of Alison's figure lying on the floor (Bechdel 59; 211), whereas the other one shows more of Alison's room around her (79). The first panel shows one of Alison's avatars lying on the floor and surrounded by objects that we can only see partially; namely, a sketchbook and a book entitled *Sappho was a Right-on Woman* (Bechdel 59). The caption above the panel explains that Bechdel felt pulled back into her parents' orbit after her coming out, while she was expecting it to become her definite emancipation. The second panel shows Alison's bedroom in college from above again, only that this time nothing has been cropped out. It is interesting that we get to see this whole picture after twenty pages in which Bechdel details her parents' marriage story, her father's queer relation to literature, and her own exploration of her sexuality. We know which books are present on the bookshelf because we have already seen them in previous pages. The information presented in the second panel was scattered throughout the last twenty pages, and now is presented again in a condensed manner.

9. This same idea is also developed by Allison (76) and Eveleth, who argues that this effect is based on the use of "labyrinthine aesthetics" (88).

10. I will not deal with queer genealogy understood as queer history here, but will focus solely on Bechdel's personal history. For more on the relation between queer temporalities and (queer) history, see Cvetkovich, Fox, and McCullough.

11. In an interview, Bechdel declared that her choices on using color were influenced by her father: "I was committed to doing everything [in *Fun Home*] in black and white because it was sort of like my story with my dad. My dad was a color freak and he was always into painting and wanted me to do more with color. He would show me how to color in my coloring books as a child. I would always rebel against that. I wanted to prove that you don't need color to reproduce the world in a convincing way. I just felt like I wasn't going to not

do it because of my dad. That would just be giving him more power. So I decided sure, what the hell, let's use color." (Mautner n.p.)

12. For instance, Eveleth argues that the labyrinthine presentation of the archive, a product of Alison's search, is not really different from her father's insofar as her presentation of reality is a "remediation of it" (103).

13. For a detailed definition of the concept, see Assmann.

14. In this respect, it is absolutely necessary to emphasize that the photographs and other pieces of archival evidence were not reproduced, but drawn by Bechdel. This choice already constitutes a statement: the archive only acquires meaning once Bechdel has filtered, recreated, and assembled its many parts, thereby granting them significance. Photos anchor the story in real life; in a way, they are like maps—and Bechdel finds relief in maps, as she tells us herself in chapter 5. They also constitute an opportunity to assume Bruce's gaze, hence enabling Bechdel's acts of sympathetic witnessing.

15. It is true that Bechdel published another memoir, *Are You my Mother?* (2012), in which she deals with her relationship with her mother. However, here I'm interested in analyzing *Fun Home* as a detached text, and in the type of relations and power dynamics that are depicted in it.

16. Alison's fascination with the hegemonic masculinity model of the American fifties and sixties is a conspicuous feature in chapter four, "In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower." She admires Roy for his "masculine charms" (Bechdel 95), wishes to get a "crewcut" (96), and is mesmerized at the sight of the truck-driving bulldyke: "I didn't know there were women who wore *men's* clothes and had *men's* haircuts" (118; emphasis added). She's also shown watching the TV show *The Rifleman*, a Western that follows the lives of a Civil War veteran and widower who lives in a farm with his son. This might be taken as a hint into Alison's deepest desires: to live a masculine life with a masculine father who would take care of her. The panel actually shows the main character firing two guns while his son watches. Meanwhile, Alison silently watches her own father arranging some flowers in a vase, probably measuring his shortcomings as a masculine model (Bechdel 95).

CHAPTER 5 – Paternity After the End of the World: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

If we had to pick one recently published book about fatherhood, most likely *The Road* would be among the first ones to come to mind. Cormac McCarthy's harrowing narrative about a father and a son journeying through a post-apocalyptic landscape has captured the interest of the general public and scholars alike ever since its publication in 2006. Inadvertently, its sweeping success has contributed to the pervasive perception that father figures are experiencing somewhat of a revival lately. Some critics have seen in it the confirmation of a hypermodern longing for the father. For instance, Massimo Recalcati regards *The Road* as an example of how to articulate and pass on paternal testimony in the wake of the evaporation of the father (*Qué Queda* 105–6).[1] Others highlight its optimistic message despite the generally bleak atmosphere that impregnates the text.[2] Alan Noble calls it "one of the most intimate and loving father and son relationships in American literature" (93). Arielle Zibrak remarks that "[r]eviews almost uniformly laud the sentimental portrait of consanguineous love; many seem to imply that the tenderness—a ubiquitous word choice— that the man shows towards the boy somehow eclipses or undoes the scenes of brutal violence contained in the novel" (104–5).

Why is this story read in overall optimistic terms so often? In my view, it is the father-son relationship which articulates the possibility of a hopeful reading for many. The man's reluctance to renounce hope and his willingness to protect his son are endearing. His efforts to persevere stem from his love of the child—and he is there for the child, always. Moreover, this abnegated father tries to provide him with a moral compass with which to navigate the post-apocalyptic world. Considering Hannah Hamad's remarks about postfeminist fatherhood (see chapter 1), I cannot but wonder whether the father in *The Road* is symptomatic of a

greater paradigm shift, as some authors seem to believe. Perhaps we should wonder whether it is so strange to find a father that is present—so rare to encounter a man who loves his child. Have we become so accustomed to representations of deadbeat dads and absent paternal figures that this man's behavior strikes us as shocking?

Even worse, we could be so bedazzled by this hands-on model of paternity that we might end up overlooking where this alleged ethics of fatherhood leads us. In my view, the novel displays a vision of ethics and morality that is far more nuanced than many readings of the novel suggest. In other words, I am not wary of the text itself, but I think we must be cautious with how easily we assume *The Road* is revolutionary with respect to paternal representation because the father repeatedly demonstrates how much he loves his child. In the following analysis, I seek to critically examine the representation of the father-child bond in order to elucidate the complex portrayal of fatherhood that emerges from the text. In particular, I am interested in analyzing the evolution of the ethical stance taken by the father, as opposed to that of his son and his late wife.

In my opinion, the novel opens a path in which the potential of individual, embodied fatherhood is thoroughly explored, only to veer off onto the traditionally patriarchal version of fatherhood at the very end. This shift somehow consolidates the vision that the new paternity ultimately leads to the old paternity—something with which I cannot but agree, especially given the novel's ending. I believe that *The Road* does include elements that can be read as subversive or challenging to the father-patriarchy conflation, particularly the fallible, embodied father and the suicidal mother. In what follows, I survey the construction of the two main characters, father and child, and also comment on the depiction of the so-called "bad guys" (i.e., virtually any other character that appears in the novel). In particular, I focus on the paternal contradictions that are rendered visible by the disruptive maternal presence, and argue that this effect is obliterated by the moral triumph of the father over the mother in

the novel's ending. By assessing character building, but also formal and stylistic choices such as the use of focalization, I aim to shed light on the father's ethical standpoint, his choices, and his relation to the child. Afterwards, I move on to consider the kind of ethics that is configured in the novel, as well as the role each character plays in its formation. I contend that despite its individualization of the paternal function, *The Road* falls on the subsumptive side of the spectrum as it concludes with the re-creation of the paternal symbolic. In other words, instead of challenging the father-patriarchy conflation, it ultimately contributes to further consolidate it.

The good guy

Let us begin by examining the father's characterization in *The Road*. The opening scene of the novel shows us the father's waking up after a nightmare "in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night" (McCarthy 3). His very first action consists in reaching for the child, whose presence comforts him. The father will be the main focalizer throughout most of the novel; it is through his eyes that we are offered a glimpse into the post-apocalyptic landscape. Within the first few pages, the father seeks "anything of color" that would contrast with the desolate landscape's "dead trees" and dim "ashen daylight" that makes "everything pal[e] away into the murk" (McCarthy 3–4). Sight is the main means through which the dire circumstances are conveyed: father and child constantly watch to find "any sign of a fire or a lamp" around them only to corroborate that "[t]here was nothing": "Nothing to see. . . . Can I see? the boy said. Yes. Of course you can. . . . What do you see? the man said. Nothing" (McCarthy 7).

Like the monster in his dream that "stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders" (McCarthy 3), the father is not blind but sightless. Surrounded by "blackness to hurt your ears with listening," a "sightless and impenetrable . . . cold autistic dark" (McCarthy 13), he is desperate and lost. He has been orphaned by the

unnamed catastrophe taking over the land. In a scene that bears notable resemblance to that of the crucifixion, he lets his frustration overwhelm him: "Are you there? he whispered. *Will I see you at the last?* Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God" (McCarthy 10; emphasis added).[3]

The semantic field of sight is seminal to the novel's storyworld.[4] Besides conveying a bleak atmosphere, visual cues are associated with the vanishing world order, on one hand, and goodness and hope, on the other hand. The man constantly surveys his environment in search of signs of civilized life. When he fails to find any, he thinks that "if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory" (McCarthy 16). Life as he knew it has disappeared, and color has become something to be wary of: "And the dreams so rich in color. How else would death call you?" (McCarthy 18). Dream sequences, in contrast to waking life, are full of color; namely, his dead wife and mother of the child appears in his dreams "out of a *green* and leafy canopy . . . her rib bones painted *white* . . . her *dark* hair was carried up in combs of *ivory*" (McCarthy 15; emphasis added). The man fears that remembering will lead him to daydreaming, which he regards as "the call of languor and of death": "For daydreams on the road there was no waking" (McCarthy 15; 16).

All the man has left are his memories; nevertheless, he refuses to yield to the temptation they represent. He is acutely aware of the slow and inexorable disappearance of everything he once knew: "The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness and night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. Turns out the light and is gone" (McCarthy 24). Even though the man keeps on going, he is radically alone insofar as he cannot share his feelings of uprootedness with anybody. His son, having been born after the event that caused the world's destruction, does not truly grasp the magnitude of his father's loss—the sense of despair as everything is obliterated forever:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible [*sic*] entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (McCarthy 75)

Without external referents, language—hence the possibility of communication—comes to an end. Civilization has already been extinguished, or so the man muses: "On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world" (McCarthy 27). Having faith in any prospect of futurity is a chimera, if only because the man has witnessed the horrors following the unnamed catastrophe. He has seen marauders and roadrats killing and raping and enslaving and cannibalizing others. His conviction that the world is divided into good guys and bad guys structures his interaction with the rest of the characters. In other words, the man seems to be intimately convinced that there must be more good guys out there somewhere; at the same time, he is reluctant to establish any sort of interaction with others, lest it might put him and his son in danger.

The world depicted in *The Road* lacks any sort of social order. There are no institutions, no sense of family or collectivity, no interpersonal bonds whatsoever.[5] Mutual interconnectedness has been replaced by an acute sense of individual survival: trusting strangers can easily turn into the beginning of a horrid nightmare. In this extreme context, fatherhood is divested of most of its features: it no longer depends on tradition, custom, or social bonding of any sort, given that human institutions have collapsed. Biological parenthood is not a warrant either, as is shown in the scene in which father and child stumble upon "a charred human infant headless and gutted" abandoned at a fire camp (McCarthy 167). The only possibility for a significant bond to be established thus depends on the

individual self's capacity to address the other, to create shared meaning and maintain communication open.

For Judith Butler, every account of oneself to another "takes place in the context of an address. I give an account of myself *to you*" (31; original emphasis). In addition, she continues, the context of such an address "means that I am engaging not only in a reflexive activity, thinking aboutand reconstructing myself, but also in speaking to you and thus instituting a relation in language as I go" (31). For the characters in *The Road*, addressing the other and hence instituting a relation in language, as Butler says, is the only way out of complete isolation and despair, but it is also a huge risk to take given their situation. And although "our exchange is mediated by language, by conventions, by a sedimentation of norms that are social in character," in the words of Butler (23), even in the event of these norms' erasure there is still a chance for creating meaningful bonds.[6]

After his wife's death, the child becomes the man's sole interlocutor. He is the only one that he is willing to trust enough to establish a relation in language—perhaps so because the child is partly other, but also partly same, as Levinas would have it. The man feels that he must cherish his interlocutor, to the extent that he equals his presence with that of God: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (McCarthy 4). It is interesting to observe that the word of God is what sets the creation of the world in motion: "And God said, Let there be light; and there was light" (*King James Bible*, Genesis 1:3). In Genesis, the spoken word and the light are inextricably entwined as both emanate from God. In *The Road*, both are also inextricably entwined in the figure of the child. I will come back to the symbolism of the child in the following section.

To talk is to preserve hope, however dim it might be. The man cherishes communication, but from time to time he needs to make sure that the child remains receptive to their exchanges: "So when are you going to talk to me again?" (McCarthy 44); "You have

to talk to me" (McCarthy 58; 65; 79; 219; 225); "Are you talking? he said" (McCarthy 147). Usually, the child's reluctance to speak follows some kind of traumatic scene or encounter, suggesting that the harshness of reality forecloses communication and thereby hope. After seeing the headless, charred baby, the man wonders if the child would "ever speak again" (McCarthy 167). Likewise, the child is also silenced by the violence his father inflicts upon others, which reinforces the connection between the hopeless scenario they trod and the loss of language and civilization. The forces of violence and trauma are irreconcilable with humanity, conveyed here by the possibility of communication.

A similar idea is expressed by Ely, the only other person with whom both father and child talk in the novel. Upon hearing the man suggest that the child is "a god," Ely replies that "[w]here men cant live gods fare no better" (McCarthy 145). In order to keep the child speaking and hopeful, the man needs to make sure that the world they inhabit is a place where men can indeed live. In other words, faced with utter devastation, he burdens himself with the task of creating meaning in a meaningless world for the child's sake. In spite of the grim reality, the vision of a forest fire rekindles his willingness to carry out his task: "Cold as it was he stood there a long time. The color of it moved something in him long forgotten. Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember" (McCarthy 27).

The man tasks himself with recreating all sorts of childhood staples for his son. For instance, he tries to teach him how to play cards with a deck "he found in a bureau drawer in a house," but he is mostly incapable of remembering "the rules of childhood games," so in the end "he made up new games and gave them made up names" (McCarthy 45). Moreover, he keeps the can of Coca Cola for the boy to try as a "treat," carves a flute for him, and teaches him the alphabet among other things (McCarthy 19–20; 66; 206). Yet, in spite of his good intentions, "[t]he culture that the man creates for the boy is only applicable to a world in which they no longer live" (Zibrak 108). The disconnection between them becomes more

apparent every time they encounter something that the child never got the chance to experience firsthand: "Then he picked up the phone and dialed the number of his father's house in that long ago. The boy watched him. What are you doing? he said" (McCarthy 6). So even as the man struggles to satisfy his curiosity, there is only so much he can manage to do:

> Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory. He thought hard how to answer. There is no past. What would you like? But he stopped making things up because those things were not true either and the telling made him feel bad. (McCarthy 46)

Instead of dwelling on the past, the man settles on crafting a series of tales that reinforce the communal bound between them: "Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (McCarthy 63). Thus, the man becomes a storyteller, the forger of a Manichean mythology that presents their community of two as the good guys that are carrying the fire. It is likely that he modeled those stories after the "[o]ld stories of courage and justice as he remembered them" (McCarthy 35) but, unlike these, their shared mythology does have roots in a world they both know personally. In a world where encounters seldom take place and are often extremely dangerous, the man insists that there might be some other good guys out there that are "refugees" just like they are (67). Their intrinsic goodness, manifested through the fact that they are "carrying the fire," prevents them from suffering any harm: "We're going to be okay, arent we Papa? . . . And nothing bad is going to happen to us. . . . Because we're carrying the fire" (McCarthy 70). Despite being extremely problematic, this clear-cut division between the good guys and "the bad guys" imposes some order in the man's shattered world. Nevertheless, the child does not share his father's polarized vision, as we will see in subsequent sections.

Rune Graulund aptly observes that the man, despite his anger at "this absent God," is in no case an "atheist":

The man, who is the very essence of fatherhood, passionately needs to believe in the existence of God, the absent Father. First of all because this would open the possibility of apportioning blame and hence enact causality and meaning once more (the apocalypse happened because God has willed it/has failed), but most of all because this means an entertaining of the hope that the absent father might at one point return in order to restore the world and relieve the man of his burden. Since God refuses to manifest, however, the hope invested in divinity is eventually transferred to the one being that quite literally seems to be of another, and future, world. (75)

The man's desire to be relieved of his burden is subtle, but unmistakably there, just like his desire to commend himself to some higher instance that will reward him for, or at least release him from, his efforts. His orphanhood is as literal as it is metaphorical; all ties with the past have been severed, or rather, obliterated by the unnamed catastrophe. Meanwhile, the man also reprimands himself for his naivety in believing there is some prospect of recognition by an Other that is no longer there: "Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledgerbook? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground" (McCarthy 165). Later on, he reassures himself that "maybe they are watching": "They are watching for a thing that even death cannot undo and if they do not see it they will turn away from us and they will not come back" (McCarthy 177). In the end, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, he continues to place "hopes where he'd no reason to" (McCarthy 180), even when he is on the very brink of dying.

What gives him hope is the child's mere existence, the only other that remains by his side. Early on, we are told that "the boy was all that stood between him and death"

211

(McCarthy 25). Besides regarding him as a manifestation of some higher power, the man perceives the boy as a grounding force: as father to that child, he has acquired the responsibility to protect him; without the child, he would not be a father, but only a man— and that is not enough to make it through this post-apocalyptic nightmare. In other words, it is the existence of a stronger bond between them that motivates him to keep going. Needless to say, this bond exists only insofar as the father wants it to exist. There is nothing but the man's will to be a father to that child: no institutions, no societal conventions, not even a nuclear family (that is, during most of the novel). The willingness to perform this role stems only from the man's determination—or that is the impression he projects, at least.[7]

This situation bears resemblance to that of Abraham and Isaac, as some critics have noted (see Noble). In the biblical story of Isaac's sacrifice, Abraham receives God's command and is thus compelled to execute it; insofar as it is a command that overwrites human law, Abraham feels he cannot escape it. The dilemma hence arises between Abraham's allegiance to human and social law (including his allegiance to his family) and his faith (Derrida, *Gift* 62). In *The Road* there is also a command—or so the man claims: "My job is to take care of you. *I was appointed to do that by God*. I will kill anybody who touches you. Do you understand?" (McCarthy 65; emphasis added). This would be proof that attests to God's existence: that He has spoken to the man and commanded him to do His will. Here there are two plausible alternatives: either we choose to believe the man, and therefore go with the religious-imbued explanation, or we reject doing so, on the grounds of his potential unreliability.[8]

I feel more inclined to read the father's mission to protect the child as a way to secure some meaning amid meaninglessness, in tune with Ross Church's observation that "in the world where there is no reason to live, only the fear of death, the father must use his son to create meaning" (26). In my view, this option is more congruent with the father's wavering

faith as he wonders whether there is a higher entity. If there is none, then that entails that his self-imposed mission to "carry the fire" is rendered meaningless. In other words, the father must keep on believing in some preternatural force (be it the Christian God, be it an imprecise deity) even if every clue suggests otherwise—because if he stops believing, then his whole mission in life shatters.

This notwithstanding, the ending of the novel proves the existence of some kind of god-like power. As he lies dying beside the fire, he watches his son and feels content at last:

There was light all about him. . . . He took the cup and moved away and when he moved the light moved with him. . . . He lay watching the boy at the fire. He wanted to be able to see. Look around you, he said. There is no prophet in the earth's long chronicle who's not honored here today. Whatever form you spoke of you were right. (McCarthy 233)

In the end, the existence of God equals the existence of the child inasmuch as he represents purity and kindness in their utmost form, but especially inasmuch the son ultimately grants meaning to the father's ordeal. In an unusual yet noteworthy inversion of roles, the son embodies the symbolic, absent father the man had been looking for throughout the novel. Some critics have nonetheless argued that being turned into a god-like figure renders the son a fetish of his father's longing for wholeness and reduces him to an object (Church 26). In order to shed light on this and other issues so far left unaddressed (e.g., the father as an ethical figure, the question of focalization and reliability), let us now move on to examine the figure of the child more closely.

The best guy

Even though the man could be considered the main character of the novel, I think it is the boy who really constitutes the story's ethical and moral core. He is the reason the man has decided to carry on despite all odds, and often enacts the most humane position amid the violent, ruthless characters that populate the novel's scenarios. As advanced in the previous section, the child stands for hope and the promise of futurity, whatever that might mean. However, we are barely provided with any information regarding the child as the narrator's voice is filtered through the man's perspective. From this viewpoint, we can perfectly grasp the great importance conferred on the child, but lack any sort of insight into the child's experience or goals. Is he aware of his father's outpouring of devotion for him? Is he comfortable with it? How did he cope with his mother's suicide, and what does he feel about his father's seeming disinterest in bringing that up in conversation? These are some of the issues on which I will try to shed light in what follows.

The opening sentence could as well summarize the whole novel; it sets the tone for the rest of it. In it we find the man waking up from a nightmare and immediately reaching out "to touch the child sleeping beside him" (McCarthy 3). It is interesting to note that the child's presence appears filtered through the paternal gaze from the very beginning, and will continue to be so until the very last few pages. Only after the man's demise will we have direct access to the child's viewpoint. Throughout most of the text, however, the child's perceptions and opinions will mainly appear in dialogue. Many of these are brief and convey a sense of familiarity, but also repetition, as if the pair had been immersed in this dynamic for a long time: "Hi, Papa, he said. / I'm right here. / I know" (McCarthy 5).

The child, who must be around the age of ten, is described as "thin," "so thin it stopped [the man's] heart," "[g]hostly pale," "[t]aut face and hollow eyes" (McCarthy 25; 33; 87). He is often scared, barely smiles, and is generally prone to silence, usually keeping his

conversations short and aseptic (McCarthy 16; 21; 23; 24). This somber external appearance offers a stark contrast with the child's constant association with the semantic fields of fire and light, a perception that is—again—filtered through the father's gaze. I have already mentioned the passage where he is identified with the word of God (McCarthy 4).[9] However, it is far more frequent that he is situated in a context where he is either next to a source of light or emitting light himself, and often identified with objects present in Christian worship: "He watched him stoke the flames. God's own firedrake"; "Golden chalice, good to house a god"; "he would raise his weeping eyes and see him standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle" (McCarthy 26; 64; 230).[10]

In spite of the close bond the boy shares with his father, they belong to different worlds in quite a literal sense. Whereas the father feels burdened by the idea that the world he knew has disappeared and only the child remains to keep him company, the boy does not seem to share the same preoccupations. For example, when the man insists on entering his old childhood home, the boy's reaction is one of fear which later supersedes his father's nostalgia. Still, there are moments in which the child seems to enjoy his father's vast knowledge of things long gone: "You can read me a story, the boy said. Cant you, Papa?"; "they sat warm in their refuge while he told the boy stories. Old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them" (McCarthy 7; 35). He plays the flute his father carves for him, and demonstrates he has made the most out of his father's lessons when he studies the map, learns the names of the cities by heart, or reads the labels in the bunker (McCarthy 36; 117). He shows only moderate interest in the world before: "Sometimes the child would ask him questions about the world that for him was not even a memory" (McCarthy 46).

In a rare glimpse into the child's psyche, we are told that he had "his own fantasies. How things would be in the south. Other children" (McCarthy 46). Yet his inner world remains a mystery even for his own father:

> Why don't you tell me a story?
>
> I dont want to. . . . I dont have any stories to tell.
>
> You could tell me a story about yourself.
>
> You already know all the stories about me. You were there.
>
> You have stories inside that I don't know about. . . . Like dreams. Or just things that you think about.
>
> Yeah, but stories are supposed to be happy. . . . You always tell happy stories.
>
> You dont have any happy ones?
>
> They're more like real life. (McCarthy 226)

The boy's aloofness, together with his pertinent observations, contributes to magnify the halo of holiness already present in the father's vision. Despite his young age, there is a serenity about him that makes him appear older and wiser than he is. For instance, the boy scolds his father for trying to give him his share of cocoa instead of enjoying it himself, and reminds him that: "I have to watch you all the time . . . If you break little promises you'll break big ones. That's what you said" (McCarthy 29). Later on, he accuses him of doing something that he had forbidden the child to do: "One time I heard you crying. . . . So if I shouldnt cry you shouldnt cry either" (McCarthy 227).

Not only does the boy demonstrate that he has interiorized his father's teachings, but also appears to have surpassed him with regard to his behavior. In spite of the child's lack of a conventional socialization, he appears to have assimilated the stories passed on by his father, those stories of courage and justice mentioned above. There are no moments of

teaching featured in the novel, so we can only assume the nature of such lessons. Despite this, we can gather some information through the questions and comments uttered by the child. The main element that grants coherence to those lessons is the antithetical opposition between the "good guys" and the "bad guys." Some references allow us glimpses into the kind of doubts this might have generated for the child. The boy seems rather interested in knowing more about the other "good guys" his father speaks about, since, apparently, he has never met any of them. I will expand on the father's rigid notions of what qualifies as a "good guy" in the following section.

For the time being, let us just say that they both have different definitions of that term. The man is wary of strangers, and understandably so, given that he witnessed the collapse of civilization: "Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road" (McCarthy 28). Nevertheless, it can be argued that the boy has also had his fair share of abominations: "Come on, the man said. Everything's okay. . . . But when he bent to see into the boy's face under the hood of the blanket he very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again" (McCarthy 114).

In an article comparing the final version of *The Road* with an earlier draft, entitled *The Grail*, Allan Chavkin and Nancy Feyl Chavkin call attention to the fact that this previous text brings to the forefront the father's innermost beliefs, as well as his profound disagreement with his late wife. In particular, they discuss the man's notion of "transcendental responsibility that continues even after death," which is still traceable in the definite version (196). They note that for the man "parental obligation does not necessarily have to end with the eternal silence of the grave":

> Not to give up in this bleak wasteland is a belief that is difficult to abide by given the circumstances. . . . What makes the man's and the boy's behavior heroic is not only the refusing to take the way out that the mother does but also abiding by their moral code when the vast majority of survivors have jettisoned all civilized behavior. (198)

It is unquestionable that father and son follow a similar moral code, but it is also true that there are noticeable differences between their conceptions of what is truly ethical. The central role of responsibility in the man's ethical system is foregrounded by Massimo Recalcati, who identifies the man's will to keep on taking care of the boy as the Levinasian "*Me voici !*" ('here I am!'), that is, the infinite responsibility we acquire the moment we respond to the ethical invocation of the Other (*Qué Queda* 105). Further on, he points out that this attitude corresponds to the dialectics of recognition whereby the man renounces his own self in order to look after the boy (*Qué Queda* 106–7). In other words, instead of trying to embody the ideal of the symbolic father, the man focuses on the particular bonds of love and care he shares with his particular, individual son. As we will see, this is to be interpreted quite literally.

For the man, being a good guy entails infinite responsibility towards the other, a responsibility that lasts longer than life itself. In addition, the man's idea of infinite responsibility goes hand in hand with a discourse of endurance in the face of adversity: "This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up" (McCarthy 116). Unlike his late wife, the man has decided to resist the temptation of death because he feels responsible (and infinitely so) for his son. These two traits, responsibility and endurance, define the good-guy rhetoric he believes in. Nevertheless, the commitment displayed by the father towards others is suspended: the child represents the absolute other for him. Following Levinas's idea of asymmetrical and infinite responsibility, Jacques Derrida argues that it is impossible to enter into such a relationship with an other without sacrificing "the other others": "As soon as

I enter into a relation with the other . . . I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others" (*Gift* 68):

> I can respond only to the one (or to the One), that is, to the other, by sacrificing the other to that one. I am responsible to any one (that is to say to any other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice . . . I can never justify the fact that I prefer or sacrifice any one (any other) to the other. (Derrida, *Gift* 70)

Through the biblical story of Isaac's sacrifice, Derrida defines absolute duty in terms of the individual's freedom to refuse:

> In essence God says to Abraham: I can see right away that you have understood what absolute duty towards the unique one means, that it means responding where there is no reason to be asked for or to be given; I see that not only have you understood that as an idea, but that—and here lies responsibility—you have acted on it . . . Abraham is thus at the same time the most moral and the most immoral, the most responsible and the most irresponsible of men, absolutely irresponsible because he is absolutely responsible . . . because he responds absolutely to absolute duty, disinterestedly and without hoping for a reward . . . He recognizes neither debt nor duty to his fellows because he is in a relationship to God—a relationship without relation because God is absolutely transcendent, hidden, and secret . . . not sharing anything in this dissymmetrical alliance. (*Gift* 72–3)

In a similar fashion, by assuming his responsibility towards the boy, the man severs his ties with all the others, including his wife: "A few nights later she gave birth in *their* bed . . . Her cries meant nothing to him . . . He held aloft the scrawny red body so raw and naked and . . .

wrapped *his* son in a towel" (McCarthy 50; emphasis added). Likewise, he focuses on the child and the child alone; anybody else they encounter in their journey represents either a threat or a potential competitor for food and resources.

Whereas Chavkin and Chavkin reduce the issue to a question of "tension between the practical father and the idealistic son" (197), I believe there is more depth to it. On one hand, it is true that the boy's kindness, expressed towards everybody they meet, can be read as excessive compassion by someone who has no real grasp of how dire their situation truly is— otherwise he would be more like his father. However, the child has already gone through a lot, and probably has suffered at least as much as the older man. Still, he insists on helping out others, even in cases where the situation cannot be fixed. For instance, when the pair crosses paths with a man struck by lightning, the child weeps and begs his father to do something, even though there is nothing to be done: "We have no way to help him. I'm sorry for what happened to him but we cant fix it. You know that, dont you?" (McCarthy 43).

Nevertheless, the encounter with another boy around his age shakes him the most. He longs to see him, and later cannot stop thinking about him and his well-being: "What if the little boy doesnt have anybody to take care of him? What if he doesnt have a papa? . . . We should go get him, Papa. We could get him and take him with us. . . . And I'd give that little boy half of my food" (McCarthy 72–3). His specific offerings and well-aimed questions suggest that it is not the first time they maintain this sort of conversation. Still, the man is adamant that the other boy does not even exist, hinting that it might be a projection of the child's profound desire for interpersonal connections (McCarthy 74).

It might be the case that the boy's desire to help others stems from his own repressed (and unfulfilled) desire to help his mother and thereby save her life. In a similar vein, it is likely that the man sees himself as a failure in his role of protector after that same episode: "He did not take care of her and she died alone somewhere in the dark and there is no other

dream nor other waking world and there is no other tale to tell" (McCarthy 27). Whatever the cause may be, the fact is that the boy is always willing to answer the others' call, whilst the man keeps himself focused on their community of two. I will focus on the issues raised by the maternal figure in the following section.

Their antithetical approach to the subject of helping others creates a rift between them. The boy rebukes his father and calls out the dissonance between his teachings and his actions: "Those stories are not true . . . in the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people" (McCarthy 225). In Zibrak's view, the father "actively discourages any of the boy's attempts towards communication with others" (107). For Zibrak, it is "fear" which causes the man "to act violently and suspiciously towards others, a posture he justifies through his relationship to the boy, a relationship built on a mythology associated with a defunct world" (123). I feel more inclined to believe that this reluctance to cultivate other bonds has its source somewhere else. After all, the novel ends with the recently orphaned boy being adopted by another group of people, even though it will entail fewer resources for them in the foreseeable future. Does that imply that they are better than the man, morally speaking? In my view, the man's rejection of other relationships has to do with an irrational terror of being proven wrong somehow. He has sacrificed so much that he could not bear to have his actions questioned, and especially not by his own child.

Let us take a closer look at the man's discourse. As seen in the previous section, meaning and the creation/erasure of meaning plays a seminal role in the novel. The man is clearly preoccupied by this issue, as he reflects on the disappearance of concepts, ideas, and ultimately language itself (McCarthy 75). He struggles to "[e]voke the forms" and advocates that "[w]hen you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (McCarthy 63). This advice comes from none other than his late wife:

221

The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. (McCarthy 49)

This "passable ghost" the man ends up creating is the result of combining a series of elements that were arguably either present in his life prior to the catastrophe or necessary to get on with his life. The pillar of his narrative is the boy, a "blessing" (McCarthy 26) that gives meaning to his life and, most importantly, provides him with a mission: to take care of him and secure a future for him, however dim the chances are. Paired with the ideas on transcendental responsibility I have discussed before, as well as with his philosophy of endurance despite all odds (a very Christian theme indeed), the narrative secures some sense of duty that gives meaning to the man's actions. Last, but not least, he relies on the "good guys" rhetoric to prove to the boy that they are going to be fine:

We're going to be okay, arent we Papa?

Yes. We are.

And *nothing bad is going to happen to us*.

That's right.

Because we're carrying the fire.

Yes. Because we're carrying the fire. (McCarthy 70; emphasis added)

The man clings to his own mythology for his son's sake, but also because he desperately wants to believe what he tells him. This attitude bears notable resemblance to the man's alleged desire to believe in God—any god—so that the events they have gone through may acquire some sort of meaning. As Eric Wielenberg points out in his analysis of *The Road*,

"[t]he more reason we have to doubt God's reality, the more we need to believe" (3). In his opinion, this is the reason why

> the man keeps on going despite recognizing, at some level, that the struggle may very well be futile. Because it is in the nature of human beings to desire that the things they do make sense, he grasps for beliefs that will make his struggle make sense. Among these is the belief that he is on a divine mission. It is not that he wants to keep going because he believes that he is on a divine mission. Rather, the desire comes first: because he wants to keep going, he believes—or tries to believe—that he is on a divine mission. (3)

Given that the man has carefully constructed a system of beliefs and moral codes that are hanging by a thread, it is only natural that he finds it difficult to maintain the impression of coherence. When his wife chooses to commit suicide, this whole discourse is on the brink of collapsing. After all, the man is unable to find convincing arguments that would make her stay. His tailored narrative of good guys carrying the fire does not succeed in keeping her safe. It is therefore reasonable that he feels provoked when his son tells him "I wish I was with my mom" (McCarthy 46), to which he immediately replies: "You mean you wish that you were dead" (McCarthy 47). Chavkin and Chavkin posit that the child's wish does not have a transparent interpretation, insofar as it is hard for the reader to decide "whether it represents chronic despair or whether it is just a fleeting moment of sadness over the loss of his mother" (198). However, the father immediately makes the assumption that the child's voicing of this wish reveals his deteriorating mood—that he, too, will soon give up. The man instantly reprimands him for it, as if by banishing all reference to giving up he could prevent the child from following his mother's footsteps: "Dont say it. It's a bad thing to say" (McCarthy 47). It almost seems as if he felt threatened by the child's words, or rather, by the reality those words uncover, one he would rather not acknowledge.

223

Towards the end of the novel, the man looks back on what they have accomplished and tries to reassure the child that they have fared rather well, all things considered:

> The man watched him. Real life is pretty bad?
>
> What do you think?
>
> Well, I think we're still here. A lot of bad things have happened but we're still here.
>
> Yeah.
>
> You dont think that's so great.
>
> It's okay. . . .
>
> After a while the man said: I think it's pretty good. It's a pretty good story. *It counts for something*.
>
> It's okay, Papa. I just want to have a little quiet time.
>
> What about dreams? You used to tell me dreams sometimes.
>
> I dont want to talk about anything. (McCarthy 227; emphasis added)

The man needs reassurance that he has done the right thing, if not from God's perspective, at least from the child's. He longs to hear that he did good, made the right choice, but instead is faced with the boy's silence. Even if he has done it out of love and paternal responsibility, he seeks external validation. This is not an exclusive trait of the father-child bond since, as we will see later, the fear of failing is a particularly conspicuous feature in his relationship with his wife.

In the end, he succeeds at preserving his narrative because he dies. It is worth noting that, as Zibrak suggests, "[t]he boy's inability to experience and process any of the events in his life independently of his father prevents him from being able to form his own life narratives. There are no versions in *The Road*" (107). After his death, the boy—who has not been able to produce a narrative of his own so far, at least that we know of—fully embraces

224

the father's vision. Though reluctant at first, he accepts his father's command to "carry the fire" and "[d]o everything the way [they] did it," hence preserving his legacy (McCarthy 234). The man's idea of transcendental responsibility further evolves into something akin to a religious impulse: "If I'm not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me and I'll talk to you" (McCarthy 235). In a Freudian-esque twist, the death of the real father—i.e., his physical absence—has finally transformed him into the symbolic father. And so tradition goes on.

The bad guys

The mythology surrounding the good guys would be incomplete without its polar opposite. After the unnamed event that set the events in motion before the child was born, the man witnessed how society descended into madness steadily and unstoppably. "What had they done?" the man wonders (McCarthy 28). Here the line is drawn between "them," the blood cults, the marauders, and "us," the civilized salvagers emerging from this planetary wreck. The boundaries that define who is "us" and who is "them" are not rigid, and change with the circumstances. Wielenberg identifies a set of six ruling principles to which good guys must adhere, including the prohibition to eat people, steal or lie, as well as the obligation to keep one's promises, help others, and never give up (4).

It is hinted that any infringement of this code could entail being labeled a "bad guy." For instance, the boy's mother infringes the code when she gives up and commits suicide, which makes her no longer part of the good guys. The close-knit association between the mother figure, death, and contravening the code would explain the man's visceral rejection when the boy says he wished he was with his mom (McCarthy 46–7). However, the man also contravenes the code several times and retains his status as a good guy until the end. One cannot but wonder how this logic works: is the father's trespass somehow milder than the

mother's? Is there any sort of cumulative effect, considering the father's trespasses are many throughout the novel? Or, rather, does it all depend on who enforces the code and who is subject to it?

In order to elucidate the moral system at work in *The Road*, let us examine the successive appearances of "bad guys" throughout the novel. Here I have extended the denomination to encompass all characters that are not received by the father within his circle, including some morally ambiguous ones such as Ely or the mother. By this I aim to draw attention to the fact that this system ultimately depends on the father's judgment; and the truth is that none of the characters they meet on their journey qualify as "good guys." The family that appears at the end of the novel is identified as being part of the good guys, too, but this is something the boy, and not the man, chooses to believe.

I have already commented on the man's distrustful stance towards any strangers they encounter. In some cases, this attitude is more than justified. The first time they encounter the bad guys, they seem to be ordered according to some internal hierarchy: the parade is led by an "army" composed of at least one "phalanx" that "clanked past, marching with a swaying gait like wind-up toys," armed with "three-foot lengths of pipe with leather wrappings" and "spears or lances tasseled with ribbons" (McCarthy 77). Those warrior-like types are followed by "wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war," and then a sort of harem comprising "women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed against the cold and fitted in dogcollars and yoked each to each" (McCarthy 78). Besides the straightforward mention of them having slaves, it is heavily implied that these bad guys are rapists and most likely cannibals as well—not to mention that they are holding some of these people against their will, hence the yokes.[11]

The implied cannibalism becomes all the more explicit when they find a house with a pantry full of people, "male and female," some of them with limbs missing, who beg them for help (McCarthy 93). Likewise, it is made explicit in their encounter with one of the roadrats, with eyes "collared in cups of grime and deeply sunk," and not just thin but "wiry, rachitic" (McCarthy 53–4). When the man asks him about what they are eating, the roadrat just says "[w]hatever we can find," to which the man incredulously replies: "Whatever you can find" (McCarthy 54). Later on, after the marauder is killed, the man evokes his image: "This was the first human being other than the boy that he'd spoken to in more than a year. My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh. Who has made of the world a lie every word" (McCarthy 64). Then he addresses the boy and simply says: "You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know" (McCarthy 65).

Despite the exaggerated descriptions and outfits, which may remind one of the outlandish villains of other post-apocalyptic fictions such as those in the *Mad Max* series, there is a much more sinister undertone to these bad guys. This is a consequence of their violation of the most sacred principle of the code: to never eat human flesh. To have resorted to cannibalism is enough of a justification for the child to feel terrified upon seeing them. Likewise, their status as not-quite-human is what allows the man to inflict violence upon them. After having witnessed the killing of the roadrat, the boy seeks confirmation of their status: "Are we still the good guys? . . . Yes. We're still the good guys. And we always will be. Yes. We always will be" (McCarthy 65–6).

For Wielenberg, the use of violence against the bad guys poses a dilemma at the heart of *The Road*: "Under the circumstances, the man's actions may be justified. But there is a danger lurking here. The danger is that engaging in justified violations of the code of the good guys can make unjustified violations more likely; a slippery slope lurks" (5). The

slippery slope materializes in all its cruelty in the encounter with the cart thief. Unlike the marauders with their weapons and their threatening aura, the cart thief is "an outcast from one of the communes" whose fingers "had been cut away" (McCarthy 215). He projects a rather pitiful image: "Scrawny, sullen, bearded, filthy . . . old plastic coat held together with tape" (McCarthy 215). He quickly obeys the man's orders to move away from the cart, thereby showing that he does not mean to harm them, but then the man continues to chastise him regardless:

Take your clothes off.

What?

Take them off. Every goddamned stitch.

Come on. Dont do this.

I'll kill you where you stand. . . .

Dont do this, man.

You didnt mind doing it to us.

I'm begging you.

Papa, the boy said.

Come on. Listen to the kid.

You tried to kill us.

I'm starving, man. You'd have done the same.

You took everything.

Come on, man. I'll die.

I'm going to leave you the way you left us. (McCarthy 216–7)

In spite of the boy's pleas, the man inflicts an exemplary punishment on the thief, humiliating him in a disproportionate manner. He accuses him of having tried to kill them simply because

he took their possessions when they were not around. By contrast, when they find the underground bunker the man assures the child that it is okay for them to take the food:

> Is it okay for us to take it?
>
> Yes. It is. They would want us to. Just like we would want them to.
>
> They were the good guys?
>
> Yes. They were.
>
> Like us.
>
> Like us. Yes.
>
> So it's okay.
>
> Yes. It's okay. (McCarthy 118)

From these examples we can conclude that the man adapts the "good guys" code to suit whatever their needs are at any given time. In turn, the part of the code that applies to bad guys must always be rigid. Zibrak argues that:

> The adherence to governing myths so widely divergent from physical reality brings with it real danger, mainly the need to other and punish in order to sustain their fictions. . . . The man clings so desperately to his identity as a good guy that his actions are responses to his own ideology rather than responses to events. The cart thief is not punished for stealing the cart so much as he is punished for being a bad guy. The man's need to uphold a defunct structure trumps compassion and community building. (123)

This behavioral pattern reveals that the code is crucial to maintaining the fiction of a functional society, but at the same time shows that the adherence to it does not correspond with the reality they experience. As we have seen, there are some elements present in the

code that ought to be respected at all times. To eat people seems to be the moral limit from which there is no turning back, as the following conversation suggests:

> We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?
>
> No. Of course not.
>
> Even if we were starving? . . .
>
> No. We wouldnt.
>
> No matter what.
>
> No. No matter what.
>
> Because we're the good guys.
>
> Yes.
>
> And we're carrying the fire.
>
> And we're carrying the fire. Yes. (McCarthy 108–9)

Unless the transgression implies cannibalizing others, the code can be bent and even broken depending on the circumstances. This leads to the moral slippery slope that Wielenberg aptly identifies, which in turn prompts a series of situations in which the man needs to justify his shortcomings. Namely, when they cross paths with a man struck by lightning, the father explains to the child that they cannot help the man because "[t]here's nothing to be done for him", it is too late (McCarthy 43). Reluctantly, the boy concedes. Even though the code features the command to help others, the man convinces the boy that they "have no way to help him" (McCarthy 43).

Their encounter with the dog casts doubt on the father's moral status. Both the man and the boy are about to arrive in a desert town when they hear a dog barking in the distance (McCarthy 69). Although they neither see it nor hear it again, the boy worriedly asks: "We're not going to kill it, are we Papa?" (McCarthy 71; 69). Even though there is no further

mention of the dog, the boy then is adamant that he has seen another little boy, something that the man categorically denies (McCarthy 72). After this episode the man recalls another time where they did encounter a dog. Unlike most of the novel, this particular fragment is one of the few that is narrated by the man in the first person. He declares, matter-of-factly, that "[t]he dog that [the boy] remembers followed us for two days," during a time when his wife was alive and they still kept "three cartridges in the pistol. None to spare" (McCarthy 74). He promises the boy not to hurt the dog, but then "[t]he next day it was gone" (McCarthy 74). Wielenberg convincingly argues that the father shot the dog and used it to feed his family; that would explain why they went from having three cartridges to just two, taking into account that the mother committed suicide with a flake of obsidian (6–7).

By killing the dog, the man breaks the good guys' code not just once but several times. He promises the boy not to hurt the dog and kills it anyway, lies to him about what happened to the dog, and then tries to deceive us into believing that the boy is delusional: "That is the dog he remembers. He doesnt remember any little boys" (McCarthy 74). Here it becomes even more apparent that the man frequently tries to convince the child not to help others. It appears that the boy sometimes mistrusts his father, probably because he sees through his excuses but chooses not to dwell on them. The man confronts him about this once, telling him that he does not believe him, to which the child simply replies: "I always believe you. . . . Yes I do. *I have to*" (McCarthy 156; emphasis added).

Occasionally, the boy also participates in these excuses, or maybe tries to apply the same logic his father uses in order to feel better. After all, as Zibrak points out, "[w]hat the boy does not learn by direct observation comes only through his relationship with the man . . . The man is therefore central to the boy's understanding of each event in his capacity as both a participant and a creator of ideological structure" (106–7). If he has seen his father break the code to justify their inaction, it is reasonable that he imitates that same reasoning when he

feels overwhelmed. An example of this behavior can be found after they escape from the house where some cannibals are slaughtering and eating people they hold captive in a basement. The child anticipates his father's justifications and offers an explanation himself that is strikingly similar to those of the man:

> They're going to kill those people, arent they?
>
> Yes.
>
> Why do they have to do that?
>
> I dont know.
>
> Are they going to eat them?
>
> I dont know.
>
> They're going to eat them, arent they?
>
> Yes.
>
> And we couldnt help them because then they'd eat us too.
>
> Yes.
>
> And that's why we couldnt help them.
>
> Yes.
>
> Okay. (McCarthy 107)

Thus far, we have seen that breaking one's promises, refusing to help others, and lying are treated as mild transgressions of the code—or, at least, transgressions that are more easily justifiable. On the other side of the spectrum, we find the prohibition of eating human flesh, which is anathema for anyone who wants to be counted among the good guys. In fact, when the boy is considering whether to join the family after his father's demise, he seeks confirmation that they have children yet "didnt eat them": "No. We dont eat people" (McCarthy 239). Upon hearing this, the boy feels reassured that they are indeed good guys and goes with them.

In addition to this, there is another violation of the code that is anathema to the father, and that is giving up. Whilst the boy sometimes reminds his father that he needs to stick to his promises or help others, he never addresses the need not to give up. By contrast, the man does remind the child to never give up, because that is "what the good guys do": "They keep trying. They dont give up" (McCarthy 116). He reads dreams as symptomatic of whether one is slowly giving up or not, and instructs his son not to trust those reveries, implying that they signal a point of no return: "When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that never will be and you are happy again then you will have given up. Do you understand? And you cant give up. I wont let you" (McCarthy 160).

The only person we know of who has given up is the boy's mother. Perhaps the reason why the man is so unforgiving of those who give up is the pain she has caused them. Or, perhaps, it is because, as Chavkin and Chavkin posit, "[t]he mother's suicide makes the father'stask to stay alive and not kill himself and convince his son that they should abide by this value system all the more difficult" (198). This would explain the man's reaction upon hearing the boy say that he wished he was with his mom (McCarthy 46–7). It would also explain the man's final decision not to kill the child when he is about to die: "You need to go on . . . You need to keep going. You dont know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You'll be lucky again. You'll see. Just go. It's all right" (McCarthy 234). To kill the child after all they have achieved would entail that his late wife was right all along. Even though this decision puts the child's survival at stake, the man takes one last leap of faith in letting the child live—and his faith is rewarded one last time as a family appears to take the boy in.

The ethical debate at the heart of *The Road* involves two stances: the father's, with his Kierkegaardian approach of absurd faith, and the mother's, with her pragmatic view of what is the right thing to do in a world that is no longer ruled by the laws of morality.[12] For Phillip

A. Snyder, who also applies a Levinasian/Derridean lens to interpret the moral struggle, the woman's suicide showcases that "when one loses the sense of responsibility to the Other, one also loses one's self": "The mother commits suicide, not simply because she rejectsher responsibility toward her husband and son, but because the impossibility of fulfilling that responsibility necessarily overwhelms her" (76). To survive in the post-apocalyptic barren land is to expose oneself to all kinds of atrocities one day after another. The woman knows this and straightforwardly tells the man: "They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen" (McCarthy 48). Her only hope is "for eternal nothingness," and even though he tries to stop her, he also concedes that "she was right. There was no argument" (McCarthy 49).

In a truly Levinasian fashion, the birth of the child signals the end of their mutual preoccupation with the other. As I have previously argued, the man severs his ties with all the others when his son is born, to the extent that his wife's cries "meant nothing to him" (McCarthy 50). Meanwhile, the woman also severs her ties with others, but instead of retaining a connection with the child, like the man does, she remains adrift ever since: "My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now" (McCarthy 48–9). When her husband begs her not to go, she replies: "I dont care. I dont care if you cry" (McCarthy 47). He cannot convince her with logic; the man acknowledges she is right in her reasoning, and does not try to put her arguments into question. He cannot convince her with an appeal to emotions either, because she has none left. In the end, he keeps on going because he has hope and feels responsible for the child; he is sustained by an irrational, absurd faith independent of any facts.[13]

Whereas the man is still capable of looking beyond the horrid reality, fueled by his desire to preserve meaning and the responsibility towards his son, the woman perceives that the right thing to do would be killing the child to spare him from further suffering. Noble

suggests that the language she uses "implies that she is making an ethical judgment" and, as heart-wrenching as their words are, "[h]er logic cannot be argued with" (99). It is precisely this seamless logic that torments the man later in the novel. Snyder posits that, in spite of her marginal role, the mother "haunts [the novel's] mood and setting with her absence" (77). In my view, the mother's presence can be spotted in many of the man's mannerisms, ranging from his obsessive remarks about the importance of dreams to his fixation with never giving up. The mother also provides him with the blueprint for navigating the post-apocalyptic world when she advises the man to "cobble together some passable ghost" and tells him that he will not survive by himself (McCarthy 49). However, her most lasting contribution might be the shadow of doubt that plagues the man's meditations. He is keenly aware that he may need to kill his child at any given point in the event they are captured, but feels incapable of doing so: "Can you do it? When the time comes?" (McCarthy 24).

The man is thus haunted by his double failure. In order not to fail the child, he must fail his wife; in turn, having failed his wife implies that he might fail again.[14] She reminds him of his own hopelessness: "You have two bullets and then what? You cant protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that?" (McCarthy 47). Still, he invests all his efforts in being the child's keeper, and rigidly adheres to his role: "This is my child. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job" (McCarthy 63). In keeping the child alive and well, he proves himself to be a capable protector; however, the memory of his late wife reminds him that he is fallible nonetheless: "He thought . . . that he should have tried to keep her in their lives in some ways but he didnt know how" (McCarthy 46).

In addition to this, he has to battle the looming thought that his wife might have been right, which would mean he is in the wrong. If, as Noble argues, "the kindest act a father can do for his child is to kill him or her before the child suffers too greatly," then the man is going against what is more ethical and humane to do in his desire "to preserve his son

according to his divine calling" (96).[15] The woman's dissension jeopardizes the man's quest. Church suggests that the man's "desire to live" is identified by his wife as "part of the wider patriarchal conception of life as a battle . . . the product offutile masculine heroics, potentially derived from the 'old stories of courage and justice'" (25). He contends that "in choosing death [by suicide], the mother challenges . . . the Christian morality which the man and boy incongruously attempt to maintain" (25):

> She understands that in the world where there is no reason to live, only the fear of death, the father must use his son to create meaning. He has to use his son like "a passable ghost" to justify his existence. . . . By being the meaning of life for the father, the boy is preventing his [*sic*] own reason to live. The son can only be a passive object for the father, something the mother predicts in her speech and counters in her suicide. (Church 26)[16]

Even though I do not think the mother consciously seeks to counter the child's (or her own) status as a passive object for the father, as Church affirms, I do agree with his overall reading that places the mother as the "most insightful character" (26). The woman is dangerous, even as a memory, insofar as her life and death are powerful reminders of the father's fallibility and fragility. It is also in this sense that her place among the bad guys must be understood. In a similar way to the role of the cart thief in maintaining the man's clear-cut distinction between good and bad guys, the mother's giving up cannot be explained within the boundaries of the good guys' code. In short, she must be banished so that the paternal narrative will hold together.

The breath of God

In this section, and now that I have covered some key issues regarding *The Road*'s alleged paternal ethics, I would like to globally assess the ethical stance of the man, as well as its relation with the form of the novel. As I advanced earlier, I think that *The Road* falls on the subsumptive side of narrative logic and, in my view, it confirms this precisely with its ending. Throughout most of the story the father's role is stripped of its patriarchal halo—especially in comparison to what Church calls "the brutal patriarchy of the marauders" (28). However, the discourse that undergirds the man's mythical creation of the "good guys carrying the fire," together with the restitution of the nuclear family and the absent, symbolic Father, are all elements that cause the narrative to tilt toward consolidating the father-patriarchy conflation rather than challenging it. However, this tilt does not make the novel a celebration of patriarchal values, nor does it automatically nullify other subversive elements that are worth commenting on. Here I want to discuss some of these elements, as well as those elements that I find contribute to the overall subsumptive order the text conveys.[17]

Let us begin by saying that *The Road* certainly exemplifies the kind of individual, embodied fatherhood described by Massimo Recalcati in *The Telemachus Complex*. This model of fatherhood focuses on individual fathers rather than abstract notions, and does not hide that these individuals can be, and are indeed, fallible. Arguably, what makes the man in *The Road* a good father is precisely his will to be a father: he deeply cares for the child, looks after him, and is willing to make sacrifices for him. His enactment of the paternal role is multifaceted insofar as it ranges from the more traditional protector role to the caring, nurturing role—a role that absolutely requires a body. This is a father who hugs his child, shelters him from the cold with his own body, keeps him warm, and keeps him company so that he does not feel alone or scared. The paternal body is very much present and, I would say, essential in the construction of the novel. It is likewise significant that the paternal body

collapses due to an unknown illness, hence prompting the eventual parting of father and son. In other words, the removal of the paternal body from the equation is what brings the Symbolic father back into the picture.

Once he's gone, the physical dimension of care is replaced by the silent conversation with a non-responding entity, and so the cycle begins again: although the father never dared to assume the existence of God while he lived, now his child can pass on "the breath of God" (McCarthy 241). The ending only reaffirms the transmission of patriarchal values, even if the father's journey as failed protector had hitherto suggested another possible conclusion. The appearance of the nuclear family, together with the transformation of the individual father into the symbolic father, undoes what this disruptive example of paternity had accomplished so far. A bodiless, absent father can never be fallible, because he will be whatever one chooses him to be. The void left by the absent father is filled in with his mythology, as the conversation between the foster father and the child showcases:

> How do I know you're one of the good guys?
>
> You dont. You'll have to take a shot.
>
> Are you carrying the fire?
>
> Am I what?
>
> Carrying the fire.
>
> Yeah. We are. . . .
>
> You dont eat people.
>
> No. We dont eat people. (McCarthy 238–9)

In a way, the late father has succeeded in preserving the meaning he so deeply cared about. The child applies the good guys' moral code to test whether he should join this family, focusing on its core elements: the mandate against eating people and the will to carry the fire.

It is worth mentioning that the child merely repeats the phrase "carrying the fire" instead of explaining what he means by that; maybe he does not really know, at least not in the same way his father knew. He has completely interiorized his father's narrative, which in turn is comprised of bits and fragments from the old-world order that his father had managed to cohere into one discourse. According to Rick Elmore and Jonathan Elmore:

> there never was any possibility of returning to the world or worldview of the novel's father, a worldview defined, much like our own, by an ethos that favors the hoarding of goods over community and a concern for the possibility of our own individual survival over the alleviation of present suffering . . . in the figure of the son, McCarthy develops an ethos towards community and the alleviation of suffering, one that the novel suggests might be the only hope for humans at the end of the world. (134)

This purported ethos towards community is reinforced by the child's encountering his foster family, an encounter that is only possible after the father's demise. We have already seen that the father acts as the gatekeeper of his and his child's community of two. For Wielenberg, the man's "inability to trust others" implies that "the child is unable to connect with other good guys as long as his father is alive. . . . Because the man is damaged, he is unable to fulfill this function completely. He can truly succeed as a parent only by dying" (8). In my opinion, this view only reinforces what I have previously contended: that the father does not become a *true* father (i.e., a traditional and conventional patriarch) until he dies and becomes a bodiless, abstract principle.

With regard to the ethics enforced by the man, Ashley Kunsa stresses that "out of love for his child and hope for some salvation, the man pushes himself to the point of death to preserve the child's physical and spiritual safety" (58). Nevertheless, if the man ties his purpose in life to the child's existence, as Zibrak has it, that means that the child lacks a

purpose other than obeying his father's commands: "To avoid death, one needs two things: a mode of survival and a reason to survive. . . . If the basis for meaning can only be located in the father's love for his son, it is a meaning inaccessible to the son himself" (109). The particular model of paternal ethics represented in *The Road* is fundamentally flawed as it is unidirectional, and does not treat the son as a full-fledged subject, but as an object framed within his father's larger quest for meaning.

In terms of how the novel contributes to consolidate the father-patriarchy conflation, there are several issues worth examining. On one hand, we need to bear in mind that the man's mythology does not appear out of the blue, but has its origins in his own upbringing, in a world that no longer exists. The man unconsciously reproduces the norms and conduct that he himself was taught while growing up; after all, as Russell M. Hillier underscores, "[t]he man clings to his humanity by making moral sense of his new world through his literary inheritance from the old world" (671). In other words, he does not know any other way to make sense of the new world. And even though he tries to "evoke the forms," as he puts it, he ends up with a code that draws so much from the old world that there are barely any differences between both. He thereby passes on notions and values to his son that are now obsolete or need readjustment to the new, much harsher reality. The problem is rightly identified by Zibrak when she contends that the child learns everything through his father:

> the man creates his own language for himself and the boy. His terms and concepts, like "good guys" and "carrying the fire," become both language and religion. As is true of most theological discourses, their effectiveness relies on the very inscrutability of their meaning . . . the only culture the boy has ever known is the one that has been constructed for him by the man. Whereas the pre-apocalyptic culture of the man's childhood was shaped by uncountable sources—history, media, peers, institutions, and myth to name a few—the boy is the only subject in the man's cultural dictatorship. (106)

Even though the expression "cultural dictatorship" may be a little dramatic, I fundamentally agree with Zibrak's diagnosis of the culture the child can access. It is likewise true that the child is prevented "from being able to form his own life narratives" (Zibrak 107), but I do not share the view that the man is the reason behind this—not directly, at least, but perhaps indirectly as a symbol of the patriarchal culture that he is trying to keep alive. Besides, it could be argued that, by preventing the child from speaking and living with others, the man further curtails the boy's horizon of knowledge and experiences.

The monopoly that the man exerts over the boy's upbringing is emphasized by some of the narrative choices. We see the novel's world through the father's eyes. Both Kunsa and Hillier foreground the access readers have to the man's train of thought, which according to Kunsa makes him a more sympathetic character (62). Hillier also observes that the "frequent coalescence of the novel's narrative voice with the father's mind and subjective experience grants readers insight into the father's desperate struggle to locate or rely upon anything meaningful" (672). In addition to fostering greater sympathy towards the man, his role as the almost exclusive focalizer throughout the novel can make us readers fall prey to his contradictions. Reading against the grain can nonetheless yield small clues as to the nature of this effect; namely, the father's attempt at gaslighting the child (and the readers) into believing there was no little boy, his many infringements of his own code, and his readiness to punish rather than show mercy as he preaches.

Furthermore, the erasure of the mother figure from the story responds to the father's efforts to banish her from the child's life. It is striking that she is not even mentioned once in conversation, except for the moment when the child wishes he was with her that I have analyzed before. The boy tells his father "if I shouldnt cry you shouldnt cry either" (McCarthy 227), which implies that the man had previously advised him not to cry. It is a bit

241

of a stretch to assume that the boy cried because of his mother, but in any case, it would be another sign that the man would rather suppress his feelings—and by extension those of the child—in order to keep the memory of his wife at bay. Finally, at the end of the novel, the *deus ex machina* only confirms that the man has won the moral debate staged in the novel. The encounter with the nuclear family proves that the father was right and the mother was wrong: "Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (McCarthy 236). Both are now dead, but the father was right all along and did the right thing sparing the boy's life. Father knows best.

All these issues crystallize in a story that ends up returning to a status quo of sorts, insofar as patriarchal ideology is concerned. The model of paternity that the man embodies is undergirded by some seminal notions of traditional manhood: the father as protector who does not hesitate in resorting to violence if needed; the father as moral referee who decides who qualifies as a good guy, controlling who accesses the community; the father who resorts to lying and breaking his own code lest the child might notice his inner contradictions, projecting an image of wholeness and stoicism. All things considered, I believe that the father is entrapped by the dominant fiction, and desperately tries to recreate it for himself and for the boy. At the end, he succeeds in doing so.

The Road is a great example of the destructive grasp patriarchal order maintains over women: they are a necessary evil that emerges as one of the main (moral) antagonists, but are likewise needed to uphold and perpetuate the same system that obliterates them.[18] The man may be the main character in the story, but his late wife is indispensable to understand the man's plight, and even to humanize it and make him fallible. The maternal presence haunts the story insofar as it acts as a reminder of the man's fallibility. Nevertheless, all characters are subordinated to him in one way or another. For instance, it is possible to praise the ethical compass of the child in comparison to that of his father, but we do not know enough about it

to test it by itself. In sum, the novel sketches some compelling alternatives and challenges to the father-patriarchy conflation, but never quite succeeds at presenting them as fully-fledged ideas. Being so focused on the man, it leaves little to no room to explore other alternative configurations that nonetheless appear as the novel's unspoken possibilities.

Subsumptive narratives and sense-making practices consist in "subsuming new situations under what is already known" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 91), an attitude that is clearly represented by the man—and by the text overall, mostly due to the focalization it applies. Yet, in spite of the text's overall subsumptiveness, there are some issues that escape the general tone. For instance, the mother's subversive presence and the child's rejection of the father's violence are symptoms of another version of fatherhood (and masculinity) that is sadly left uncharted.

It would be unfair not to acknowledge that the man's shortcomings ultimately shield the boy from making hard choices so that he remains untainted for as long as possible. Perhaps the boy would not be an example of ethical behavior without his father. In that case, there is hope that subsumptiveness can engender non-subsumptiveness—eventually. Church reasons that "the boy's new family represents a resistance to the brutal patriarchy of the marauders. As the father did in his own way" (28). It might not be explicitly brutal, but it is still another form of patriarchy—a milder one, perhaps. Just like post-feminist fatherhood fares better than traditional fatherhood, but is still not ideal, *The Road* opens new possibilities by imagining an embodied father that is fallible, and kind to his child, and humane in spite of everything that has happened—and then effacing those same possibilities with the triumph of the bodiless, absent, symbolic Father.

Notes

1. Let us recall that the evaporation of the father was the terminology used by Lacan to signify the steady weakening of the symbolic function in the modern era (see chapter 2). For more information, see Recalcati (*Complejo*).

2. The degree and type of optimism varies from author to author. Some foreground religious readings, whilst others opt for a more agnostic or ambivalent approach. For example, Ashley Kunsa regards the novel as a "linguistic journey toward redemption, a search for meaning and pattern in a seemingly meaningless world—a search that, astonishingly, succeeds" (58). On a different note, Alan Noble argues that his reading of *The Road* through the lens of Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* "allows us to fully accept the nihilism of the novel without in any way diminishing its hope" (107). Eric Pudney and Allen Josephs lean toward a Christian-based interpretation of hope that other authors have nonetheless rejected (see Wielenberg 3).

3. "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

4. For David Herman, "storyworlds are mentally and emotionally projected environments in which interpreters are called upon to live out complex blends of cognitive and imaginative response" (570). It is through textual cues that readers are able to engage with narratives and transport themselves as they interpret the story. See Herman for more information.

5. In this sense, it reads as a parable of a particularly merciless and rapacious form of late capitalism.

6. Although Butler remains open to the possibility of an ethical relation outside of language (or one that precedes language, for that matter), and so does Levinas, the father in *The Road* seems not to be able to dissociate linguistic relations from ethical relations. This would also explain why he is so adamant that his son talk to him whereas he avoids talking to virtually anybody else in the book, unless he is forced by the circumstances (e.g., when the child insists Ely join them for one night). It is likewise significant that when he does use language, it is to chastise and threaten others (e.g., before he kills the roadrat, or when he forces the cart thief to strip off his clothes).

7. With regard to the man's conduct, Recalcati praises his tenacity and desire to be a present father to the child (*Qué Queda* 106). On the other hand, the man may remain culturally conditioned despite the apparent obliteration of all past culture; besides, he *needs* to hold on to something (or someone) to ground and provide meaning to his life. The intersection of all these factors make it all the more difficult to decide which one predominates—if any.

8. In one of the scarce first-person passages of the book, the man affirms that his son "doesn't remember any little boys," thus refusing to listen to his son's pleas to help a little boy he declares to have seen (McCarthy 73–4). The end of the novel reveals that there was indeed another little boy who was traveling with the child's new foster family (McCarthy 239). We never know for sure whether the child did see the other boy or if he imagined he did. Accepting the former would entail casting the father as unreliable, whereas accepting the latter would make the child unreliable.

9. Another possible association, besides that of Genesis and the creation of the world I discussed in the previous section, is that between the child and the Verb, i.e., the messianic figure of Christ who will cleanse humanity of its sins.

10. The tabernacle is an apt symbolism for the boy, since it was originally built as the portable dwelling-place of God after the Exodus from Egypt; just like the boy, it is a walking recipient for holiness. Similarly, the chalice is another recipient for a symbol of divinity, in this case the blood of Christ. At the same time, those symbols barely retain any meaning—perhaps for the father, who remembers them, but certainly not for the child himself. Yet, even if the symbolism is lost, does not the father's reigniting it prompt its comeback? As Lydia Cooper argues: "The boy, like the grail . . . becomes the object that brings the essence of divinity back to a corrupted world" (224). For an insightful commentary on *The Road* as a grail narrative, see Cooper.

11. Let us bear in mind that the other appearance of a pregnant woman in the novel precedes the scene where the man and the boy stumble across a human infant charred on a spit (McCarthy 167), which suggests that a potential source of nourishment for the bad guys came from getting women pregnant so that the infant could be eaten.

12. Alan Noble reads the father's ethical stance through the figure of Abraham as discussed by Søren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*. For further reading, see Noble.

13. This substantial divergence between the woman's rationality and the man's irrational faith is manifested in their respective relation to dreams. The woman tells him: "They say that women dream of danger to those in their care and men of danger to themselves. But I dont dream at all" (McCarthy 48).

14. As I have explained above, Levinas maintains that if one enters into a relationship with the Other, that individual is renouncing all the other others. In my view, this applies to the man's situation following the birth of the boy: he moves on from being in a face-to-face relation with his wife to a face-to-face relation with his child.

15. Rather than a divine calling, I see the father's mission as guided by his desire to preserve or create meaning, as I have previously explained.

16. Church's interpretation of the mother as a figure who chooses death by her own hand before submitting to a fate worse than death (not unlike Antigone) uncovers a potentially subversive reading of the text that is nonetheless muffled by the novel's ending.

17. Let us bear in mind that the label *subsumptive* refers to those narratives that reinforce naturalizing strategies: "Narrative practices function subsumptively when they reinforce problematic stereotypical sense-making practices. Such practices tend to hinder our ability to encounter other people in their uniqueness and perpetuate the tendency to see individuals as representatives of the groups to which they belong according to gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, class, and so on" (Meretoja, *Ethics* 107). For more information, see chapter 2.

18. It seems a bit far-fetched that the father managed to preserve the values of Western culture and civilization for his son but nonetheless failed at speaking to him about his mother.

CHAPTER 6 - Wasted Bodies, "Matter's Love": Sharon Olds's *The Father*

In *Bequest and Betrayal*, Nancy K. Miller posits that the death of others, especially one's parents, "always provides unexpected narrative benefits" as it "tells us something important about who we are" (ix). She further adds that we write about the dead because the dead are "alive in us": "Showing our faces, telling ourselves, cannot help but betray the others who live in our heads and dreams. Writing about oneself entails dealing with the ghostly face in the mirror that is and isn't one's own" (x). In *The Father*, a poetry collection that chronicles her father's illness and death, Sharon Olds discovers that the face of the man who lies dying is also her own. Instead of trying to dig out the father's self, Olds's efforts concentrate not so much on the works of memory as on the sheer materiality of the present, particularly the physical presence of the father figure. It is through the observation and then identification with the body that the portrait of the father emerges, a portrait that is seemingly unconcerned by the father's secrets or inner life.

Nevertheless, *The Father* shares some central themes with the literary works studied so far. In spite of its emphasis on the materiality of the body, the book likewise explores issues of recognition, longing for the father's love, and the tension between authority and authorship that emerges when the child attempts to write (about) the father. The thematic unity shared by the narrative texts studied so far and this poetry collection justifies, in my view, its inclusion in the present study regardless of the formal and genre disparities. Moreover, there is a certain narrative quality to Olds's poems, which stems from her use of emplotment.[1] I find it particularly useful to study this book against the same backdrop that has been used so far and thereby determine whether it is possible to find traces of an ethics of the father figure in a unconventionally narrative (i.e., not prose) text.

In *The Father*¸ Olds fixates her gaze[2] on her father's abject body, a territory marked by an illness (throat cancer) that has already obliterated the boundaries that demarcate the subject. Face to face with the abject, decaying body, the poet chooses to pursue identification with the father, not on the psychological or emotional plane, but on the physical plane. Although we have encountered many of these themes in the literary works analyzed so far, what makes Olds's poetry stand out is her channeling of recurring themes—such as mortality, identification with the Other and, above all, a desperate longing for paternal love that can never be fully satisfied—almost exclusively through the material dimension. Hence, the body fulfills a central role in her representation of fatherhood; not just the father's body, as we will see, but the speaker's own body as well.[3]

Throughout the collection, it becomes apparent that the speaker harbors a profound longing for the father's love and recognition. This longing is nonetheless unquenchable, as the father remains out of the speaker's (emotional) reach. The distance between the two cannot—or will not—be bridged by means of the word. This inability to voice emotions seems to affect the father, but not the daughter, who is indeed vocal about her conflicting feelings toward him. There are multiple references to an obstruction inside the father's throat—sometimes described as a plug of dirt—which appear to symbolize his inability to express affection for his daughter. Meanwhile, an actual physical obstruction caused by throat cancer curtails the father's capacity to communicate effectively. Faced with this twofold obstacle, the speaker explores an alternative kinesthetic means of communication.

In this chapter, I argue that the sheer materiality of the poetic universe contained in *The Father* comes to life through the daughter's piercing, immodest gaze. By applying the notion of haptic visuality developed by Laura U. Marks to my analysis, I seek to draw attention to the ways in which the speaker is able to conjure a visual-tactile representation of the father figure primarily as a body. Given that fathers are seldom represented in these

terms, I would like to delve into Olds's unusual perspective on paternity and examine what are the ethical implications of such an outlook. I begin by addressing the portrayal of the paternal body as an ill, hence abject body in section 1, "It is / neither good nor bad, it is only / the body." Then I move on to consider the formal mechanisms through which the visual plane can be made to convey kinesthetic sensations in sections 2, "Haptic visuality and the second body," and 3, "'Matter's love,' father's love: the quest for paternal love through the gaze." Finally, I turn to assess the ethical stance derived from the process whereby the paternal body is de-deified and wasted in sections 4, "The rehumanization of the father through the wasted body," and 5, "'And now I watched him be undone': *The Father*'s ethics of matter." I argue that Olds's exhaustive chronicle of her father's grappling with illness and death re-humanizes him in her eyes as he becomes a fallible conglomerate of dirt, however capable of professing (some form of) love.

"It is / neither good nor bad, it is only / the body"

As explained in chapter 2, fathers have been traditionally associated with the abstract principles of culture, law, and authority, and consequently appear detached from the material realities of the body. Kelly Oliver argues that "paternal authority is based on the physical strength of the father's body even as it denies the importance of that body" (*Family* 119). Paradoxically, then, the virile body emerges as "a representative of control and power," an "antibody" that symbolizes "the overcoming of the body": "The virile body is the symbol of manliness; manliness is associated with culture; culture is associated with overcoming the body" (Oliver, *Family* 128). The father's body remains in control due to its characterization as virile. The difference regarding other bodies, most conspicuously female bodies, is that virility allows control of the otherwise dangerous body, especially over bodily fluids. For Elizabeth Grosz, excluding men's bodily fluids from their self-representations marks their

bodies as clean and proper: "The logic of this fantasy is that, unlike women's bodies, men's bodies do not secrete fluids and become subjected to flows that are out of their own control, so their bodies, unlike women's bodies, are clean and have proper boundaries" (qtd. in Oliver, *Family* 131; see also Morrison).

The father's body as represented in *The Father* is nothing like the virile body. First, it is a body that is constantly secreting fluids, something that requires the constant assistance of others to be kept clean and proper. This suggests, on one hand, an obvious lack of self-constraint: the father cannot control, much less overcome, his own body—which in a way brings him closer to the feminine body, as I will discuss later. On the other hand, it also evinces a deteriorating subjectivity as the boundaries of the self are jeopardized by his inability to clearly demarcate what is his and what is other. This inability marks the father's body as abject.

Secondly, the father's body is an ill body suffering from throat cancer. Contact with someone afflicted with a disease, according to Susan Sontag, "feels like a trespass; worse, like the violation of a taboo" (6) because that contact "is felt to be obscene—in the original meaning of that word: ill-omened, abominable, repugnant to the senses" (8).[4] In this sense, the paternal body "bears the burden of abjection" insofar as the ill body is perceived as "inhuman" or "alien" (Zakin n.p.). In the words of Julia Kristeva, it is not "lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (232). The disturbance of borders is a feature of the diseased body, which "frequently refuses to maintain the distance that marks separation between subjects; when the body is overwhelmed by illness, it begins to swell, ooze, sweat and bleed until it intrudes upon public space" (Tanner 24).

The first third of the collection puts special emphasis on the notion of border-crossing applied to fluids and corporeal waste that would normally remain out of sight. Namely, we

find graphic descriptions of a tumor that "is growing fast in his throat these days, / and as it grows it sends out pus" (Olds 7), but also detailed scenes where the father expels bodily fluids. In this case, the attention is directed towards the action of crossing from the inside of the body to the outside: "He gargled, I got the cup ready, / I didn't vary the stroke, he spat" (Olds 17); "So my father has to gargle, cough, / spit a mouthful of thick stuff" (Olds 7); "the mucus rose, / I held the cup to his lips and he slid out / the mass" (Olds 17).

For Kristeva, corporeal waste represents "the objective frailty of symbolic order" (259).[5] She distinguishes two broad types of polluting objects, "excremental" and "menstrual," and contends that the former and "its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.)" stand for "the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death" (Kristeva 260). Although cancer is arguably a threat from without, as life is indeed threatened by death, it is placed within, as mentioned above. In this sense, "cancer is the disease of the Other . . . an invasion of 'alien' or 'mutant' cells, stronger than normal cells" (Sontag 68). In the poem "The Picture I Want," the cancer manifests itself physically as an alien object that renders the father alien as well: "In the open neck of his sports shirt / you can see some of the larger lumps / pressing out at his throat and chest, / he is like a stocking stuffed with things" (Olds 10). Here, the otherwise virile figure is misshapen due to the abnormal presence of those lumps that are "pressing out," once again from the inside towards the outside.

In *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag posits that "in cancer the main symptoms are thought to be, characteristically, invisible—until the last stage, when it is too late" (12). That is indeed the case in *The Father*. The "lumps of cancer" are very much visible; the speaker confirms that they "are everywhere now," disrupting and modifying the topography of the paternal body: "he can lay his palm where they swell his skin, he can / finger the holes where the surgeon has been in him" (Olds 12).[6] The first part of the collection draws attention to this

process of undoing, stressing the alterations endured by the self: "Every hour, now, he is changing, / shedding some old ability" (Olds 6).

Albeit primarily physical, the alterations suffered by the cancer patient imply a deeper, almost ontological transformation. Sontag contends that in cancer "non-intelligent . . . cells are multiplying," forming a "nonself" that ends up taking the subject's place: "you are being replaced by the non-you" (67). In addition, "the person dying of cancer isportrayed as robbed of all capacities of self-transcendence, humiliated by fear and agony" (Sontag 17). This humiliation runs even deeper when the person afflicted by it used to be a mighty patriarch reduced to an infantilized version of himself:

> . . . adjusting the drip, wiping the dried
>
> saliva out of the corners of his mouth,
>
> making sure the cup for the mucus
>
> was near him, and the call button pinned to the sheet
>
> *like a pacifier tied to the bars of a crib.* (Olds 14; emphasis added)

The speaker's father appears portrayed through her eyes as heavily dependent on others, unable to take care of himself. Even though we know virtually nothing of the man being described, the speaker includes multiple references to a past time where he had not been stripped of his virility yet. For example, "The Present Moment" refers to the man he used to be:

> Now that he cannot sit up,
>
> now that he just lies there
>
> looking at the wall, I forget the one
>
> who sat up and put on his reading glasses

.………………………………

> It's as if I abandoned that ruddy man
>
> with the swollen puckered mouth of a sweet-eater,
>
> the torso packed with extra matter
>
> like a planet a handful of which weighs as much as the earth, I have
>
> left behind forever that young man my father,
>
> that smooth-skinned, dark-haired boy . . . (Olds 20)

The image of a younger, healthy father provides an even starker contrast with the "large man gone small with cancer" in "The Picture I Want" (Olds 10) and especially in "The Lifting" (Olds 15–7):

> Suddenly my father lifted up his nightie, I
>
> turned my head away but he cried out
>
> *Shar!*, my nickname, so I turned and looked.
>
> He was sitting in the high cranked-up bed with the
>
> gown up, around his neck,
>
> to show me the weight he had lost. I looked
>
> where his solid ruddy stomach had been
>
> and I saw the skin fallen into loose
>
> soft hairy rippled folds
>
> lying in a pool of folds
>
> down at the base of his abdomen,
>
> the gaunt torso of a big man
>
> who will die soon . . .

For Laura Tanner, "*The Father*'s revelation of the diseased and dying body . . . constitutes a violation of the cultural codes through which contemporary Western civilization renders the terminally ill body visible" (25–6). In my view, this poem exemplifies this violation better than any other featured in the collection. Like the speaker, we are taken aback by the father's sudden revelation in the first line, aware that we are witnessing something that does not belong in the public sphere. Our first impulse, much like the speaker's, might be averting the gaze—out of a sense of decency before the father's nakedness, but also due to the shame and disgust that looking at an ill body may provoke. It is worth noting that, up to this point, the father has remained a rather passive object of the daughter's gaze. In the opening poem, "The Waiting," he is first described as having a "burnished, looked-at look," "a way of holding still to be looked at, / as if a piece of sculpture could sense / the gaze which was running over it" (Olds 3). The father's passivity, most likely a consequence of his illness, is put on hold in "The Lifting" as he calls his daughter's name, an interjection that she understands as a command for her to look.

Upon calling her name, the father gets some of his old power back. Here the act of looking is not a furtive glance but a full-on stare; it has been not just noticed by the father, but also actively requested by him. He is in command of how he displays himself. Shortly before his body stops responding, he demands an earnest look from his daughter, exposing his body as a site of abjection—a place where his impending mortality reveals itself in a graphic manner. If the first poem, "The Waiting," portrays the father as reduced to "the material status of a body thatmoves steadily toward death" (Tanner 27), "The Lifting" indicates a shift, albeit short-lived, in the roles of subject and object of the gaze. Despite being in the position of object, the father of "The Lifting" reverses the power dynamics insofar as he chooses to display himself. In spite of her purportedly dominant position as the subject of the gaze, the speaker appears overwhelmed by the brash revelation of her father's mortality.

254

The speaker's reaction to the paternal interpellation reveals an effort to reach out to the increasingly vanishing father. Tanner aptly observes that in displaying himself, the father "asks her not to see him in spite of his illness . . . but rather to locate him in his unfamiliar body without reducing him to it" (32). I will come back to the power hierarchies established in the act of looking in subsequent sections. For the time being, I wish to focus on the body on display and the speaker's reaction to it. According to Tanner, the speaker "finds herself written" in her father's "starkly naked form" (33). Here the abject body acts as a reminder of her own "mortality": "Caught unaware, Olds is the subject of a look that is not preformulated, distanced, or empowered; in a flash of recognition, she sees her father stripped down almost to his bones and finds those bones shockingly familiar" (Tanner 34).

In my view, this encounter can be read as a reversal of Levinas's notion of paternity. If the father looked at the child and saw futurity, here it is the child who looks (back) at the father and sees his (and by extension, her) mortality. Paradoxically, the similarity connecting father and child is the utmost form of otherness, i.e., mortality and hence death. From the speaker's perspective—as a healthy subject—the father's nakedness represents the very real threat of the abject rendered visible. Yet she reacts with amazement at how very similar they are, even extending the similarities to her daughter:

> . . . Right away
> I saw how much his hips are like mine,
> the long, white angles, and then
> how much his pelvis is shaped like my daughter's,
> a chambered whelk-shell hollowed out,
> I saw the folds of skin like something
> poured, a thick batter, I saw
> his rueful smile, the cast-up eyes as he

shows me his old body,

he knows I will be interested, he knows I will find him

appealing. If anyone had ever told me I would sit

by him and he would pull up his nightie and I would look

at him, at his naked body, the thick

bud of his glans, his penis in all that

dark hair, look at him

in affection and uneasy wonder

I would not have believed it. (Olds 15)

Thus, the threat of the abject is neutralized via recognition. The recipient of abjection, the body, is precisely what facilitates recognition and identification in *The Father*. Even though father figures are most frequently associated with the word, here the logocentric symbolic order has collapsed as the illness steadily spreads through the paternal body. In "The Want," the speaker confesses that she "had stopped / longing for him to address [her] from his heart / before he died" (Olds 14). Those communication issues appear to have begun way earlier, probably during the speaker's childhood, as she recalls that: "I had / always known him as an object in the world / of objects because he would not speak, / sometimes, for a week" (Olds 14). The title of the poem suggests that despite her words, the daughter does want him to address her from his heart.

Even though "The Want" does evince the speaker's longing for her father's recognition, she does not blame him for his silences and lack of heartfelt confessions. Instead, she looks for that same recognition elsewhere, and in the material body she finds a suitable vessel to replace their defective communication. Therefore, most moments of intimate communion between father and daughter are wordless, but rely heavily on the tactile dimension, thereby suggesting that touch can make up for words (or rather, lack thereof). A

clear example of this is found in "The Look," a poem in which the speaker recounts an episode where she had to rub her father's back in order to help him spit:

> . . . so I slid my hand between his hot
>
> back and the hot sheet and he sat there
>
> with his eyes bulging, those used India-
>
> ink-eraser eyes that had never really
>
> looked at me. His skin shocked me,
>
> silky as a breast, voluptuous
>
> as a baby's skin, but dry, and my hand
>
> was dry, so I rubbed easily, in circles,
>
> he stared and did not choke, I closed
>
> my eyes and rubbed as if his body were his soul.
>
> I could feel his backbone deep inside, I could
>
> feel him under the rule of the choking,
>
> all my life I had felt he was under a rule.
>
> He gargled, I got the cup ready,
>
> I didn't vary the stroke, he spat, I
>
> praised him, I let the full pleasure
>
> of caressing my father come awake in my body,
>
> and then I could touch him from deep in my heart,
>
> …………………………………..
>
> . . . and he lifted his head shyly but
>
> without reluctance and looked at me
>
> directly, for just a moment, with a dark
>
> face and dark shining confiding eyes. (Olds 17)

This poem confirms the speaker's longing for paternal recognition, but also exemplifies that wordless forms of recognition—i.e., outside the logocentric order—can occur and still have a positive effect on the child. Here the body is brought to the fore as the vehicle through which this wordless exchange takes place. The visual plane—both the father's eyes "that had never really / looked at me" as well as the speaker's eyes—are relegated to the background as he simply "stared" while her daughter "closed / [her] eyes and rubbed as if his body were his soul" (Olds 17). The attention shifts from the visual plane to the sensory plane, thus undermining the relevance of more traditional (logocentric) forms of recognition. The following description brings attention to the profoundly intimate dimension unveiled in touching: "I could feel his backbone deep inside, I could / feel him under the rule of the choking / . . . I let the full pleasure / of caressing my father come awake in my body, / and then I could touch him from deep in my heart" (Olds 17).

Even though Olds's father poems have sometimes been deemed to be borderline pornographic, the pleasure described above is far from representing an incestuous drive.[7] I read it as the pleasure that stems from recognition, as the father's soul, a sign for his inner self, surfaces in his body. After the intimate exchange where the daughter once again consents to approach the abject, the father raises his head and looks at her "directly, for just a moment, with a dark / face and dark shining confiding eyes" (Olds 17). Instead of waiting for her father to come to her, she is the one to approach him in order to collapse the otherwise insurmountable distance. By accepting, and identifying with, the paternal abject body, the speaker is able to bridge the distance between them and finds solace in a material form of recognition.[8] In what follows, I examine the formal and textual mechanisms that make this possible.

Haptic visuality and the second body

Thus far, I have drawn attention to the representation of the paternal body as a site of abjection, as well as to the daughter's willingness to overcome abjection via identification with the wasted body. In this section I turn to examine the role of the daughter-speaker and delve into the question of father-daughter identification. The concept I will use to articulate these issues is the gaze—of the daughter, in this case—and, in particular, the sensory dimension of the gaze. In what follows, I elaborate on my argument that the subversion of logocentric notions of paternity is possible due to the central role played by the material plane. In turn, materiality is conveyed through a series of formal devices best understood through the notion of haptic visuality, a concept taken from film theory which I believe will be useful to analyze the sensual gaze in *The Father*.

In her famous essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey analyzes the power dynamics established by the male gaze that reduces women to objects to be looked at. This quality of being "simultaneously looked at and displayed," which Mulvey calls "to-be-looked-at-ness," springs from the pleasure provided by the scopophiliac instinct (809; 815). In this formula, the woman occupies the twofold role of object of desire and object of the male gaze. According to Mulvey, woman "stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as a bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (804).

Even though Mulvey's arguments have been subject to extensive criticism ever since the essay was published, her association between the subject of the gaze and the maker of meaning is still highly relevant to the question of the gaze in *The Father*. As we have seen in other parts of the dissertation, it is frequent for paternal representations to include some kind of confrontation or tension over the twofold issue of authorship and authority. So that the

symbolic debt may be subjectivized as part of the inheritance process, the child often feels compelled to (re-)authoring the father's story as much as the child's own. Here authorship appears not as a markedly intellectual process, as in *The Invention of Solitude* and *Fun Home*, but as a quality emanating from the subject who is the agent of the gaze.

We have also seen that the acritical replication of certain narrative practices can contribute to uphold the subsumptive codes of patriarchal domination. In other words, if the child merely replaces the father figure as the master storyteller and maker/interpreter of meaning, the dominant fiction can go on without having been substantially challenged. In addition to the ethical dilemmas this raises, the perpetuation of the dominant fiction hinders all possibility of separating paternity from patriarchy.

The question that shall orient this analysis, then, is whether Olds's poetry collection accommodates itself to a subsumptive logic, or, on the contrary, whether it counters it. So far, I have contended that the speaker's acceptance of, and identification with, the abject body undermines the centrality of the word (and hence logocentrism) in the process of paternal recognition. Compared to the rest of works that have been studied so far, this is the one that diverges from that model the most. However, Olds's poetry cannot fully escape logocentrism and the Symbolic order from which it emanates; after all, desire is "born with language," as Mulvey has it (808). I do not intend to suggest that Olds renounces the word in her poetry, but rather the dynamics of logocentrism, at least to some extent.

Let us unpack what I mean by this. As a poetry collection, *The Father* lacks the resources of visuality that cinema or comics can display. Still, Olds manages to conjure a complex sensorial experience out of her verses by means of a representation of the body and the material plane at large that relies heavily on kinesthetic evocation. Since language-based communication with her father is not viable—because of both his lack of recognition and abject status—the speaker focuses instead on the sensual aspect of their relationship, as

discussed in the previous section. Nevertheless, her channel of communication to us readers continues to be the written word. I want to suggest that both these dimensions are brought together through the use of haptic visuality.

Haptic visuality is a concept coined by Laura U. Marks which "seeks through form to represent other senses that go beyond the gaze" (Guillamón-Carrasco 139). This kind of visuality would then encompass the diversity of human senses beyond sight and hearing (Guillamón-Carrasco 139). Marks explains that:

> While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image . . . haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality. (163)

In sum, haptic visuality foregrounds bodily experience through means that are neither kinesthetic nor have any way to replicate directly that sort of experience.[9] Regardless of its uses in film theory, I believe it to be a concept that can be fruitfully applied to the study of literary texts. First of all, the material dimension is crucial to Olds's poetry in *The Father*, especially in her descriptions of the ill body. Secondly, the haptic mode of visuality aligns with Olds's attempts to describe the abject. In this case, the father's body constitutes a challenge to the social binaries of the symbolic order because it disrupts the binary motherhood-nature/fatherhood-culture by rendering the paternal body visible; in turn, the paternal body being an ill body also constitutes a violation insofar as excremental fluids are not just represented but brought to the fore.

Let us now examine some examples of haptic visuality in *The Father*. In "Last Acts," the speaker fantasizes with washing her father's face:

I wish I could wash my father's face,

take cotton from the dirt of the earth

and run it over his face so the loops

lick in his pores before he dies. I want

to be in him, as I was once inside him

………………………………………

I am his flesh, he can love me without

reserve, I will be his pleasure.

Now I want to feel, in the rowelling

of the cloth, the contours of his pitted skin,

I want to wash him, the way I would scrub

my dolls' faces thoroughly

before any great ceremony. (Olds 21)

The inclusion of verbs of action such as "wash" and "scrub," together with descriptions of different materials (cotton, cloth) in contact with the body, all evokes a highly kinesthetic portrait of this intimate moment. Instead of focusing on the process of cleaning itself, the speaker follows the motion of the cotton over the father's face "so the loops / lick in his pores before he dies." Likewise, she focuses on the feel of "the contours of his pitted skin" through the cloth, whose motion ("the rowelling of the cloth") suggests a piercing or pricking sensation against the skin. The action being described is not as central to the poem as the rendition of the father's body filtered through the speaker's touch. In doing so, the poem translates the sensations of these two bodies in contact with each other, and relegates the strictly visual part of the scene to the background.

Inasmuch as she is the agent of the gaze, the speaker can orient our attention to what she perceives. The emphasis on sensorial information reaches its peak in the poems that

recount the moment of the father's death. Right before he passes away, the speaker narrates how he got bathed for the last time and zooms in on his body: "and I sat with them and they washed him, clavicle, / shoulder, chest, ribs, the grainy / ochre skin . . ." (Olds 32). It almost appears as if she was trying to memorize every tiny detail of his physique. Then she lays her head "on the bed in the path of his breath and breathed it, / it was still sweet with its old soiled sweetness / the way dirt smells sour and clean" (Olds 33). Her act of gazing is disrupted by the smell, which invades the poem and then fades away.

Right before the father dies, we are told he starts "to darken," which may be understood either as a literal change in his complexion or as a metaphor of his impending death.[10] The speaker describes the first effects of rigor mortis on the paternal body as it "began to bend, / turning away from the window, his skin was / a glassy yellow . . . his emaciated head, his spine arched / as if to lift him away from the earth" (Olds 33). By giving a detailed account of the changes he undergoes in his last moments, the speaker also conveys an overwhelming tension that is mirrored by the father's contorting body. Here the visual plane is disrupted by the kinesthetic evocation of the paternal body.

In "His Smell," the daughter provides a painstaking description of her father's smell, a mixture of "yeast," "sour ferment," "wide cement," "a sidewalk of crushed granite," "the smelling-salts / tang of chlorine" of a "pool in summer," and "mold from the rug in his house" (Olds 37). These references conjure images of the father's addiction to alcohol, but also images of childhood familiarity. Then, she approaches the corpse and wonders at her reaction:

> I had thought the last thing between us
>
> would be a word, a look, a pressure
>
> of touch, not that he would be dead
>
> and I would be bending over him

smelling him, breathing him in

as you would breathe the air, deeply, before going into exile. (Olds 38)

It is worth noting that the primal feeling that smelling evokes further stresses the father's complete abandonment of the symbolic order. Both father and daughter have travelled back to a pre-symbolic moment in which neither words nor looks matter, and the possibility of contact is reduced to the animal-like act of smelling.[11]

As I advanced earlier, the relationship between the daughter and the dying father is highly sensual, even primal. However, I think it is important to stress that this relation is still mediated by the written word, regardless of the speaker's efforts to translate its materiality through the use of haptic visuality. First, we find a sensual/sensorial relation that facilitates recognition and identification, which can be understood as two sides of the same coin. On one hand, the father's recognition of his daughter takes place on the pre-symbolic plane of the tactile dimension. The daughter's identification with her father likewise takes place in the same sensorial/bodily dimension, as she recognizes his body is very much like her own. This double process of recognition-identification occurs in the diegetic level of the poem. Yet precisely, insofar as the contact between these two bodies happens in the diegetic level, they are, quite paradoxically, bodies stripped off their material dimension.

Here the concept of the "lyric second body" discussed by Anne Keefe proves useful to understand the different layers at play in the book. For Keefe, Olds's emphasis on the body is an attempt to re-create on the lyric plane "what Merleau-Ponty would call 'the second body'":

Unlike the material body, this lyric second body is constructed in and through language within the space of the lyric poem. In other words, because sensory experience is inextricable from the body and presupposes subjectivity, it is perhaps only through the aesthetic re-

264

creation of subjective experience such as that which occurs within the space of the lyric poem that we can ever facilitate a return to the body's experience from a perceptual remove. (Keefe 259)

In my view, these two devices (haptic visuality and the lyric second body) applied on the formal level try to correct, or make up for the aforementioned paradox. The notion of a second body within the lyric space of the poem is useful to account for Olds's representation of her own sensorial experience, but it is also worth noting that the father's body can be represented only through the speaker's second body. Since we do not have access to the father's perceptions, the only way we become aware of his abject status is through his daughter's scrutinizing gaze. The second body in *The Father*, then, is above all the speaker's; and, in turn, it is the speaker's second body which mediates and filters the experience of the paternal abject body.

In spite of its abject status, the paternal body may become an object and subject of love, as suggested by Kelly Oliver (*Subjectivity* 147). This can happen thanks to the re-embodiment of the father, whereby the individual can be dissociated from the patriarchal principle. Let us recall that the notion of the embodied father was proposed by Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace to separate individual performance from the paternal metaphor that is at the core of patriarchal ideology (see chapter 2). It is the association between the father and the law that makes the father a disembodied principle (Oliver, *Subjectivity* 137). In *The Father*, this association is disrupted by cancer. Whilst the fracture in the symbolic order allows the father to have his body back, it also turns him into a receptacle of abjection.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of the daughter's lyric second body allows for father-child recognition and identification, in the meantime preserving the integrity of the daughter in contact with abjection. It is in this sense that Olds uses the word; she re-creates her sentient

body as a way to gain agency over traumatic experiences that are hardly articulable in language. As Keefe has it:

> Olds's serial return points to just how much we need language in the face of the inarticulate experience. However, because of language's inefficiencies and imperfect ability to capture the valences of experience, we need the serial lyric return, the second body, to parse memory and to experience again. This rearticulation in and through language becomes a kind of remedy for the excess of flesh and the world that cannot be captured in language. . . . Therefore, if we accept phenomenology's claim that the body, language, and experience are inextricably intertwined, then to choose a second body through lyric composition is indeed a powerful strategy. (266)[12]

Keefe concludes that the lyric second body that appears in Olds's poems "becomes a method of return engaged by women poets to disorient structures of power within and through language" (275). I partially agree with this affirmation, especially insofar as the lyric second body is a useful tool to gain agency and a shield from the direct exposure to abjection. In fact, I would add that the lyric second body in *The Father* extends to the titular character. I have mentioned before that the father's body shares a greater resemblance to the traditional female body than it does to the virile body. Let us recall that the female body is characterized by its inability to stay clean and proper, and the abject paternal body of *The Father* aligns with this definition.[13] Moreover, by displacing recognition and identification to the pre-symbolic sensorial plane, Olds situates the paternal body in the sphere of the semiotic, the space of the maternal body. This gesture is indeed disruptive of the existing structures of power, as Keefe argues. Not only does the paternal body make an appearance—hence countering the usual asomia that accompanies representations of paternity—but appears as displaying attributes usually associated with the maternal body.

Nevertheless, the status of the paternal body (and, by extension, the daughter's gaze that informs the body) raises a number of problematic issues. Insofar as the father appears "feminized" and the daughter occupies the traditionally male role as subject of the gaze, we ought to consider the ethical implications of this shift; namely, whether the father is reduced to an object of the daughter's gaze and thereby stripped of his agency. Next, I tackle the objectifying power of the gaze and the hierarchies it creates. It is my contention that the speaker's quest for paternal love sometimes resorts to positions that are borderline subsumptive. In particular, I will examine the case of the daughter's zooming gaze and argue that, in an attempt to bridge the distance between them, the speaker reifies and fetishizes the father as an object of love that cannot love back.[14]

"Matter's love," father's love: the quest for paternal love through the gaze

There is a declaration of power inherent to every act of looking, whereby the bearer of the gaze loses agency in favor of the subject of the gaze. In *The Father*, the daughter assumes the role of gazer and offers us readers an account of her father's illness and death. This situation bears resemblance to the case of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, where the daughter likewise filters the paternal portrait. Arguably the same questions are raised by this inversion of roles; namely, whether the daughter's assuming a dominant role—the *archon* in the case of *Fun Home* and the gazer in *The Father*—undermines the seemingly non-subsumptive logic of her account.

Nevertheless, there are some key issues that must be taken into account before pursuing this line of thought. It is true that, overall, the daughter emerges as the main subject (rather, agent) of the gaze throughout the collection, whereas the father fulfills the role of the object being gazed at. This distribution of roles often entails that the object's agency is downplayed or disappears altogether, submitted to the desires of the observer. Ever since the

267

publication of Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the subject of the gaze has been often regarded as either male or possessing male qualities, a reflection of the patriarchal order that undergirds the objectifying look. At first sight, the fact that the daughter fulfills this male-associated position may imply a repetition of the dominant fiction. In other words, if the process of confronting the father and (re)gaining agency as a fully-fledged subject means that the child merely replaces him as creator of meaning, then the patriarchal structure is preserved, albeit inadvertently in many cases.

Yet *The Father* differs from *Fun Home* in a crucial aspect, and that is the disruptive effect of illness on the father and, indirectly, on the daughter. In this section I examine the way the power hierarchies and modes of exerting power (for instance, through the act of gazing) appear distorted by the presence of the abject. In particular, I continue the discussion about the gaze and its formal representation by examining the effect of zooming throughout the collection. Zooming introduces "a dramatic reduction of the distance between the viewer and the viewed," and in their view reveals a profound "desire for intimate relationship or attachment with the gazed object" (Padva and Buchweitz 5). This desire for intimacy is easily recognizable in *The Father*, as I have argued so far. Interestingly, when the speaker makes her father the subject of not only her gaze, but her *zooming* gaze, this desire for absolute intimacy threatens the very essence of relationality.

For Padva and Buchweitz, the act of zooming enforces "a unidirectional process in which the zoomed object cannot look back at the viewer," which marks it as "a violent act" that threatens the privacy of the object "by turning the covert into the overt" (5). Thus, zooming introduces a hierarchy whereby the father becomes powerless in front of her daughter's suddenly powerful gaze. It thus disrupts the possibility of face-to-face recognition: though the subject may look at the Other, the Other cannot possibly return the gaze. Therefore, zooming can be considered a subsumptive device.[15]

For Tanner, the collection "represents Olds's attempt to use the gaze as a means of dissolving boundaries rather than maintaining distance, as a way of claiming her father's embodied presence rather than reducing him to an objectified absence" (26). Whilst the speaker's gaze may indeed claim the father's embodied presence, as Tanner suggests, I think the speaker's unresolved longing for paternal affection, along with her desire to get closer, is so intense that her gaze does become increasingly invasive and objectifying, even though this effect is somehow countered by haptic visuality. Yet, on the other hand, I believe the speaker is fundamentally powerless even as she occupies the role of the gazer. In what follows, I offer some examples to illustrate my point.

It is clear from the beginning that the speaker is used to watching her father from a distance. The gaze is an element that has always been present in their relationship—the child looking at the father from afar. In "The Waiting," the poem that opens the collection, the father sits "unmoving, like something someone has made" in his living room at the break of dawn (Olds 3). It is suggested that he knows he is being watched; he remains static, "as if a piece of sculpture could sense / the gaze which was running over it" (Olds 3). Undisturbed by the daughter's piercing gaze, he waits for her to come closer: "the kiss / came to him, he did not go to it" (Olds 3). In spite of his objectified status, the father retains his power over his daughter. A clear example of this dynamics is found in "The Lifting," where the father commands the daughter to look at his abject body and then orients her gaze towards him (see section 1).

For Laura Tanner, the father's "knowledge of his own objectification emerges as one of the few signs of [his] subjective presence" (27). In her view, the daughter's look evinces for him "the dissolution of subjectivity and its replacement with a fully conscious yet objectified self" (28). I believe the father tries to hold on to his subjectivity via the daughter's gaze because he knows himself to be her coveted object of desire. Or, rather, that is what the

269

speaker suggests, as she assures us that "he knows / I will be interested, he knows I will find him / appealing" (Olds 15). The daughter's longing for paternal love and recognition is so overwhelming that it renders her powerless as subject of the gaze; or, in other words, as subject(ed) *to* his gaze instead of subject *of* the gaze. She resorts to zooming in an attempt to bridge the distance that keeps her away from her father. This action inadvertently reinforces the father's status as object as well as, inadvertently, the daughter's submission. That is to say, the daughter's fetishization of the father as the object of her desire is further stressed by the recourse to zooming, even though the intention of the zooming gaze was precisely to access paternal love. Paradoxically, what is intended as a means to get him closer is what is keeping him at bay.

Ever since she was a child, the father has always been the object of the speaker's desire. In "The Dead Body," she declares: "I knew him / soulless all my childhood, saw him / lying on the couch in the unlit end of the / living room on his back with his mouth open" (Olds 39). In "Natural History," the speaker compares her father's stillness in his grave with her memories of him as he lay "asleep, passed out, undulant, lax, / indifferent" (Olds 59). Again in "Parent Visiting Day," the same scene is recollected by the speaker: "When I was a child, you lay, at night / alive, a man who had removed his own / liver and brain and put them on the table, small / organ of the bourbon, / large organ of the chaser" (Olds 62).[16] This recursive image of the daughter staring at her motionless father epitomizes their fraught relationship. Likewise, it conveys a profound feeling of powerlessness as the child, now an adult, continues to be unable to attract the father's attention. Finally, in "Waste Sonata" the speaker conjures the same scene one last time:

> . . . I stood
>
> in that living room and saw him drowse
>
> like the prince, in slobbrous beauty, I began

270

to think he was a kind of chalice,

a grail, his love the goal of a quest,

yes! He was the god of love

and I was a shit. . . . (Olds 76)

For the first time we obtain a glimpse into the daughter's feelings as the powerless subject of the gaze. Unnoticed by her father, she becomes convinced that his love is something to be earned and treasured, even if that entails degrading herself in the process. In my view, this scene is crucial to understand the dynamics of the gaze that unravels between the speaker and her father. What she longs for—a glimpse of paternal recognition—cannot happen because the father will not return her gaze. Yet it might be the case that his failure to return the gaze is precisely ruled by his objectified status. Objects, precisely *qua* objects, cannot be subjects of love.

Another frequent metaphor that conveys the speaker's powerlessness is the representation of her father as a deity, a celestial body or a combination of the two. In "Wonder," the speaker evokes an image of her childhood where the father's head is compared to a "planet" and "a dazzling / meteor dropping down into the crib" (Olds 25). In "The Glass," the speaker narrates how her father is forced to spit the pus that the tumor in his throat sends out ("like the sun sending out flares") into a glass "every ten minutes or so" (Olds 7). This gruesome scene reveals a side of the father being portrayed as a reverse Saturn-like figure whose mouth is a source of creation, not destruction:

shiny and faintly golden, he gargles and

coughs and reaches for it again

and gets the heavy sputum out,

full of bubbles and moving around like yeast—

271

he is like a god producing food from his own mouth. (Olds 7)

Nevertheless, the father's power has already been significantly reduced as a consequence of his cancer. The speaker notes how the shimmering glass displaces the father as the center around which everyone and everything orbits:

> the room seemed to turn around it
>
> in an orderly way, a model of the solar system
>
> turning around the sun,
>
> my father the old earth that used to
>
> lie at the center of the universe, now
>
> turning with the rest of us
>
> around his death, bright glass of
>
> spit on the table, these last mouthfuls. (Olds 7–8)

Unlike in "The Waiting," here the room is not organized around the father, but around the father's excretions—a synecdoche for his approaching death. The reference to a shift from the geocentric model ("my father the old earth that used to / lie at the center of the universe") to the heliocentric model ("the room seemed to turn around it / in an orderly way, a model of the solar system / turning around the sun") suggests that a whole paradigm shift has indeed taken place that affects the father's life and the lives of those around him. Strikingly, it is the glass—a clear symbol of abjection—that imposes order, or rather, introduces a different hierarchy that demotes the father to becoming one among the rest.

This poem highlights an aspect of abjection that is crucial to the volume, and that is the capacity to rearrange power hierarchies that had remained unaltered for most of the speaker's life. It is my contention that the process of becoming abject re-humanizes the father

272

that had been so far unreachable. In this process the gaze plays a seminal role insofar as it reveals another dimension of the paternal that had hitherto been unnoticed by the speaker. I am referring to the realization that the father is nothing but a body that will soon turn into waste, not a deity or a grail whose love must be earned on a quest. We have seen that the inclusion of haptic visuality underscored the longing for paternal love and reproduced the kinesthetic pleasure of recognition through words. Zooming, despite its objectifying power, contributes to de-deify the father. The zooming gaze provides the speaker with an unexpected insight into the father's status; as she fixates her look on the father's (now) abject body, mortality and materiality emerge to re-signify the paternal figure.

In "The Picture I Want," the image of the speaker's head leaning on the father's shoulder serves to introduce a close-up of the father's lumps: "my face as near / to the primary tumor as a dozing baby's / lips to the mother's breast" (Olds 10). Despite the proximity of the abject, the speaker remains unfazed. A similar situation appears in "The Last Day," where the speaker details her father's last minutes alive:

> . . . I put my head on the bed beside him
>
> and breathed and he did not breathe, I breathed and
>
> breathed and he darkened and lay there,
>
> my father. I laid my hand on his chest
>
> and I looked at him, at his eyelashes
>
> and the pores of his skin, cracks in his lips,
>
> dark rose-red inside the mouth, springing hair deep in his nose . . . (Olds 33–4)

Through the speaker's zooming gaze, we are placed again face to face with the father's abjection. As he crosses the border between the dead and the living, his daughter takes in any minute detail ("pores of his skin, cracks in his lips") as if to memorize his features before he

ceases to exist. In my view, her desire for recognition and love overrides and hence counters the effect of the abject, to the extent that she learns to identify herself with it. In her desire to gain access to the object of love, the speaker projects her desire to reverse the cleavage so that she and her father can become one. In "Nullipara," the speaker declares that her father "knows he will live in me / after he is dead, I will carry him like a mother. / I do not know if I will ever deliver" (Olds 5). In "Death," a similar image is conjured in which the speaker wishes for her father "to rise up / into me or me to climb down / into his body," comparing their bodies to "two baskets / ripped at the sides which could now be woven together" (Olds 41).

Let us bear in mind that the father's body was marked as female, or at least feminized, as a result of illness (see section 2). I posited that this virtually transported the paternal body into the pre-symbolic or semiotic plane. The semiotic is defined as:

> the materiality of language, its tonal and rhythmic qualities, its bodily force. In Kristeva's account, the drives are not simply excluded by language but also inscribed as an alien element within it. While more primitive than signification, the semiotic participates in signifying practices. . . . Mobile and provisional, moving through the body of the not-yet subject, the semiotic is a chaotic force anterior to language, unlocalizable because it courses through an as yet undifferentiated materiality in which the infantile body is not yet distinct from the maternal body. (Zakin n.p.)

Continuing my argument, I contend that the speaker's zooming gaze is a manifestation of her longing to be reunited with the father as one, reversing the process of abjection that is seminal to the formation of the self. In the image of semiotic union that concludes "Nullipara," the daughter becomes a mother to her father; in an attempt to collapse their separation, she provides her own body to secure their union. In later iterations of the same

274

idea, the daughter fantasizes with consuming the remains of the dead paternal body. Nevertheless, these fantasies of absorbing the father develop in parallel to the realization, ushered in by the zooming gaze, that the father, far from occupying the status of a divinity, is nothing but matter. In the following section, I turn to examine the way in which *The Father* reverses the transformation of the embodied father into an abstract ideal that we saw at the end of *The Road*.

The re-humanization of the father through the wasted body

In this section I would like to draw attention to the process whereby the father figure is "wasted", a process that provides a stark contrast with the posthumous deification famously posited by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*. In my opinion, this strategy effectively counters the dominant fiction and succeeds in separating the paternal from the patriarchal. It must be noted that by "strategy" I do not mean this is a somehow conscious attempt purposefully crafted by the author; rather, I see it as the natural conclusion of a process that emerges organically in *The Father*, which I examine in depth in what follows.

Thus far, I have oriented my analysis through the study of the gaze, including haptic visuality and zooming, and the body, including the material body and the lyric second body. In my view, the simultaneous use of these elements creates a constant tension between subsumptive and non-subsumptive forces that extends throughout the collection and is left purposefully unresolved. That is, instead of leading us to a satisfactory conclusion, namely, the univocal resolution of the speaker's unrequited desire for paternal recognition, the plot contained (or suggested) in *The Father* leaves us with a feeling of incompleteness. This impression is shared by Brian Dillon in his essay on the father-daughter plot throughout Olds's whole oeuvre. Even though he identifies "a linear progression from abuse to expulsion of the abuser to the apparent death of the abuser with (perhaps) the speaker's achievement of

275

a peace with her past" (108), he is reluctant to identify a definite ending: "The plot of this relation might very well continue as long as Olds writes. The past cannot be neatly confronted, interpreted, and resolved. Some plots resist a tidy closure" (Dillon 118).

On a reduced scale, this same problematic appears in *The Father¸* in itself a microcosmic rendition of the father-daughter relationship that has been a major theme in Olds's literary production.[17] The lack of a "tidy closure," as Dillon has it, is interpreted by Mary Theresa Lane as the author's "refusal (or inability) to write a restitution narrative that would deliver her from her own experience of abjection and pain" (155). In my view, it is precisely in refusing to be "delivered" from the experience of abjection that Olds's account finally falls on the non-subsumptive pole of the spectrum. In other words, the tension between subsumptive and non-subsumptive elements mentioned above is maintained because the poems are not arranged linearly, as Dillon aptly points out. However, I contend that by refusing a linear progression Olds manages to underscore the continuous process that is confronting the desire for paternal love. Interestingly, by placing that desire in the semiotic plane, she further stresses that it cannot ever be satisfied. Thus, it would be naïve to pretend that the collection can somehow introduce a teleological order whereby the subject ends up being whole. It is true, I think, that the subject can be made whole, but only through a fiction. In respecting the subject's fundamental lack in her writing—both her father's lack and her own—even when she had the possibility to craft a fiction where this lack could have been solved, Olds completely subverts the principles that undergird the dominant fiction.

Before I proceed any further, I would like to briefly recapitulate the elements that contribute to this subversion. I have already listed the tension between the haptic mode of visuality, which foregrounds the experience of relationality outside the purely visual field, and the zooming gaze, whose intrusive effect erases otherness and facilitates the consumption of the Other *qua* fetishized object. In addition, the arrangement of the poems so that linearity

276

is downplayed brings attention to the fundamental incompleteness of the subject, as well as the unresolvable status of desire. Finally, the inversion of the process whereby the father goes from embodied individual to symbolic abstraction (as seen in the ending of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*) neatly separates the speaker's father from the paternal principle.

Let us now turn our attention to the manner in which this reverse process unravels in *The Father*. Even though I will refer to a series of steps that I have ordered chronologically, it must be stressed that the poems do not appear in this particular order. The collection can be roughly divided into a first part wherein the father's illness and passing is chronicled, and a second part that focuses on the speaker's feelings and thoughts following his death. In addition to these two temporal planes, we get glimpses into the speaker's childhood, suggesting a narrative that is larger than the collection itself as it spans several decades.[18] This temporality, situated before the main events recounted in *The Father*, provides a much-needed contrast with the version of the father that we encounter throughout most of the collection, hence allowing us to grasp how those changes are seminal to the father-child relationship.

At this moment—let us call this the distant past—the speaker regards herself as "a shit," as she confesses in "Waste Sonata" (76), whilst her father is described as a "prince" (Olds 76), a "planet" and "a dazzling / meteor" (Olds 25), "the god of love" (Olds 76), and a being "[m]ysterious / as God" (Olds 75). These metaphors, together with the speaker's recurrent description of a scene in which she watches her father lie still (probably in a drunken stupor), set the scene of a child who professes an unconditional yet unrequited love for her father.[19] However, he seems not to notice her—or at least that is what the speaker perceived as a child. For instance, in "The Look" the speaker talks about her father's "used India- / ink-eraser eyes that had never really / looked at me" (Olds 17). In a similar vein, the father is introduced in "The Waiting" as a sculpture-like figure who refuses to look in his

daughter's direction even though he is perfectly aware of her presence—or so she assures us (Olds 3).

The moment of transfiguration, as advanced earlier, unravels throughout the father's illness and moment of death. For Brickey, Olds contrasts "the disintegration of the father's physical body with the elevation of his spirit" by means of his taking on "the attributes of a god" as he dies (41). I believe it is quite the opposite: the living, healthy father already possessed those attributes, and it is only after he becomes ill that the daughter comes to realize her mistake in idolizing him. The theme of the father's fall from grace appears in several poems, most notably in "To My Father" and "Waste Sonata," which I will comment on later. For the time being, I would like to focus on the daughter's gradual realization of the father's defective nature, which goes hand in hand with her desire to consume him, but also with her discovery of his new abject status.

As I argued in previous sections, the daughter's act of looking (a combination of haptic visuality and zooming) signals her profound desire not only to be recognized by her father, but to connect with him intimately so that they become the same self.[20] It is upon closer inspection that the idea of her father as a fallible, mortal man starts to sink in her. This insight is what leads her to identification first, while the father is still alive, and comprehension later. However, there are many instances in which the daughter's tentative identification mingles with her passionate desire to be closer to her father, resulting in her blurring of the borders of subjectivity. For instance, in "Last Acts" she experiences such a strong sense of communion with her father while she washes him (see section 2) that she announces her merging with the paternal body: "I am his flesh, he can love me without / reserve, I will be his pleasure" (Olds 21). A similar image of merging is evoked in "The Request" as the daughter leans over the father: "I *sank* almost / *into that body* where my life half-began" (Olds 28; emphasis added).

278

In my opinion, the speaker's desire to "[absorb] the father into herself," as Dillon puts it (117), goes way back before his death. Dillon argues that "[t]he emotional distance the father maintained, both when the speaker was a child and as he is dying, prohibits a communion of love between father and daughter in his final days" (117), but maybe he oversees the tiny hints of communion prior to the father's passing. Two outstanding examples of these small moments of connection appear in "The Look" (see section 1) and, in a more straightforward manner, in "My Father's Eyes." The latter is especially poignant: set one day before the father's passing, the speaker painstakingly evokes one of her father's last signs of understanding. He is no longer capable of speaking and barely moves; the daughter explains that "[t]hey said he was probably not seeing anything, / the material sphere of his eye simply / open to the stuff of the world" (Olds 31). However, he seems to react to both his wife and the speaker's voices:

> And once, when he got agitated,
>
> reaching out, I leaned down
>
> and he swerved his blurred iris toward me and with-
>
> in it for a moment his pupil narrowed and
>
> took me in, it was my father
>
> looking at me.
>
> This lasted just
>
> a second, like the sudden flash
>
> of sex that jumps between two people.
>
> Then his vision sank back down
>
> and left only the globe of the eye, and the
>
> next day the soul went out
>
> and left just my father there

and I thought of that last glint, glint without

warmth or hope, his glint of recognition. (Olds 31)

Perhaps Dillon is right after all: this scene does not recount a "communion of love," but something much more primal, even animalistic. The father's reaction to his daughter's presence is based on pure instinct, as he follows her voice without seeing her. Then, "his glint of recognition" does not indicate the superior kind of recognition that we might expect in this context. That is to say, this is not recognition in the sense that has been prevalent throughout the dissertation; it does not signal the father's acceptance of his child and simultaneously his paternal role, as Recalcati suggests, nor can it be understood as the revelation that we originate in the Other. It is recognition of another life in its purely material status, hence the speaker's observation about it being a "glint without / warmth or hope" (Olds 31). As we will see, this scene of recognition ties in with the ending of "My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead," the last poem featured in the volume.

Following the father's passing, the theme of physically consuming the father's remains becomes increasingly dominant. I agree with Dillon's affirmation that "[t]he poems that recall the dead father do not allow the other to remain the other: the speaker absorbs the father into herself" (117). I interpret this extreme form of blurring the boundaries between the speaker's subjectivity and her father's subjectivity as a sign of grief, as it alternates with the speaker's guilt for not having been able to save her father. Both themes appear entwined in "The Pull":

I wanted to lie down with him,

on the couch where he lay unconscious at night

and there on his death-bed, let myself down

beside him, and then, with my will, lift us both

280

up. Or maybe just lie with him

and never get up. (Olds 65)

In "Parent Visiting Day," the daughter addresses her father and confesses to him that "[i]f they had needed someone *to descend / into you*, to look for your soul . . . —if there had been a task to perform*I would have performed it*, / but you could not be helped. That was the point of hell" (Olds 62; emphasis added). This poem already evinces a shift in the speaker's attitude; through the use of the conditional, she seems to hint that she is no longer willing to go through hell and high water for him. However, this can be read alternatively as the daughter's hell insofar as she perceives her father's need for help but cannot do anything at all to help him, leaving her fantasy of filial assistance unfulfilled.

It is not easy to pin down the exact moment where this shift occurs, but I am inclined to suggest that it begins as consequence of the speaker's contact with the abject paternal body. She seems to share the view that "[c]ancer . . . is a disease of the body. Far from revealing anything spiritual, it reveals that the body is, all too woefully, just the body" (Sontag 18). Her witnessing is nonetheless informed by her intimate belief—or rather, lack thereof—that the body is all there is. Specifically, in "The last day" she admits that "I have always longed to believe in what I am seeing . . . I had / never understood and I did not / understand it now, the body and the spirit" (Olds 32–3). Then, in "The Exact Moment of his Death," the definite transfiguration takes place that renders the father completely Other:

for a moment it was fully

he, my father, dead but completely

himself, a man with an open mouth and

black spots on his arms . . .

……………………………………….

281

He seemed to be holding still, then the skin

tightened slightly around his whole body

as if the purely physical were claiming him,

and then it was not my father,

it was not a man, it was not an animal,

I ran my hand slowly through the hair,

lifted my fingers up through the grey

waves of it, the unliving glistening

matter of this world. (Olds 35–6)

Death turns the father into "unliving glistening matter." I think it is significant that the speaker does not refer to her father's corpse as a body, but instead rebels against this commonplace perception:

. . . we would stand outside the door and he was

alone—as if all we had cared about was his consciousness,

this man who had so little consciousness, who was

90% his body. I hated

the way we were treating him like garbage, we would burn him, as if

only the soul mattered. Who *was* that,

if not he, lying there dried and abandoned.

…………………………..

So what if his soul was gone, I knew him

soulless all my childhood, saw him

lying on the couch . . .

…………………………

and nothing there but his body. So I stood by him

> in the hospital and stroked him, touched his
>
> arm, his hair, I did not think he was there
>
> but this was the one I had known anyway,
>
> this man made of rich substance, this raw one . . . (Olds 39–40; original emphasis)

Death does not transform the father into a body because a body is precisely what he already was prior to that moment. In fact, in "Close to Death" the speaker hints that this belief comes, albeit indirectly, from her father:

> I have nothing for him, no net,
>
> no heaven to catch him—he taught me only
>
> the earth, night, sleep, the male
>
> body in its beauty and fearsomeness,
>
> he set up that landscape for me
>
> to go to him in, and I will go to him
>
> and give to him, what he gave me I will give him,
>
> the earth, night, sleep, beauty, fear. (Olds 24)

It is nonetheless striking that the speaker so adamantly insists on her father's materiality, given that he had been previously described as a god-like figure. In my view, this reinforces the argument that cancer transfigures the body and renders him fully human—fully material, hence utterly waste-able and thus comparable to the daughter who sees herself as "a shit" (Olds 76). The collection therefore contrasts the speaker's perception of the father as a deity during her childhood with her perception of him as pure matter in her adult life. It is during the father's illness that the daughter realizes their connection and is therefore able to identify with him. In Dillon's words,

283

> [w]hat the speaker knows when she sees her father as a victim, dying of cancer, is that they
> are connected, not by their shared experiences, not even the ones portrayed as traumatic for
> the speaker in numerous poems, but connected in their bones and blood, their bodies a
> physical conjunction that transcend all darker memories of abuse. (116)

Recognition, and then identification, takes place on the plane of the purely material. I believe the change of mind undergone by the speaker correlates with her implicit realization that those two processes, which had been so far unrealizable, become viable once she re-embodies and thereby re-humanizes her father. In this sense, as Dillon affirms in the quotation above, identification with the father is made possible by the speaker's realization that they are connected "in their bones and blood." Paradoxically, the process of rehumanizing and re-embodying the father comes at the cost of his de-subjectifying materialization. In other words, prior to his illness, the father was a fully-fledged subject (in the sense of transcendental) though he was simultaneously his daughter's object of desire. During his illness, his subjectivity is besieged and ultimately obliterated by cancer as he falls prey to the abject, but his daughter's gaze manages to see beyond it. His subjectivity is now rooted in the purely material, therefore not transcendental at all.

Corporeality yields to a process of wasting the father (and his body) following his demise. That is to say, not only is the father reduced to his corporeal dimension, but he is in fact undone until he collapses into dirt. This process is seminal to the second part of the volume, in which the daughter reflects on the father's absence, grief, and mourning. The theme of merging with the father in the semiotic plane is replaced by the desire to consume the father's remains. In a further twist of haptic visuality, the speaker fantasizes tasting her father's ashes in "The Feelings":

. . . I would have

>liked to stay beside him, ride by his
>
>shoulder while they drove him to the place where they would burn him,
>
>see him safely into the fire,
>
>touch his ashes in their warmth, and bring my
>
>finger to my tongue. (Olds 42–3)

In "One Year," the weight of the father's absence is captured in the speaker's visit to his grave, where she falls asleep:

>. . . When I woke,
>
>my cheek was crumbly, yellowish
>
>with a mustard plaster of earth. Only
>
>at the last minute did I think of his body
>
>actually under me, the can of
>
>bone, ash, . . .
>
>………………………………
>
>When I kissed his stone it was not enough,
>
>when I licked it my tongue went dry a moment, I
>
>ate his dust, I tasted my dirt host. (Olds 55)

This poem is packed with images of nature, including various species of trees and plants, insects, and minerals. As the speaker wakes up, she finds "a mustard plaster of earth" on her cheek, which suggests that she has integrated herself among the natural elements. Then she proceeds to kiss and lick her father's tombstone, which stands as a substitute for his now inaccessible body. At this point, the daughter is fully aware that in consuming her father, she's consuming waste. Instead of having elevated the father to the plane of abstract symbols, his death has further demoted him from a body, still recognizable as human, to dirt, formless

285

matter. As I argued at the beginning of this section, I believe that by foregrounding this transformation Olds manages to further destabilize the symbolic status of the father (already undermined by illness). In the following and final section, I analyze the manner in which the elements underscored so far (haptic visuality and zooming, the abject paternal body, the process of wasting the paternal body) can contribute to rethink an alternative relation between paternity and ethics.

"And now I watched him be undone": *The Father*'s ethics of matter

Compared to the rest of works analyzed so far, *The Father* is perhaps the one that puts most emphasis on the paternal body. To conclude this chapter, I would like to assess how the emphasis on matter informs an ethical stance that diverges in significant ways from the ones that have been discussed until now. I have already commented on the continuous tension between subsumptive and non-subsumptive elements and devices that plays a pivotal role in Olds's idiosyncratic rendition of the father figure. Here I will focus on how these elements influence the ethical underpinnings of *The Father*, as well as on the divergences of certain issues—i.e., the inheritance process, comprising recognition—with regard to what we have seen until now.

The collapse of the paternal god-like figure prompted by the intromission of abjection leads the speaker to identify with, and be recognized by, her father. As I argued in chapter 2, the process of recognition entails understanding that any subject has its origin in the Other, which in turn leads to a dialectical negotiation of one's selfhood in which the subject must assimilate and subjectivize the symbolic debt. If we apply the terminology proposed by Recalcati to the case of *The Father*, we find that the speaker has been unable to subjectivize her symbolic debt precisely because her father will not recognize her. However, it becomes increasingly apparent that her father—or anyone, for that matter—cannot deliver the kind of

recognition she seeks. In Lacanian terms, we would say she is driven by a poignant desire to suture the cleavage that precedes the formation of the self as an independent subject. In Kristevan terms, she tries to return to the sphere of the semiotic. This return to the semiotic is marked by her desire to be loved by the father and become one with him, even if it means sacrificing her sense of self; yet, as it has been discussed, it also proves to be an alternative route to the tainted symbolic.

In explicitly renouncing the symbolic, the speaker discovers an alternative means of communication that fosters recognition and identification with her father in the sensorial, hence female-marked plane. In a way, she further feminizes the father figure. If the intromission of abjection had already undone the virile body, as argued in section 1, then the daughter's identification with the abject paternal body deepens the undoing of the usual masculine-patriarchal structures that underpin paternity. In my view, Olds's kinesthetic universe reflects the twofold nature of discourse:

> For Kristeva, the self is a subject of enunciation—a speaker who can use the pronoun "I". But speakers are neither unitary nor fully in control of what they say because discourse is bifurcated. The symbolic dimension of language, which is characterized by referential signs and linear logic, corresponds to consciousness and control. The semiotic dimension of language, which is characterized by figurative language, cadences, and intonations, corresponds to the unruly, passion-fueled unconscious. All discourse combines elements of both registers. . . . Since the rational orderliness of the symbolic is culturally coded masculine, while the affect-laden allure of the semiotic is culturally coded feminine, it follows that no discourse is purely masculine or purely feminine. The masculine symbolic and the feminine semiotic are equally indispensable to the speaking subject, whatever this individual's socially assigned gender may be. Every self amalgamates masculine and feminine discursive modalities. (Anderson et al. n.p.)

The prevalence of the semiotic is likewise conveyed in the poem "My Father's Eyes," which presents us with the event of recognition—with a twist. The father acknowledges his daughter's presence in what we might call an act of semiotic recognition—that is, the pre-symbolic. The speaker tries to banish language from playing a role in this process, given that the exchange takes place on a purely sensorial plane that conjures signification without words. The paradox arises again when the speaker represents this scene outside of language by means of the (written) word of the poem, suggesting that the desire to be reunited with the father in the semiotic is as unattainable as conveying this "semiotic recognition" without words.[21]

We find echoes of this scene in "My Father Speaks to Me from the Dead." Here, the father speaks through her daughter:

> I have been in a body without breath,
>
> I have been in the morgue, in fire, in the slagged
>
> chimney, in the air over the earth,
>
> and buried in the earth, and pulled down
>
> into the ocean—where I have been
>
> I understand this life, I am matter,
>
> your father, I made you, when I say now that I love you
>
> I mean look down at your hand, move it,
>
> that action is matter's love, for human
>
> love go elsewhere. (Olds 79)

In this poem, the father opposes matter's love to human love, and situates his capacity to love his daughter within the realm of the former. He retains his status as creator; however, the act

288

of creation differs from other acts that we have seen, namely in *Fun Home* and *The Invention of Solitude*, in that it focuses strictly on the material plane. Of course, it is the daughter who speaks through the father, and not the other way around. In "When the Dead Ask My Father about Me," she repeats this act of ventriloquism to justify why her father could not "speak about her":

> This dirt, I have always had it in my mouth.
>
> Now I carry it on my tongue, an honor—
>
> a spoonful of the earth. But then my mouth
>
> was grouted shut with its dark grout.
>
> …………………………………..
>
> . . . I walked from room
>
> to room, carrying the soil in my mouth,
>
> she never stopped me. She would stand in the doorway
>
> to the living room, at night, when the dirt
>
> was packed inside me and packed around me
>
> on that six-foot couch . . .
>
> ………………………………………….
>
> . . . She could
>
> speak, you see. As if my own
>
> jaws, throat, and larynx had come
>
> alive in her. But all she wanted
>
> was that dirt from my tongue, umber lump you could
>
> pass, mouth-to-mouth, she wanted us to
>
> lie down, in a birth-room, and me
>
> to labor it out, lever it into her
>
> mouth I am audible, listen! this is *my* song. (Olds 73–4; original emphasis)

The dirt seems to be what prevents the father from addressing the daughter, rendering him unable to express his love for her. Even though the image of the father's mouth being "grouted shut with its dark grout" may suggest a connection between dirt and throat cancer, the subsequent reference to the dirt being "packed" inside the father as he lies "on that six-foot couch" points back to the speaker's childhood memory of her father's drunken stupors. It is then confirmed that the dirt blocking the father's mouth has alwaysbeen present. Since he is blatantly incapable of speaking up, his daughter does it for him in the poem ("As if my own / jaws, throat, and larynx had come / alive in her"). Thus, her fear that her father had been repressing "some cry / he has kept inside him all his life" (Olds 12) is exorcized through her act of ventriloquism in these poems.

It must be noted that such a fear springs from the daughter's intimate desire to be loved. In other words, she wishes there was something interfering with her father's capacity to voice his love for her because that would provide her with the closure she needs. In order to obtain closure, then, the daughter speaks with her father's voice—what she imagines to be her father's voice. Even though this strategy veers into the terrain of subsumptive logic, the lack of a definite ending in which the daughter finds peace and forgiveness counters the daughter's act of ventriloquism. The non-linear progression of the events as they are recounted throughout the poems suggests that inheritance and mourning lack a clear beginning or ending, thus emphasizing the cyclical nature of inheritance and hence identity formation, a process always in the making.

The ethics of matter that stem from *The Father* is almost nihilistic in its postulates, and at the same time deeply comforting. After having understood that her father is not a deity, but a man "full of shit"—in the same manner she has identified herself as "a shit"—the

speaker is finally able to see herself and her deified father on the same level and thereby grapple with her feelings for him:

> . . . he was a
>
> shit, but I felt he hated being a shit,
>
> ……………………………………
>
> but I could not live with hating him.
>
> …………………………………
>
> But to die, like this. To grow old and die
>
> a child, lying to herself.
>
> My father was not a shit. He was a man
>
> failing at life. He had little shits
>
> travelling through him while he lay there unconscious—
>
> sometimes I don't let myself say
>
> I loved him, anymore, but I feel
>
> I almost love those shits that move through him,
>
> shapely, those waste foetuses,
>
> my mother, my sister, my brother, and me
>
> in that purgatory. (Olds 76–7; emphasis added)

The speaker is finally able to accept and embrace her love for him as much as her hatred. This feeling is explored in all its rawness in "I Wanted to Be There When My Father Died":

> I wanted to be there when my father died
>
> because I wanted to see him die—
>
> and not just to know him, down to
>
> the ground, the dirt of his unmaking, and not

just to give him a last chance

to give me something, or take his loathing

back. . . .

…………………………………….

and yet I wanted to see him die

not just to see no soul come

free of his body, no mucal genie of

spirit jump

forth from his mouth,

proving the body on earth is all we have got,

I wanted to watch my father die

because I hated him. Oh, I loved him,

my hands cherished him, laying him out,

but I had feared him so, his lying as if dead on the

flowered couch had pummelled me,

his silence had mauled me, I was an Eve

he took and pressed back into clay,

casual thumbs undoing the cheekbone

eye-socket rib pelvis ankle of the child

and now I watched him be undone and

someone in me gloried in it . . . (Olds 71)

Here the speaker gloats in her resentment, thereby defying the taboo that dictates one must grieve after the father's death. Her explosive hatred again contravenes the Freudian notion that the father becomes a symbol—i.e., an empty signifier, a perpetual void—following his death. By openly admitting how harmful her father's indifference was for her, she is freed from her desire to be united with him, thus completing the process of his undoing. She divests

her father of his symbolic attributes, and wonders "What have I worshipped? / I ask you this so seriously, / you who almost never spoke. / I have idolized the mouth of the silent man" (Olds, "To My Father" 75).

It must be noted that the speaker's rejection of her father's symbolic attributes does not imply that she rejects her father altogether. In my view, she is able to see through the paternal-patriarchal conflation that posits the father as a necessarily empty signifier. Let us recall that the Name-of-the-father marks the void upon which the Law of the father, as symbol, rests (Radiszcz 13); it exemplifies the forever empty spot left by the *Urvater* after his murder by the band of brothers, according to the Freudian myth in *Totem and Taboo*. Upon realizing that her father has been undone, like she will be undone someday, she also gains insight into how her desire for the father's love can only find solace in matter's love, or the love provided by the father *qua* living, loving body.[22] In fact, she retains and cherishes the memory of her father as an individual anchored in the material realm. In "The Swimmer," the speaker enjoys the feeling of being "suspended" in water "like a sperm":

> . . . Then I love to swim slowly,
>
> I feel I am at the center of life, I am
>
> inside God . . .
>
> ……………………………………
>
> curling—so I am like a real being,
>
> invisible, an amoeba that rides in spit,
>
> I am like those elements my father turned into,
>
> smoke, bone, salt. It is one of
>
> the only things I like to do
>
> anymore, get down inside the horizon
>
> and feel what his new life is like, how

clean, how blank, how griefless, how without error—

the trance of matter. (Olds 56)

In experiencing "the trance of matter," the daughter can feel at peace being matter among matter, which also brings her closer to her father, in a way ("I am like those elements my father turned into," she declares). Still, the process of grieving may never end for her, just like her longing for her father's love will never end. In my view, "The Swimmer" would be an apt ending for a volume portraying grief as a linear process with a clear beginning and ending. Nevertheless, neither grief nor identity formation are finite, orderly processes, as suggested in previous sections. After the purported coming to terms with the father's death in "The Swimmer," the poem "Letter to My Father from 40,000 Feet" reminds us of the never-ending nature of human love. Upon seeing a man on a plane that reminds her of her father, the speaker feels the overwhelming urge to "go very close to him"; this urge coexists with her desire to "arm-wrestle" the stranger that now represents her father and "win":

I did not want to gaze at him or kiss him,

I just wanted to put my long

arms around him, smell the ironed

cotton, feel the heat of his chest

against my cheek, the big male body

free of cancer, the fine sifted

lumpless batter of the flesh. Well, that's it, really,

just checking in. Isn't it something

the way I can't get over you, this

long, deep, unearned desire

you made when you made me, even after your death

it beams toward you, even when I'm dead I will be

facing you, my non-self

aiming this ardent non-love

steadily toward you. I guess I am saying

I hate you, too, there's a way I want

to take that first-class toper and throw him

down on the ground, arm-wrestle him

and win, bang his forearm on the earth

long after he cries out. (Olds 63–4)

The Father's ethical stance is thus found in the speaker's acceptance of her own mortality and fallibility, a comprehension she reaches after she de-deifies and re-embodies her father. The father's bodyeventual collapsing and turning to waste prefigures that same process for the speaker's body. In "The Motel," now that the titular building has been reduced to "a pile of rubbish," the daughter quietly accepts that "every trace of everything / that held me / holding him / will be removed from the planet" (Olds 69–70). Even though it might seem only matter and waste are left, the nihilism inherent to this posture is countered by the memory of paternal love—which emerges as a memory of physical, embodied love as perceived in and by the body. In "The Exam," an arresting representation of grief and memory, the speaker superimposes several temporalities that momentarily coexist on the same plane:
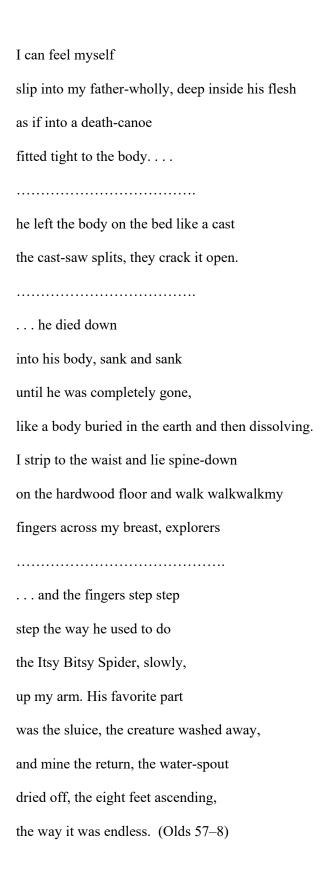
When I lie down to do a breast exam

I feel like my father in the hospital bed

about to take those last few breaths, I can feel myself in him,

my arms in his arms, my hands filling his hands,

my chest his chest—three breaths left,

…………………………

I can feel myself

slip into my father-wholly, deep inside his flesh

as if into a death-canoe

fitted tight to the body. . . .

………………………….

he left the body on the bed like a cast

the cast-saw splits, they crack it open.

………………………….

. . . he died down

into his body, sank and sank

until he was completely gone,

like a body buried in the earth and then dissolving.

I strip to the waist and lie spine-down

on the hardwood floor and walk walkwalkmy

fingers across my breast, explorers

…………………………….

. . . and the fingers step step

step the way he used to do

the Itsy Bitsy Spider, slowly,

up my arm. His favorite part

was the sluice, the creature washed away,

and mine the return, the water-spout

dried off, the eight feet ascending,

the way it was endless. (Olds 57–8)

The daughter remembers her father as she performs a breast exam on herself. Her image lying

down on the floor recalls that of the dying father in his hospital bed; the threat of cancer

unites them both unexpectedly. The first part of the poem consists in an evocation of the father's illness and death, which somehow rekindles the feeling of merging bodies we have already explored. There is a fear and anxiety of obliteration as the speaker recalls the father's death and fantasizes with her slipping into the paternal body, being trapped within the confines of his dying body and thus condemned to share his fate. Then, as the speaker starts her exploration, the feeling of her own fingers across her breast suddenly invokes the memory of a childhood game the father and she used to play.

In my view, the impossible merging of bodies that is the speaker's unrealizable desire is halted by this other memory. Whilst the memory of the ill father trapped the speaker, threatening to dissolve her self, the game of the Itsy Bitsy Spider springs from a place of memory where the daughter's body and the father's body, well defined and separate from each other, interact in a tender, loving way. In other words, the same materiality that threatens the subject's integrity with its abjection and decay is likewise what prevents her from being obliterated when it appears as the loving paternal body, or "matter's love." The twofold status of matter as threatening and emancipating can never be solved, just like the tension between the symbolic and the semiotic for Kristeva, or the unquenchable desire of a daughter for her father's recognition. Arguably this precarious balance threatens the subject's wholeness; but then, if the subject is aware of the fact that it is all a fabrication, does it even matter? After all, like the Itsy Bitsy Spider game itself, these processes are all "endless."

Notes

1. Some critics have noted that certain characters and events reappear throughout her oeuvre, often highlighting the dynamic relationship between memory and the "embodied sensual experience" (Keefe 259). Thus, Russell Brickey identifies Olds's father as "the most prominent among [her] cast of characters" (30). Brian Dillon wonders whether a plot about the father can be discerned when looking at the entire Olds canon (108), and presents some compelling arguments to back up the notion of an overarching plot connecting Olds's

several poetry collections, although he also concedes that "plot continuity," in a more traditional sense, "is suggested but left unfulfilled" (113). For further information, see Dillon.

2. I borrow the use of the term "gaze" from Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," where the gaze is an objectifying and controlling mechanism of apprehension of the Other. Implicit to this notion of the gaze is the hierarchy that is established between the subject or agent of the gaze and the object at the receiving ending of that same gaze.

3. Following critics such as Laura Tanner or Brian Dillon, I will hereafter refer to the main voice in *The Father* as the speaker. I think it is crucial to distinguish the material author from the voice inside the text due to the centrality of what Anne Keefe identifies as "the lyric second body" in Olds's poetry: "this lyric re-creation [of the visceral body] is the making of what Merleau-Ponty would call 'the second body.' Unlike the material body, this lyric second body is constructed in and through language within the space of the lyric poem" (259). I address this issue in depth in sections 1 and 2. For further reading, see Keefe.

4. For further readings into the contact with the abject, see Douglas and Morrison.

5. See also Morrison for an in-depth discussion of the gendered classification of the wasted body.

6. The notion of topography is taken from Susan Sontag's observation that "[m]etaphorically, cancer is not so much a disease of time as a disease or pathology of space. Its principal metaphors refer to topography (cancer "spreads" or "proliferates" or is "diffused"; tumors are surgically "excised"), and its most dreaded consequence, short of death, is the mutilation or amputation of part of the body" (14–5). For further reading on the metaphors of cancer, see Sontag.

7. See Bedient.

8. Arguably, the speaker overcomes abjection since, as Kristeva points out, "abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin" (233).

9. In its original context, haptic visuality refers to the capacity of the "audio-visual medium of film" to conjure "deeply sensuous universes" through the recreation of "other senses (taste, smell, and, crucially, touch) so that they can be said to encourage a 'tactile,' 'haptic' gaze and empathetic involvement from the viewer" (Beugnet and Mulvey 191). For further reading on the uses of haptic visuality, see Marks and Beugnet and Mulvey.

10. The first part of the collection is rich in associations between the father and the semantic field of light. I think it is possible that his darkening stands for his life being extinguished, like a flame—as opposed to previous poems, most notably "The Glass," in which the father is a source of light himself.

298

11. It is noteworthy that smelling and the nose act "as a kind of guard for our safety," as it allows us to detect potential dangers (gas, rotten food) (Morrison 34). The speaker's smelling of her father's corpse (the ultimate form of abjection insofar as it represents the definitive expelling of the I) symbolizes the acceptance of the abject in its most extreme form.

12. By "serial return," Keefe subsumes the repetition of the same event throughout Olds's oeuvre, a strategy that allows her to refine the language with which she captures the unspeakable by accrual. In a way, this device bears striking resemblance to Auster's strategy of the memory palace as seen in *The Invention of Solitude*. For further information, see Keefe.

13. Drawing from Kristeva and Mary Douglas, Susan Morrison argues that "[w]e feel the compulsion to separate ourselves from that which we consider filthy in order to reassure ourselves that we *are not* that filth . . . That which is literally ejected from the body, then, is to be forbidden as *not you*" (31; original emphasis). However, she further stresses that "[t]hough all bodies exude filth, women's bodies in particular have been identified with what is fluid and excess . . . The division of the body into clean and dirty collapses in misogyny, where women's bodies have no chance to be clean" (Morrison 38). The father's body, now a diseased body, has no chance to be clean either, as it is forever tainted by the excretions of his illness. It is in this sense that I understand it to be akin to the female body. For further information on the implicit misogyny of the dirty/clean body opposition, see Morrison.

14. The asymmetrical interaction of subject and object via the gaze has been theorized (albeit confusingly) by Lacan. Evans explains that, inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of the look, Lacan develops his own theory of the gaze in which he separates the eye from the gaze, marking their relation as "antinomic": "the eye which looks is that of the subject, while the gaze is on the side of the object, and there is no coincidence between the two . . . When the subject looks at an object, the object is always already gazing back at the subject, but from a point at which the subject cannot see it. This split between the eye and the gaze is nothing other than the subjective division itself, expressed in the field of vision" (73).

15. Levinas considers the visual to be a subsumptive device that appropriates and subdues the Other's otherness by turning it into sameness. Let us recall that for Levinas, as well as for other "critics of contemporary Western epistemology," visuality stands for alienation as "it is through the optic that the gaze is, potentially, transformed into a gaze of ownership" (Beugnet and Mulvey 194). Scott reflects on how "morality, ideology and the phallic gaze" were "inextricably linked" in politically engaged film theory of the 1970s, given that some critics (including Laura Mulvey) believed "the look of the camera-eye operates immorally insofar as it becomes

a tool of a Western ideology of autonomous, individualistic and phallocentric subjectivity" (77). For more information on the connection between the gaze, recognition, and appropriation, see Scott.

16. Olds has a tendency to revisit the same key events in her life through acts of "serial repetition." For further reading, see Keefe.

17. For a detailed analysis on the representation of the father figure in Olds's poetry, see Dillon. In particular, the use of recursivity and its intersection with the paternal portrait are likewise examined in Spears and Keefe.

18. I have tried to approach *The Father* as an independent work, even though Olds's oeuvre is precisely characterized by constant leaps in time, back and forth, covering the poet's whole lifetime. Focusing only on this particular collection, it is possible to deduce the chronology and approximate age of the characters because at some point the speaker talks about her daughter (in the poem "The Lifting"), thus implying that she is an adult woman.

19. It is a widely known fact that Olds's father was an alcoholic, something that is referenced in her poetry multiple times. Yet if we were to deal exclusively with *The Father* as an independent work, we would find a straightforward reference to his addiction only in "Parent Visiting Day" (Olds 62).

20. This desire for intimate connection has been repeatedly mistaken by critics with an incestuous drive. For instance, Calvin Bedient refers to the collection as "a sequence of fifty-one poems on the poet's ghoulish, erotic death-watch of her father" (169). To me, it reveals that Olds's longing for her father's affection reaches the extent that she places him in the position usually occupied by the mother as the primary relation during the child's infancy—an interesting choice that somehow feminizes the father, as I have argued.

21. This contradiction has been recognized by Julia Kristeva. Oliver indicates that for Kristeva women are "first of all speaking beings," and as such cannot "merely jump outside of the Symbolic order of patriarchy" ("Revolutions" 100–1). She establishes a difference between the Symbolic order of signification and the symbolic element within it: "The symbolic is the element of signification that structures the possibility of taking a position or making a judgment. It is the element of stasis within the Symbolic, whereas the semiotic is the element of rejection. Both of these elements are crucial to signification. Without either of them there could be no signification" (Oliver, "Revolutions" 102).

22. This vision of the paternal body resonates in Kristeva's notion of the "imaginary father": "The imaginary father is a metaphorical function that gives way to the metonymic paternal function; love gives way to desire. . . . Insofar as the mother is primarily a speaking being, the Other is already within her. That is, she is

always already implicated in signifying systems. The mother-father conglomerate, then, is the combination of the mother and her desire. It is a father within the mother, a 'maternal father'" (Oliver "Imaginary" 52). Kristeva's imaginary father allows alterity and difference to merge in a fantasy of wholeness, thereby causing alterity to be experienced as "a pleasurable excess rather than a painful gap" (Oliver "Imaginary" 53). Oliver points out that in ethical terms the imaginary father provides a fantasy of identity that does not set rigid limits between alterity and identity, as the "primary identification with the imaginary father neither absorbs nor ostracizes the difference of the Other" ("Imaginary" 61).

Conclusion: Tell Thy Father

Is it possible to separate the individual father from the patriarchal order? Yes, I believe it is possible, but only through individual acts of narration that are nonetheless subject themselves to the influence of naturalized discourses. As the previous analyses have demonstrated, there are certain ways in which the father can recuperate his body and become human, that is, fallible, material, and hence lovable. Although each of the literary works analyzed here achieves this effect differently, there are several common trends worth discussing, as well as some notable divergences.

I began with the assumption that literature can contribute to reimagining father figures outside the constraints set by the dominant fiction, or the imaginary, compensatory fantasy that equates the father to the phallus. As has been repeatedly stressed, there is no such thing as accessing the wholeness the phallus symbolizes, neither for fathers nor for their children— or anyone, for that matter. The notion of complete selfhood is a fantasy that should ideally orient desire in a productive manner, but in reality can contribute to crush individuals under the burden of their self-assumed failure.

Perhaps in no other work is this so obvious as in *The Road*, where the nameless man entrusts himself and his child with the mission to "carrying the fire," that is, preserving the legacy of their forefathers in spite of the total destruction surrounding them. Throughout the story, we readers have privileged access to the man's crippling self-doubt and guilt thanks to the text's focalization. However, the novel's resolution suggests a different scenario altogether. As he comes to embody (paradoxically, upon his death and therefore disembodiment) the symbolic Father, no trace of those shortcomings remains in the child's memory of him. Here the tale is resolved in a way that fits the dominant fiction: the father

starts as a fallible and all-too-human individual, but perseveres, and in the end is bestowed with the greatest gift a patriarchal society can offer: to become a god-like figure to men, particularly his son. His sins are forgiven and then forgotten as only the memory of his task remains. Maybe he will remain an example of wholeness (and wholesomeness) to his son, even though we know firsthand of his musings and worrying.

By contrast, the other works analyzed (that is, *The Invention of Solitude*, *Fun Home*, and *The Father*) all follow the opposite direction as they ultimately expose the sham that is thepurported wholeness of the paternal figure. Each of them does it in its own particular way, although there are obvious similarities among the themes they explore and the formal techniques they employ in doing so. For instance, they all insist on the essential nature of selfhood as fabrication, while refusing to morally condemn their respective father figures as deceivers for not being "whole." In this aspect, they clearly go counter the main assumption of the dominant fiction, namely, that fathers are commensurate with the phallus. By discovering that those paternal figures were far from perfect, the children undertaking this search come to terms with their own feelings of unworthiness or self-doubt.

In this sense, I think it is possible to recognize this process as some version of Recalcati's inheritance process, although it does not seem to follow the same blueprint. An aspect that is worth stressing is that the ethical behavior of fathers does not seem a prerequisite for fulfilling the inheritance process, as Recalcati posits. In fact, I find it striking that the only father whose behavior towards his child is unmistakably ethical is the nameless man from *The Road*—and that is precisely the narrative that ends up upholding the dominant fiction the most. By this I do not mean to suggest that, since it does not appear to be relevant to the inheritance process, fathers are exempted from such compromises. Rather, I intend to demonstrate that checking the box for good parenting does not entail that those forms of conduct automatically fall outside the scope of the patriarchal order. In other words, *The*

Road shows us that it takes more than having some men with updated childrearing skills to dismantle the patriarchy—even though I believe it is a great point of departure.

Incidentally, the ending of *The Road* makes one wonder whether the ethical behavior of any given character is enough to secure an ethical reading of the work in question. In my view, it is not; but it certainly is a tricky affair, as we often focus on the characters in the foreground and forget about the message being conveyed in the background. In fact, I believe that the case of the man in *The Road* is analogous to those studied by Hannah Hamad in *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary U.S. Film*: even though the particular conduct of men and/as fathers might be positive and commendable overall, the story that is being told through those characters matters more than their individual behavior.

What is needed, however, and is probably indispensable according to the works studied, is the child's desire to enter in conversation with the father, or rather, with who the father was and what that meant for the child. It does not really matter if this conversation takes place posthumously; in fact, the event of the father's death seems to impel children to revisit their paternal-filial relationship. It should be noted that, although I use the term "conversation," it cannot be said to be a dialogical process when the father has already passed away and is therefore unable to answer back to the child's requests. This raises an interesting question that leads us directly into the domain of ethics: if the father is already dead and cannot explain himself, can these stories of filial investigation manage to be ethical and respectful with the father's memory? Moreover, it must be noted that many of these works include acts of ventriloquism, that is, moments in which the child assumes the father's voice to hear whatever s/he wants to hear (most notably in some of the poems in *The Father*, although Bechdel and Auster also explore this issue).

In my opinion, these acts that could potentially make the narrative veer towards the subsumptive side are countered by several mechanisms, most of them situated on the formal

plane. Yet first and foremost, the common factor that prevents these three texts from falling prey to a subsumptive logic stems from their belief in relationality as inherent to subjectivity and identity formation. Particularly in the cases of Auster and Bechdel, their respective narrators are profoundly aware of the self's origin in the Other (in many others, in fact). In my view, that insight fosters a way of constructing the story about the father figure that effectively nullifies any subsumptive tendencies. As has been discussed, most (if not all) of these works are predominantly monological, and yet they manage to appear dialogical insofar as the narrating voice reveals itself as biased.

For starters, these works seek understanding, which goes in two directions: each author aims at understanding their respective fathers, but above all they try to understand themselves and clarify the terms of their relationship to the father figure—especially in terms of what makes them similar and hence brings them closer. Those similarities, which may or may not have been noticed prior to the act of writing, cohere in the narrative so as to create a paternal portrait that is simultaneously a filial portrait. In doing so, these authors confirm (directly or not) their belief in relationality as inherent to identity formation and subjectivity in general. From the same pieces thus arranged emerges the portrait of the father and the portrait of the child; the latter is the one that has composed it, but it would amount to nothing without the father's participation, however indirect it might seem.

It is in this sense that we ought to understand reciprocal narration in this context. The father's direct participation is materially impossible, and yet the child is indebted to him insofar as the exercise of paternal exploration constitutes at the same time an exercise of self-exploration. In a way, this could also be considered a kind of ventriloquism; that is, the child-narrator tells both the father's and their own story by assuming the role of the reciprocal father-narrator as master storyteller. Not unlike the dominant fiction, these acts of ventriloquism represent the attempts at crafting a compensatory fantasy that the child

imagines. The main difference lies precisely in the non-subsumptive intention these stories pursue, as they do not intend to hide their constructedness and therefore their fictive nature—quite the opposite, they go on to underscore their status as fictions built by biased, somewhat unreliable, and fallible individuals.

Overall, this is a common feature that all three works display. Additionally, this is further stressed by their shared tendency to openness and a certain labyrinthine quality that undermines the very idea of wholeness present in teleologically-driven plots. For instance, *The Invention of Solitude* foregrounds the construction of knowledge as a process of accretion (not unlike a hermeneutic circle), as well as the slippery nature of the self; it also draws attention to the impossibility of concluding the process of self-formation—arguably, a process that can extend beyond death, considering the posthumous portrait of Samuel Auster that is constructed in the first part of the book. In the case of *Fun Home*, it shares with Auster's text the labyrinthine rendition of memory and selfhood, which are presented as deeply intertwined concepts.

Moreover, other non-subsumptive strategies we can find include Bechdel's use of mediation through her (re)drawing photographs and the element of doubt introduced by her use of a limited narrator that doubts and contradicts herself, thereby undermining the monological nature of her account. In *The Father*, the irresolution of a plot that is suggested but never confirmed contributes to destabilize the rationale that is expected from the dominant fiction. Overall, then, none of the narrating voices in *The Invention of Solitude, Fun Home,* and *The Father* actively seek to subsume the father under their own rule, even though they do struggle to occupy the role of master storyteller.

This raises another important question—the most crucial one for this research, perhaps—regarding the way this metaphorical struggle for power is structured. Is it possible to narrate the father without resorting to this rather patriarchal scheme of confrontation?

Given the outcome of the analyses, I believe it cannot be done. There might be other works that manage to do so, but it is certainly not the case in those studied here. This does not entail that the conflation of father and patriarchy cannot be undone altogether, since we have seen that diverse mechanisms exist that can lead to this result. This is the reason why I think that individual acts of narration might be the closest we can get to effectively counter the dominant fiction. Let us recall that the dominant fiction operates at the ideological, hence largely unconscious, level; its (narrative) structure is all we have ever known, and, therefore, will likely continue to use it to grapple with paternity—unless, of course, we invent new structures.

Can literature be the vehicle for such a profound change, or does it rather chart the change once it is already taking place? I do not have a definite answer. Yet I do believe that individual acts of narrative imagination may pave the way to modifying those reified patterns in our narrative unconscious. Maybe the ethics of fatherhood, if feasible at all, will have to wait until we advance in that terrain.

However, there are many things we could be doing in the meantime. For example, studying the ways in which the paternal body defies the dominant fiction. In my opinion, paternal bodies—not just *qua* male, but especially if they are ill, disabled, or elderly bodies— hold a great subversive potential that can contribute to discover new ways of imagining the paternal without the patriarchal. In a similar vein, incorporating an intersectional approach to the study of fatherhood (and masculinity) proves absolutely essential to understanding the myriad possible configurations father figures may adopt. It would be inconceivable to explore other mechanisms of subversion of the dominant fiction without taking into account the plethora of non-hegemonic masculinities and models of fatherhood that have existed, and still exist nowadays. I am positive that learning more about other father ideals beyond the

hegemonic model will contribute to expand our understanding of the mechanisms of domination and devise new ways to challenge it.

One last thing we can do is keep on narrating the other(s) and ourselves. By promoting the fiction of wholeness and self-made subjectivity, the dominant fiction has managed to downplayother discoursesthat locate relationality as a seminal element of human life. Relationality does not automatically imply forceful empathy towards others, forgiveness, or understanding, but its core tenets demand that we place ourselves in the position of reciprocal narrators for each other. Incidentally, this could be the key (or a key, at least) to solve the mystery of paternal ethics: there is no need to seek redemption or be a perfect father to be ethical, only the courage to acknowledge one's fallibility and the desire to immerse oneself in the compromise of narrating the other. After all, even the most obscure, uncommunicative, and unreachable fathers deserve a chance to tell and be told.

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Appendix: Resumen en español

Durante las últimas décadas, se ha generado un creciente interés alrededor de las figuras paternas relacionado con (y, en parte, también condicionado por) el auge de las llamadas "nuevas masculinidades". El final del siglo XX y el comienzo del siglo XXI se han visto marcados por la reivindicación del estudio de la masculinidad desde una perspectiva de género. Autores como Michael Kimmel han "visibilizado" la masculinidad como género con sus propios estereotipos, modos de aculturación y problemáticas, en lugar de asumir su supuesta universalidad. En paralelo al desarrollo de los estudios sobre masculinidad, la figura paterna ha ido adquiriendo mayor notoriedad tanto en la cultura popular como en el mundo académico. Libros como *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary U.S.* Film (Hannah Hamad, 2013) se han hecho eco de la explosión de productos culturales en los que se enfatiza un nuevo modelo de paternidad involucrado en la crianza de los hijos que busca alejarse del rol tradicional de padre como proveedor material (o *breadwinner*). Este "nuevo padre" contrasta así con la tradicional figura del padre trabajador y ausente tanto física como emocionalmente.

En el caso particular de los Estados Unidos, el debate público acerca de los modelos de paternidad y el rol del padre en la sociedad ha alcanzado gran notoriedad. Autores de orientación conservadora como David Blankenhorn o David Popenoe han publicado obras en las que describen un panorama social catastrófico que es, según ellos, consecuencia directa del declive de la figura paterna en la sociedad estadounidense. Muchos comentaristas sociales conservadores ven en el debilitamiento de la figura paterna una amenaza a la unidad familiar que garantiza el orden social. A pesar de la exaltación de valores como la responsabilidad individual, esta reivindicación de la figura paterna no busca necesariamente una mayor igualdad en el hogar y la crianza de los hijos, como sí lo hacían otros movimientos pro-

feministas como los "New Men" de los años setenta. Al contrario, tiene como objetivo una vuelta a los valores representados por el modelo de familia nuclear de posguerra, con su correspondiente división de tareas en base al género.

Partiendo de esta base, surgen dudas al respecto de cuál será el efecto en el debate social y académico de los productos culturales anteriormente descritos. Mi investigación toma esta situación como punto de partida y busca analizar el papel de las representaciones paternas en obras literarias en la construcción de (nuevos) ideales acerca de la paternidad en la sociedad estadounidense contemporánea. De este modo, se pretende contribuir al debate acerca de la paternidad y la masculinidad abordando la cuestión desde la literatura, ya que a día de hoy continúa siendo un tema menos explorado, por lo general, que el de la paternidad en otros ámbitos como el cine o la televisión. Salvo notables ejemplos como el recientemente publicado *Fictive Fathers* (Debra Shostak, 2020), la paternidad en la literatura norteamericana reciente no ha sido todavía estudiada de modo exhaustivo.

La presente tesis doctoral analiza el papel de la literatura en la construcción de modelos de paternidad y se pregunta hasta qué punto es posible repensar la figura paterna fuera de los límites de la masculinidad tradicional, como paternidad no patriarcal, a través del uso de la imaginación narrativa. Partiendo de la base de que tanto la masculinidad como la paternidad pueden ser concebidas como narrativas en el sentido propuesto por Hanna Meretoja (2018), esta investigación aborda la transformación sufrida por los paradigmas de paternidad en los últimos treinta años en diversas disciplinas, desde el psicoanálisis a los estudios de género, y trata de identificar el impacto que estos cambios hayan podido tener sobre la representación de figuras paternas en la literatura estadounidense contemporánea. Tomando como punto de partida la posibilidad de fundar una ética en la figura paterna, la presente investigación busca comprobar si la literatura puede proporcionarnos una alternativa ética al padre del patriarcado.

La tesis consta de dos partes claramente diferenciadas. La primera de ellas comprende una revisión en profundidad del estado de la cuestión (capítulo 1) así como los postulados de una metodología propia (capítulo 2) que combina un marco teórico basado en la narrativa hermenéutica con conceptos tomados del psicoanálisis lacaniano, tales como la noción de herencia desarrollada por Massimo Recalcati en *El complejo de Telémaco* (2014). La segunda parte se centra en analizar cuatro ejemplos de representación de figuras paternas, haciendo especial hincapié en el potencial ético de dichas representaciones. Las obras incluidas son *The Invention of Solitude* (Paul Auster, 1982), *Fun Home* (Alison Bechdel, 2006), *The Road* (Cormac McCarthy, 2006) y *The Father* (Sharon Olds, 1992). Se busca así comprobar hasta qué punto los llamados nuevos modelos de paternidad han permeado hasta el punto de hallarse en representaciones de índole literaria. Asimismo, se pretende evaluar si desde la literatura es posible articular una respuesta a los movimientos reaccionarios que defienden una vuelta a ideales de género obsoletos.

En el primer capítulo de la tesis, titulado "Postfeminist Fatherhood, Hegemonic Masculinities, and the Rise of the New Fatherhood Model in the U.S.", se presentan conceptos clave que son fundamentales para determinar los parámetros teóricos en los que se desarrolla la investigación. En concreto, se define la noción de paternidad siguiendo la descripción del sociólogo Ralph LaRossa (quien distingue entre la cultura de la paternidad y la conducta de la paternidad), así como la noción de masculinidad hegemónica acuñada por Raewyn Connell. Estas especificaciones sirven para delimitar el ámbito a tratar, que se restringe aquí a la masculinidad hegemónica (por tanto, blanca y cisheterosexual) y, de manera análoga, a lo que en la tesis denomino "paternidad hegemónica", un concepto que aúna la dimensión normativa de los modelos de paternidad percibidos como ideales y su implantación en el subconsciente colectivo a través de su representación en productos culturales de índole diversa.

A continuación, se ofrece una revisión sobre el modo en que los modelos e ideales de paternidad y masculinidad se entrelazan, explicando que la tendencia de la paternidad responsable se ha incorporado al ideal hegemónico de masculinidad sin que ello suponga automáticamente un entendimiento más igualitario de los roles de maternidad/paternidad y, por extensión, de los roles de género. Al contrario, la defensa de la paternidad responsable que se ha extendido en los medios de comunicación, la cultura popular, e incluso el ámbito académico (con ejemplos llamativos en el campo del psicoanálisis) es a menudo parte de la reacción contra el feminismo, en un giro de la tendencia identificada por Susan Faludi en su libro *Backlash* de 1991. Se identifican así dos modos de concebir el supuesto ideal de la "nueva paternidad": uno de ellos se alinea con una línea de pensamiento pro-feminista, mientras que la otra se identifica con el contra-argumentario reaccionario que arremete contra el movimiento feminista.

Comparado con el rígido molde para figuras paternas que se ha popularizado en la cultura popular, sobre todo en cine y televisión, la literatura (incluyendo los cómics) puede proporcionar una alternativa a estos roles de género falsamente igualitarios. El argumento principal de este capítulo se resume en que por mucho que la paternidad hegemónica cambie, en tanto que hegemónica seguirá condicionada por los valores patriarcales sobre los que se asienta; y, en consecuencia, ninguna ética podrá ser derivada de la fusión entre paternidad y patriarcado, puesto que se partiría de una base que niega la condición de sujeto de pleno derecho a cualquiera que no entre en la categoría de hombre cisheterosexual blanco.

El primer capítulo termina con un exhaustivo repaso a la evolución del ideal paterno en el ámbito del psicoanálisis. Partiendo de la idea lacaniana de la evaporación del padre, Recalcati defiende que la actual época hipermoderna precisa de modelos éticos fuertes que contrarresten el impulso hedonista y el individualismo feroz. Propone Recalcati una particularización del padre simbólico, una función abstracta en el ideario lacaniano, de forma

334

que cada padre individual adquiere un compromiso ético para con sus hijos fundamentado en el respeto mutuo a la Ley del deseo. El propósito de Recalcati es recuperar la figura paterna pero rechazando su dimensión autoritaria y coercitiva, enfatizando en su lugar el papel que el testimonio del padre juega en el proceso de formación identitaria de sus hijos. A éste lo denomina "herencia", y lo describe como un proceso de formación identitaria dialéctico y relacional en el que el hijo debe asimilar su deuda simbólica con el Otro del que proviene.

Sin embargo, la propuesta de Recalcati no está exenta de problemas de gran calado. Estos se estudian en profundidad a lo largo del segundo capítulo, titulado "Notes for an Ethics of Fatherhood", donde se realiza una exploración a nivel teórico de los principales argumentos que vendrían a sostener una supuesta ética de la paternidad. Se razona que estos idearios, pese a que enfatizan la dimensión ética del vínculo paterno-filial, dejan de lado cuestiones tan fundamentales como la corporeidad del padre o la supuesta ahistoricidad y universalidad de la función paterna. El padre de la filosofía occidental y el psicoanálisis es, ante todo, un padre sin cuerpo, en tanto en cuanto se erige en representante del orden simbólico de la cultura. Contrasta así con la figura materna identificada con la naturaleza y la dimensión material, tangible.

En este capítulo se argumenta que ninguna ética que parta de un padre incorpóreo puede ser verdaderamente ética, puesto que estará sostenida por los mismos preceptos que subyacen a la fusión entre paternidad y patriarcado. Para comprender el modo en que esta fusión funciona es fundamental el concepto de ficción dominante desarrollado por Kaja Silverman en *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992). Silverman define la ficción dominante como sistema y repositorio de representaciones con las que los sujetos se identifican en el plano imaginario; en un nivel superior, la ficción dominante es el sistema que conforma el espejo en el que las sociedades se miran, o en otros términos, la imagen de lo que para una sociedad representa la "realidad". La ficción dominante, pues, es un contenedor ideológico

que cohesiona la noción de realidad para los sujetos en el plano individual y las sociedades que éstos conforman.

Según Silverman, lo que caracteriza nuestra ficción dominante es la centralidad de la familia nuclear y, dentro de ésta, de la figura paterna como cabeza visible del orden social. Argumenta que este estado se alcanza a partir de una anomalía en las leyes que rigen el orden simbólico: la Ley de la palabra (según la cual los sujetos deben ser "castrados" como condición para acceder al orden simbólico de la cultura que los precede) y la Ley del parentesco (que regula la organización social para prevenir el incesto, en teoría). Silverman señala que las dos leyes existen en contradicción la una con la otra: la Ley de la palabra presupone que todos los sujetos están sometidos a ella, mientras que la Ley del parentesco asume un sistema de valores patriarcal que subordina la mujer al hombre. La ficción dominante conceptualiza al padre como vértice en torno al cual se articula la familia y, por extensión, el resto de la sociedad. El padredeviene símbolo y metáfora del orden patriarcal, y deja de percibirse como sujeto a la Ley de la palabra que debería regir a todos los individuos.

Esta fusión del padre con el orden patriarcal al que pasa a representar lo despoja de sus atributos físicos, es decir, del cuerpo, y lo convierte en una figura caracterizada por la ausencia. A lo largo del segundo capítulo de la tesis, y tras haber rechazado los postulados de la ética paterna que proponen Recalcati y el filósofo Emmanuel Lévinas, se exploran distintas maneras de devolver al padre al plano físico de la presencia. En particular, se habla de la posibilidad de re-corporeizar al padre como método para contrarrestar, por un lado, la ausencia paterna que caracteriza a la ficción dominante, pero también para subvertir la dicotomía hombre-cultura/mujer-naturaleza que subyace al orden patriarcal. Asimismo, se exploran nociones de subjetividad relacional como las propuestas por Hannah Arendt, Adriana Cavarero y Judith Butler, así como el concepto de identidad narrativa desarrollado

por Paul Ricoeur, que permiten subvertir la idea de subjetividad como un todo monolítico que es propia de la ficción dominante patriarcal.

A continuación, se propone un cambio de perspectiva que busca recontextualizar alguna de las ideas de Recalcati, que pese a todo encierran un gran potencial, filtrándolas a través de la lente proporcionada por la hermenéutica narrativa de Hanna Meretoja. Al incorporar la hermenéutica narrativa al marco teórico se introduce la idea de paternidad entendida como narrativa, es decir, como práctica de interpretación y dotación de sentido presente en el subconsciente colectivo. Contextualizar la paternidad de este modo enfatiza que estas ideas existen en un plano ideológico con el cual los individuos se relacionan, a menudo de forma inconsciente cuanto más naturalizadas están dichas ideas. Meretoja argumenta que las narrativas presentes en el inconsciente colectivo pueden limitar nuestro entendimiento de las cosas hasta cierto punto, pero en tanto en cuanto somos sujetos en posesión de lo que llama "imaginación narrativa", podremos encontrar nuevos modos de entender el mundo que nos rodea, desafiando así estas narrativas reificadas. Se argumenta, aplicando la noción de imaginación narrativa, que el potencial ético de la literatura puede promover modelos de representación paterna que van más allá de los límites del ideal hegemónico actual.

En la segunda parte de la tesis, centrada en los análisis textuales de cuatro obras que tratan la cuestión de la paternidad y las relaciones paterno-filiales, se pretende demostrar de qué modo los textos pueden contribuir a perpetuar o subvertir las narrativas naturalizadas en nuestro subconsciente colectivo. Para esto se incorpora el concepto de lógica narrativa, que puede ser subsumidora (si se adecúa a los parámetros de la ficción dominante) o no-subsumidora (si subvierte las expectativas de la ficción dominante). El primer texto que se estudia es el *memoir* posmoderno de Paul Auster *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), una obra que trata de capturar el retrato del padre del autor tras su fallecimiento. En dicha obra, Auster

se vale de una serie de recursos textuales y formales que interrogan las bases mismas sobre las que se asienta la ficción dominante. Al comenzar a escribir sobre el padre, una figura caracterizada por su ausencia, Auster se da cuenta de que es imposible lograr capturar la esencia de su ser; a través de esta reflexión, llega a un entendimiento de la identidad humana como maleable, contradictoria y en última instancia inaprehensible, argumentos que chocan frontalmente con la noción de identidad completa que asume la ficción dominante.

The Invention of Solitude se convierte en un experimento refractario, una *camera obscura* que devuelve el retrato del hijo a través de los intentos del hijo por retratar al padre. Es también una reflexión sobre la paternidad entendida como promesa de una narración recíproca en la que el padre ha de convertirse en narrador del hijo. En el caso de Auster, debido a que el trauma familiar que arrastra su padre le impide ocupar este rol, es el hijo quien asume la titánica tarea de narrar al padre y narrarse a sí mismo, con el propósito de resignificar lo que esta labor significa. Al asumir su tarea como narrador, el autor (re)inventa al padre, a sí mismo y reinventa también el significado de la soledad: ésta pasa a ser una soledad que nunca es aislamiento ni consistirá en vivir de espaldas al mundo, porque cada uno de nosotros está siempre acompañado por todos los otros que lo han precedido y forman parte de su misma subjetividad. La obra logra así abrir la noción de paternidad entendida como un rol mediador intergeneracional que se construye como ético en tanto en cuanto se sabe co-dependiente de otros.

La siguiente obra analizada es *Fun Home*, un *memoir* gráfico escrito y dibujado por Alison Bechdel (2006). En él, Bechdel explora el trauma que supuso para ella la muerte de su padre tan sólo unos meses después de haber descubierto que era homosexual. Como hija y como lesbiana, Bechdel traza un retrato de su padre en el que busca ante todo establecer conexiones con él, algo que le resultó particularmente difícil de lograr mientras éste estuvo vivo. La autora revisa la historia oculta de su padre y sus relaciones ilícitas con otros hombres

en paralelo a su propia historia y salida del armario. La obra desdibuja así los límites entre los géneros de la biografía, la autobiografía y el *Bildungsroman*.

De modo análogo a lo que sucedía en *The Invention of Solitude*, aquí el retrato paterno y el retrato filial se entrelazan y se confunden. En su deseo por reivindicar al padre como antecesor en su particular genealogía *queer*, Bechdel adopta un relato monológico y controlador en el que otras voces desaparecen; sin embargo, logra equilibrar el componente subsumidor de su relato a través de recursos estilísticos y formales como la estética laberíntica (Eveleth), el uso de un *mediated narrator* (Assmann) o la ruptura de la linealidad en pos de la repetición obsesiva. El uso de estos recursos, junto con su negativa a encasillar a su padre dentro de una identidad monolítica y perfectamente delimitada, decanta la balanza hacia una lógica narrativa no-subsumidora.

A continuación se estudia la novela de Cormac McCarthy *The Road* (2006), considerada por muchos un ejemplo notable del nuevo modelo ético de paternidad. Sin embargo, al contrario de lo que sucede en las dos obras anteriores, *The Road* sigue una lógica narrativa claramente subsumidora. A pesar de que el comportamiento del padre con su hijo se puede considerar en efecto ético y basado en un modelo de paternidad presente y corporeizada, la obra reconduce lo que en un principio parecía un proceso de subversión del ideal paterno y termina siendo una vuelta al *status quo* simbólico. Al final de la novela, y tras la muerte del padre particular, presente y corpóreo, éste se transfigura en el padre abstracto del orden simbólico, desbaratando así cualquier posibilidad de repensar la paternidad fuera de un marco patriarcal.

Por último, se analiza el poemario de Sharon Olds *The Father* (1992), en el que la autora recoge la enfermedad, muerte y duelo por su padre. De nuevo, estamos ante un caso de subversión de la ficción dominante a través de una serie de mecanismos textuales que ponen el foco en la corporeidad abyecta del padre enfermo, y más adelante del padre muerto. La

obra comienza con un padre cuasi-divinizado que es el objeto de deseo de la autora: desea su amor y reconocimiento más que nada en el mundo, pero al mismo tiempo lo ve como un objeto inalcanzable. A través de la transformación física que el padre sufre como consecuencia de un cáncer de garganta, la autora cambia su percepción del padre y comienza a percibirlo como un ser falible, imperfecto y repulsivo en su enfermedad, lo que contribuye a (re)humanizarlo.

Este proceso lleva a ambos a un reconocimiento mutuo fuera del orden simbólico logocéntrico, pero al mismo tiempo amenaza la subjetividad de la autora, quien busca una fusión pre-simbólica (por tanto, semiótica según el concepto de Julia Kristeva) con su padre que es imposible. Al final de la obra, la autora renuncia a esta fusión y se permite al fin admitir su odio por el padre, que coexiste con el amor filial y la búsqueda de comprensión. A través de la repetición y la ruptura de linealidad y argumento, Olds logra presentar el proceso de amor paterno-filial y duelo por el padre como un proceso infinito pero que puede ser productivo en lugar de destructivo para el sujeto.

Por último, se incluye una reflexión final sobre los procesos mediante los cuales podemos llegar a subvertir la ficción dominante en base a lo estudiado en las cuatro obras que componen la segunda parte de la tesis. Se concluye que es posible subvertir esta ficción a través de actos individuales de narración, siempre y cuando dichos actos cuenten con mecanismos textuales que puedan contrarrestar el impulso subsumidor y totalizante del rol filial convertido en arconte y ventrílocuo del padre. A pesar de que muchas de estas ficciones tienen un efecto compensatorio que busca obtener aquello que la figura paterna no pudo o no supo dar (por ejemplo, convertirse en narrador recíproco del hijo, proporcionar amor y reconocimiento), el relato del hijo puede evitar reproducir la ficción dominante a través de los ya mencionados recursos textuales, tales como la narración mediada, la ruptura de la linealidad o el énfasis en la subjetividad entendida como un proceso dialéctico y relacional.