Beginning with Postmodernism

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In the epilogue to the 2002 reprint of her influential study *The Politics of Postmodernism,* Linda Hutcheon remarks that "the postmodern may well be a twentieth-century phenomenon, that is, a thing of the past. Now fully institutionalized, it has its canonized texts, its anthologies, primers and readers, its dictionaries and its histories" (165). Hutcheon's claim about the pastness of postmodernism has gained support in the years since she made it, as a body of criticism has emerged which takes a determinedly revisionist and historicist perspective on many of the canonical postmodernist texts to which she alludes. Novels such as Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), now monuments in the American postmodern landscape, have produced a spate of recent readings in this vein. Aspects of these texts that can seem peripheral on a first reading—such as the role of Mexico in Pynchon's novel, or the impact of the Vietnamese and Iranian conflicts in DeLillo's—have been alighted upon as offering an underappreciated historical situatedness to the poetics of postmodernism.[1] In addition, the previously submerged role played by various institutions and class interests in the historical formation of postmodernist styles and forms has become the focus of important interventions in the field.[2] Much of this critical work retains the analytic and taxonomic category of the postmodern, even as the accepted dominance in the texts being read of traditionally postmodern themes and aesthetics is often questioned (whether from a descriptive or political viewpoint).[3] In other work, "postmodernism" itself is undermined as a useful critical designation, in favor of terms such as "long modernism" or "technomodernism."[4] In her short essay "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary," something of a manifesto for the recently-formed Post-45 group of literary critics who are carrying out

much of the work cited above, Amy Hungerford remarks on "the solid dominance of historicism" that informs contemporary critical practice, a dominance that "now seems less a critical movement than a simple assumption about literary-critical work," best figured as "not a wave but a tide, or even just the water we all swim in" (416). And it seems that what we can term the new postmodernist studies has been firmly constituted by this historicist turn, which reacts against the "disabling commitment to theory" that marked the work of scholars of a previous generation.[5]

At the same time as this revisionist work on postmodernism has begun to emerge, another prominent critical trend has seen a burgeoning interest in the fiction of a younger generation of American literary writers, those who are taken to follow "in the wake of postmodernism's waning influence" (Hoberek, "Introduction" 233). Whether, in classifying the fiction that began to surface in the late 1980s and 1990s and has continued into the new millennium, critics favor "hybrid fiction" (Grassian), "American literary globalism" (Adams), "cosmodernism" (Moraru), "late postmodernism" (Green) or "post-postmodernism" (Burn), it is clear that the narrative of "postmodernism, then" is already under construction in the critical stories told about recent American literature. In this scholarship there is understandably little questioning of the validity of postmodernism as a useful historical and aesthetic category: the story being told requires, in the main, that there be a relatively clear postmodern model in fiction which later writers can internalize and react to. Depending on which younger writers each critic is most concerned with, the canon of their postmodern forerunners will shift slightly, but only within certain bounds. The primary interest is in identifying the predominant styles and concerns of the new generation, in naming what it is these new writers are doing in their fiction, and in articulating how they build upon and depart from their canonical postmodern forebears.

One way to unite these two strands of recent criticism—the revisionist historicism regarding postmodern fiction on the one hand, the mapping of a post-postmodern aesthetics on the other—is to examine the ways in which a range of US authors writing in the wake of postmodernism have themselves addressed in their fiction the problem of historicizing the postmodern, meaning both the American society termed postmodern and the literature produced by that society. Many recent novels by post-baby-boom American writers—a generation I take to be born roughly between the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1970s—depict

a postmodern world recognizable from the work of earlier writers, but with a renewed historical focus that takes the reader back deep into the past, often to the Industrial Revolution and before. The stress is no longer on the rupture between past and present, as it was in much postmodern fiction, but rather on continuity, where the contemporary information society that characters inhabit is seen as emerging from identifiable historical and technological shifts over a long durée. This is far from a simple process, however; for these writers, as for contemporary critics, beginning with postmodernism means beginning with history as a problem. How the historical past can be accessed and related to the present by the writer and his/her characters remains in varying degrees of question in a number of important post-boomer novels, among which include Richard Powers's *Gain* (1998), Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me* (2001), Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), and Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* (2001), as well as various texts by the late David Foster Wallace.

Although her fiction has been critically overlooked to date, few among these writers have more directly addressed the task of responding to postmodernism and postmodernity than Jennifer Egan, whose novel *Look at Me* will be my exemplary text throughout this essay. In one of the few extant discussions of any length of Egan's work, Pankaj Mishra identifies Egan as one of the "oddly few successors" of Pynchon and DeLillo, the two American novelists who most ably chronicled "the strange new mutations in individual and social life caused by the reorganisation of work, consumption and war" (27). Mishra praises Egan's fiction, and *Look at Me* in particular, "for still being able to register incredulity at the weirdness of this process." Given this directness of engagement with recognizably postmodern themes in her fiction, Egan's relative neglect in critical work on contemporary American writing—certainly when put next to comparable figures such as Franzen, Powers, Whitehead, and Wallace—might seem surprising. And yet, ironically, it may be that the very directness of her engagement has contributed to the overlooking of her work: at first glance, it can be difficult to identify exactly what it is that Egan's fiction brings to the postmodern table that we haven't seen before, how she builds upon the tradition of Pynchon and DeLillo, as well as other authors regularly included in the postmodern fold, such as Paul Auster, J. G. Ballard, John Barth, Jorge Luis Borges, William Burroughs, Angela Carter, Bret Easton Ellis, Vladimir Nabokov, and Ishmael Reed.[6]

What I want to suggest here is that surface similarities between Egan's novels and key texts in the postmodern tradition owe much to the relation her fiction maintains to that tradition as a whole, a relation that can best be described as gothic. While *The Keep* (2006) makes this gothic aspect explicit, it is *Look at Me* that provides the more interesting case study of postmodern inheritance. This is because *Look at Me* plays a similar role for mid-to-late-twentieth-century postmodernism that an earlier novel to which it directly alludes, Edith Somerville and Martin Ross's *The Real Charlotte* (1894), played for nineteenth-century realism. Both novels, characterized by smooth surfaces concealing darker processes of decay, repeat the most identifiable tropes and genres of the immediately preceding literary tradition, but do so in a manner that produces a sense of the uncanny.[7] In the case of *Look at Me,* the effect of this uncanniness is to reintroduce resonances and specters of history into the novel's form as well as in its content. And one reason why this effect is powerful is because the most canonical accounts of postmodernism and its exemplary texts have consistently stressed the prominence of space over time—the contemporary loss of history and emergence of an endless present—in the totally administered and technophilic postmodern society. Its gothic relation to the postmodern canon of literature and criticism thus makes *Look at Me* an important artifact in considering the story of "postmodernism, then." Before telling this story through a close reading of aspects of the novel, however, I will articulate in broader terms what it means to begin with postmodernism.

Beginning

It is important to recognize at the outset that authors of Egan's generation begin with postmodernism in a double or even triple sense. First, in publishing their early work in the late-1980s and 1990s, they begin by developing a conversation with postmodern fiction. High postmodernism (in its technomodernist vein) was no longer regnant in American fiction by this period, having been overtaken by the range of movements Mark McGurl usefully summarizes under the categories of high cultural pluralism and lower-middle-class modernism. Nonetheless, the experimental shadow of earlier postmodernism still remained: Stephen Burn, for example, has noted allusions in early works by Franzen, Powers, and Wallace to a range of high postmodernists (19), with Wallace's novella

"Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" offering a particularly humorous patricidal take on the work of John Barth. Especially important to the post-boomer writers emerging at this time was the contemporaneous fiction of Don DeLillo. While Wallace could still, as late as 1993, refer to DeLillo as "a long-underrated conceptual novelist" ("E Unibus" 47), any account of the late-1980s and 1990s in American fiction must be at least in part the story of DeLillo's rise, through a series of increasingly high profile novels from *White Noise* (1985) to *Underworld* (1997), to the status of "representative postmodern novelist for the end of the century" (Green 4).[8] Alongside critical studies of influence such as Burn's, plenty of anecdotal evidence could be offered for DeLillo's shaping impact upon younger writers. For instance, Benjamin Kunkel, born in 1972 and the youngest novelist I consider here, has remarked in an interview that "when I was at college, I and half the young men I knew wanted to be Don DeLillo" ("Welcome"). Wallace and Franzen wrote letters to DeLillo when in distress about their respective literary projects; Egan has acknowledged her indebtedness to DeLillo in an interview: "It's almost a cliché to say it but like so many people of my generation, I've really soaked up my DeLillo and find him extremely compelling as a model" ("Face Value").

Second, beginning with postmodernism for younger writers means inheriting the heavily mediated information society that the earlier generation of American writers had tracked in its emergent phase. Yet despite the compelling models offered by DeLillo and others for how to write about the full onset of this society, certain specific anxieties inevitably attend its inheritance as a subject for literary art. Chief among these is the disconnection from historical time associated with the postmodern spatial turn. For instance, when Thomas Pynchon addresses a period of American or world history that pre-dates postmodernity—such as the World War II years in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), or the eighteenth century in *Mason and Dixon* (1997)—he treats these realities not as part of a long historical durée but rather as spatial phantasmagoria, each with its own absurd rules and zany norms. Similarly, although Don DeLillo is evidently interested in historical events—as recent scholarship on his novels has emphasized—it is a resolutely contemporary history that concerns him, and none of his many books, *Libra* (1988) and *Underworld* among them, reach back into a past much before the early 1950s. This spatial emphasis is abetted by the prominent postmodern genre identified by Linda Hutcheon as historiographic metafiction, in which any claim to represent an objective

historical reality becomes the subject of satire and subversion. In Hutcheon's view, there is a powerful contemporary politics embedded in these fictional revisions of historical metanarratives; she praises E. L. Doctorow's postmodern novel *Ragtime* (1975), for instance, for its "extended critique of American democratic ideals through the presentation of class conflict rooted in capitalist property and moneyed power" (*Poetics* 61). By contrast, for Fredric Jameson, who famously corrects Hutcheon's reading of Doctorow's novel in the opening chapter of his landmark *Postmodernism,* the spatial turn in contemporary art undermines the possibility of a politics. In Jameson's view, the postmodern age is rather one "that has forgotten how to think historically" (*Postmodernism* ix), producing a society, as he puts it in an earlier iteration of his program essay, "that has become incapable of dealing with time and history" ("Postmodernism" 117). As such, and as his mantra "Always historicize" indicates, the job of the critic or theorist in Jameson's view is to articulate the underlying historical forces that can no longer be accessed by contemporary art, an art that perforce deals increasingly in surfaces with no depth, invoking only a traumatized postmodern subject which has "lost its capacity actively to extend its protensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience" (*Postmodernism* 25).[9]

Mention of Jameson brings me to the third sense in which post-boomer writers begin with postmodernism, which combines the previous two: they begin with the academic construction of American literature and society specifically *as* "postmodern"—in other words, they begin with the phenomenon of "theory."[10] The central lesson of McGurl's *The Program Era,* foundational for the new postmodernist studies, is that post-war American fiction is inseparable from its institutional contexts; in this light, I would argue that the academic context of the post-1960s English program, with its increasing incorporation of theory into the teaching of literature, may be just as materially relevant as the expansion of the creative writing program during that period. Most of the post-boomer writers mentioned in the present essay undertook English degrees, or degrees in related areas of the humanities, during the 1980s, when theory was at its zenith of influence in the American academy. Indeed, the significance of theory for writers of his generation was testified to by David Foster Wallace as early as his first major essay, in which Wallace argued that "the contemporary artist can simply no longer afford to regard the work of critics or theorists or philosophers—no matter how stratospheric—as di-

vorced from his own concerns," and that the impact on humanities teaching of continental philosophy and literary theory—"such aliens as Husserl, Heidegger, Bakhtin, Lacan, Barthes, Poulet, Gadamer, de Man"—could no longer be ignored ("Fictional" 13). While novels such as Wallace's *The Broom of the System* (1987) and Richard Powers's *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985) explicitly dramatize this intersection of theory and fiction, the importance of theory has also been acknowledged by other, ostensibly less aesthetically radical peers of Wallace such as Jeffrey Eugenides and Benjamin Kunkel. For instance, Eugenides opens *The Marriage Plot* (2011) with an account of the role played by Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida in the intellectual milieu at Brown University (which Eugenides himself attended) in the early 1980s. His narrator describes the period thus: "Going to college in the moneymaking eighties lacked a certain radicalism. Semiotics was the first thing that smacked of revolution. It drew a line; it created an elect; it was sophisticated and Continental; it dealt with provocative subjects, with torture, sadism, hermaphroditism—with sex and power" (24).

As Eugenides's racy characterization of semiotics suggests, theory in the academy was initially felt to offer continuity with the spirit of 1960s radical politics and counterculture. Yet for many post-boomer writers, certain aspects of theory's prevalence would eventually come to be viewed with skepticism, as exacerbating rather than mitigating the felt crisis in political agency which postmodernism heralded and Jameson described. Indeed, Jameson's own work can be seen as problematically tied up with this crisis of agency, as Kunkel has argued in a recent assessment of Jameson's career. Beginning with the claim that "Fredric Jameson's pre-eminence, over the last generation, among critics writing in English would be hard to dispute" ("Into the Big Tent" 12), Kunkel's article makes clear that he credits Jameson not only with being one of the primary movers in academic theory and the main theorist of postmodernism, but also one of the period's great prose writers, "among the important American writers of the age *tout court*" (16). Possessed of "a majestic style," Jameson rivals DeLillo, Pynchon, and William Gibson in Kunkel's estimation as a writer capable of capturing in his prose the "mood and texture of postmodern life" (12), and in particular "the oddly becalmed quality of recent decades" (14). In a series of perceptive readings, Kunkel demonstrates how the eternal present which for Jameson characterizes postmodernity finds stylistic analogy in Jameson's own prose, where the possibility of

time—the time of learning and development, of the path of thinking, in Heidegger's phrase—is firmly replaced by a spatial omniscience. The overall effect is of a "windless postmodern stasis" (14), in the face of which Jameson's work strikes Kunkel as always marking "the double aspect of a retreat and an advance" (13). This makes Jameson both "the timeliest and most untimely of American critics and writers" (12), and in reading his work, Kunkel claims, "the reader's impression of tremendous intellectual power is accompanied by one of political paralysis" (16).[11]

In "On the Period," Hungerford suggests that in telling our newly revised stories of post-1945 US fiction we should prefer McGurl's "rigorously historical argument" (414) to "cultural materialist accounts" such as Jameson's (413). She is therefore entirely consistent in preferring "long modernism" to "postmodernism" by her essay's end. For if we want to retain "postmodernism" in telling our stories of "postmodernism, then," then it may in fact be necessary to combine the insights of McGurl and Jameson, rather than choose between them. Taking McGurl's sociology of literature as a starting point allows us to recognize that post-boomer writers, their younger critics, and a large proportion of readers of contemporary fiction all begin with postmodernism in the same place, in the university, which is after all the site of the naming and canonization of the postmodern phenomenon. In this process, Jameson's work has been central, and, as Kunkel suggests, grappling with postmodernism inevitably means grappling with Jameson's now-canonical formulations—the death of affect, the loss of history, the fragmentation of the subject, the subsumption of the natural into the cultural, and so on.

It may be, nevertheless, that Jameson's sweeping analysis of the postmodern does It may be, nevertheless, that Jameson's sweeping analysis of the postmodern constitutes a serious obstacle to historicizing the contemporary and to thinking transition. This is the position adopted by Timothy Bewes: "The task of theorizing what comes after the postmodern, then, may well have to begin by challenging the spatialized notion of the postmodern as an epoch that may be succeeded by anything at all" (274). Yet by recognizing the actuality of "postmodernism" as a signifier for post-boomer US writers schooled in theoretically-informed humanities programs, we can perceive that Bewes's claim applies just as much to literary authors engaged in writing "what comes after the postmodern" as it does to critics interested in theorizing such a development. The kind of challenge to spatiality that Bewes conceives of is, I would argue, what

underlies the historicizing impulse in recent American fiction: in order to depict our present era as offering historical and political possibilities, one has to understand the world depicted by postmodern fiction—which is still, in many of its facets, the recognizable world facing the post-postmodernists—as itself historical, as the outcome of a historical process, and as capable of historical understanding. And one must do so while taking on board the forms and theoretical insights of postmodern fiction, and of the theory that grew up alongside it in the post-1960s academy. As I will demonstrate in the remainder of the essay, this complex undertaking is one of the main projects of Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me*.

Beginning again

Look at Me has two main plot strands, which emerge together in the opening chapter, separate thereafter, and are reunited at the novel's conclusion. Both plotlines center on a character named Charlotte, and the novel's twenty chapters alternate, roughly speaking, between the story of one Charlotte and the other. They also alternate between a first- and third-person narrative perspective. The third-person narrative is focused on a teenaged girl named Charlotte Hauser, and on various people in her life, including her uncle Moose Metcalf and her older lover Michael West. The Charlotte who speaks of herself in the first person is, on the other hand, a thirty-five-year-old fashion model named Charlotte Swenson, who in the novel's opening lines recounts a car accident in which she was involved, and in which almost every bone in her face was broken. The reconstructive surgery she undergoes leaves her strangely unrecognizable to many of her former friends and associates. After convalescing in her hometown of Rockford, Illinois, she returns to New York to attempt to revive her fashion career. While not successful in doing so, Charlotte does become engaged in two other ventures. One involves a detective, Anthony Halliday, who is employed to track down a shady character named Z, whom Charlotte may or may not have known in her pre-accident life. The other involves an internet startup entitled Extra/Ordinary People, run by a young entrepreneur named Thomas Keene, and for which Charlotte's blog entries recounting the story of her life and accident are written by a journalist/academic, Irene Maitlock.

The novel opens with Charlotte's recounting of the car accident and its immediate aftermath. "In my memory," she tells us in the second paragraph,

> the accident has acquired a harsh, dazzling beauty: white sunlight, a slow loop through space like being on the Tilt-A-Whirl (always a favorite of mine), feeling my body move faster than, and counter to, the vehicle containing it. Then a bright, splintering crack as I burst through the windshield into the open air, bloody and frightened and uncomprehending. (3)

This aestheticized description of a physically brutal event recalls the openings of J. G. Ballard's twin car crash novels *Crash* (1973) and *Concrete Island* (1974). In particular, the notably filmic representation of Charlotte's memory as a series of clashing images—"dazzling beauty," "white sunlight," "splintering crack," "bloody and frightened"—answers to the mix of horror and beauty, fear and desire, which typifies Ballard's work and which is encoded more generally in what Enda Duffy has recently termed the adrenaline aesthetic of modern cultural engagements with the automobile. Moreover, the crash that here opens *Look at Me* will later be reconstructed within the novel precisely as a film, the making of which is recounted in the penultimate chapter, with the story of the film shoot simultaneously transcribed at the scene by Irene Maitlock.[12] And in that same later chapter the build-up to the crash will also be recounted for the reader in a separate thriller-like narration in a "first-person" account written by Irene as Charlotte's ghostwriter.[13] While any sexual element to the crash, or any relation to the feeling of driving at speed, are played down by Charlotte's opening narration of the accident, Irene's account will certainly suggest the combination of adrenaline, sexuality, and deadened affect associated with Ballard's postmodern *oeuvre*. The allusion to Ballard is sharpened by Irene's surname, Maitlock, recalling that of the protagonist of *Concrete Island*, Robert Maitland.

Yet the suggestion that there might be something artificial about these retrospective narrative renderings of memory is highlighted by Charlotte as early as the novel's third paragraph, directly following the one quoted above:

> The truth is that I don't remember anything. The accident happened at night during an August downpour on a deserted stretch of highway through corn and soybean fields, a few miles outside Rockford, Illinois, my hometown. I hit the brakes and my face collided with the windshield, knocking me out instantly. . . . The shatterproof windshield did indeed hold fast upon its impact with my head, so although I broke virtually every bone in my face, I have almost no visible scars. (3)

It now appears that the "memory" related by Charlotte in the first quotation has a different status from that recounted in the second. The latter account, which contradicts the first in language that is less heightened and more denotative, is associated with "the truth," and the truth is that there exists for Charlotte no memory of the event, if memory is to be associated with the recall of experience rather than its recreation. But can memory and experience function in this more organic, traditional manner? Not, it seems, in the postmodern moment, as Irene will later imply at the point when she reveals to Charlotte her "true" identity, as a cultural studies professor rather than the *New York Post* journalist she had initially posed as:

> "I'm an academic," she went on, "a professor of comparative literature. . . .My area is cultural studies. Specifically, the way literary and cinematic genres affect certain kinds of experience." I sensed her straining to put this in language I would understand. "For example, the Mafia. How do cultural notions of the so-called wiseguy affect the way people like John Gotti dress and move and speak? How does that extra layer of self-consciousness impact experience? The same for cops; they watch cop shows, too. And how does their experience of those shows affect their experience as cops?"
>
> "Detectives," I said, addressing the cigarette in my hand.
>
> "Exactly. Detective stories. The genre is almost as old as the profession, the two have been intertwined practically from the beginning."
>
> "Detectives write books," I said ruefully.
>
> "That's right," she said. "A surprising number try to write detective novels, as if writing books were a corollary of the experience of being a detective." (279)

Of course, as with the allusions to Ballard, there is little pretense to original insight in these gestures, rather the opposite. Perhaps the most obvious precursor to Irene Maitlock in her role as cultural studies academic is Murray J. Siskind in *White Noise,* who theorizes about Elvis, car crashes and, in his most Baudrillardian moment, "The Most Photographed Barn in America." Similarly, the insights that Irene and Charlotte share about detectives, the idea that "writing books [is] a corollary of the experience of being a detective," could come straight from a Paul Auster novel, for example *City of Glass* (1985). As if to confirm Irene's analysis, the "real"

detective character in *Look at Me,* Anthony Halliday, is at one point seen reading Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* in order to help, he admits, with the writing of his own detective novel (148). Later, Halliday's obsessive search for the mysterious Z is presented as involving a level of identification with his target that is highly characteristic of the metaphysical detective genre, evoking the unnamed narrator's obsessive search for his double, Fanshawe, in Auster's *The Locked Room* (1986). And the fact that Z turns out to be a terrorist means that the identification also recalls Auster's later novel *Leviathan* (1992), in which the protagonist becomes obsessed with writing a biography of Alexander Berkman. Furthermore, Irene's own narrative accounts of Charlotte Swenson's life are "fed by the cheap detective novels she still gulped down when she had time" (244), and the other allusion in her surname is of course to the popular TV detective Matlock. Indeed, virtually all the main characters in *Look at Me* are presented at one time or another as detectives: when Moose and Charlotte Hauser walk the train-lines and old industrial zones on their field trips, they are "canvassing the dregs of Rockford's past like detectives" (287); when the terrorist Z, or Aziz, walks the streets of Manhattan, he is playing the role of a detective seeking to uncover "the conspiracy he had come to America to destroy" (122).

Being and writing

From the outset, then, Egan's approach to representing the world her characters inhabit acknowledges prior postmodern treatments of similar themes and worlds, and is in fact built upon those treatments. Nonetheless, these lightly metafictional allusions to postmodern texts by Auster, Ballard, and DeLillo—as well as to others by Barth, Borges, Burroughs, Ellis, and Pynchon to which I will come—always remain relatively implicit throughout *Look at Me,* which helps to account for the novel's uncanny quality.[14] In a story concerned with how the artificiality of the main character's world renders her identity ethereal and uncertain, those qualities of artificiality and ethereality are heightened for the reader by the sense that Charlotte's otherwise realistically-presented surroundings may exist only as a patchwork of postmodern genres, genres that are themselves *already* characterized by qualities of parody, intertextuality, and what Jameson identifies as "pastiche," an aesthetic which offers surfaces with no referential depth (*Postmodernism* 16-21). Indeed, this underly-

ing network of allusions to postmodern texts provides the novel with an additional layer of mediation beyond the levels associated with those technologies of representation—television, film, writing—that were the focus of postmodern critique. Some indication of how this deceptively complex technique operates in *Look at Me* can be gleaned from a scene in which Charlotte is confronted by Halliday while with her sister's family in a restaurant in Rockford:

> "But—how did you know I would be here?" I asked, even as the term "rising indignation" made an appearance in my mind ("I'm a detective," he reminded me), a state of rising indignation led her to retort with scorching indifference, "I don't want to see you. Anywhere. Ever again," and turn—"Can we just?" he said, turned on her heel, "Can I just—" carpet sponging under my feet as she stalked back to the table in a huff, giving him what for and not taking any guff from that moralizing hypocritical schmuck, yet oddly, at that point the angry part of me seemed to peel away from the rest, stalking and puffing picturesquely, and I returned to the table wishing I'd stayed to speak with Halliday. (329)

One way to describe this passage is as the rendering of a stream of consciousness, where the consciousness is no longer a modern one like that of Leopold Bloom or Clarissa Dalloway, characterized by the reader's illusion of access to unmediated mental processes, but a postmodern one like that of Lee Harvey Oswald in DeLillo's *Libra*. This postmodern consciousness is defined by its detached awareness, even in the moment of action, of being the subject of future narration and/or technologized representation. Moreover, as is clear in this passage, the anticipation of such a narration, with its attendant generic norms, affect and shape the impulses of the action itself, just as Irene had suggested happens with cops, detectives, and mafia bosses exposed to cultural narratives concerning their professions.[15]

Yet the manner in which Egan here enacts in the typeface itself the division of consciousness that is simultaneously being described, perhaps recalls less DeLillo's Oswald than the character of Ambrose in John Barth's postmodern coming-of-age story "Lost in the Funhouse." There is even here a notable difference, however. When the typeface alters in Barth's story, the agency seems to emanate from Ambrose as writer: "*Italics mine*"

(Barth 72). Ambrose can thus negotiate the "*place of fear and confusion*" (72) that is the funhouse of consciousness at the story's opening by claiming ownership of the act of creation by its end: "he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator" (97). For Charlotte, on the other hand, the funhouse—of writing, of consciousness, of image culture as represented by the novel's mercurial synecdoche, "the mirrored room"—can only be more passively endured, with little opportunity for agency (whence also the passivity implied by the novel's title, *Look at Me*). When the typeface alters in the passage quoted above, the prose is far more reminiscent of Irene's heightened rendering of Charlotte's life than it is of Charlotte's own more muted account. The effect is accentuated by the pronominal shift: the split between "I" and "`she`" enacts in the material type the sense of splitting and doubling that haunts Charlotte's sense of self throughout the novel. There is something more overwhelming here than the division between Ambrose the teenager and Ambrose the writer, or even than the more haunting division of the self by writing that marks an earlier postmodern parable, Borges's "Borges and I." Even in that short piece—which enacts its own gothic relation to "the prose of Robert Louis Stevenson"—the speaker does acknowledge "fleeting moments . . . of me that survive in that other man [Borges]," and recognizes life as "a point-counterpoint," in which the creative possibility remains "to think up other things" (324). For Charlotte, the playful, comic spirit that animates the "literature of exhaustion" practiced by Barth and Borges is replaced by a more oppressive sense of enclosure. The passage from *Look at Me* continues: "I was peeling apart in layers. I was breaking into bits. `She was coming apart at the seams` . . . my head buzzing with a confusion of junk noise, white noise, space junk, a junkyard of noisy thought that made me long instead for a lovely, petaled silence" (329). Here the peeling apart is reinforced not only by the specter of cliché—"`coming apart at the seams`"—but also by the "junk" of Burroughs, the "white noise" of DeLillo, and the "space junk" of Gibsonian cyberpunk. Moreover, even the "petaled silence" for which Charlotte yearns offers an image resonant with prior sources in literary modernism, bringing to mind the early Pound or e e cummings, or moments of lyrical texture in the later Beckett.

The fact that even a longed-for "petaled silence" might offer no outside to textuality for Charlotte suggests the scriptedness of her life, the haunting of her story by specters of texts prior and to come. This

emphasis on the material word, the elusive manuscript, is a classic trope of the gothic tradition, as is the foreclosure of escape from the institution, the claustrophobia that results from the lack of an outside. As McGurl has shown, one important embodiment of the institution for contemporary American letters is the creative writing program itself, and specific anxieties about its effects are not absent from *Look at Me*. When Irene and the internet entrepreneur Thomas Keene argue in front of Charlotte about how the latter's life should be narrated for the consumers of her "PersonalSpace™" internet homepage, they find a common reference point in their shared knowledge of the nineteenth-century literary canon. In musing upon the correct representation of Charlotte's "tragedy," they name and briefly discuss the Brontës, Hardy, Tolstoy, Zola, Stendhal, Dickens, Eliot, Wharton, and Flaubert (256–57). Unlike the novel's spectral allusions to the postmodern canon, therefore, the tradition of the Victorian novel signifies directly in *Look at Me* as a set of comforting narrative arcs, each with a recognizable beginning, middle, and end. What critics commonly refer to as the "realist novel" has here become a set of standard conventions, which can be exploited to stir emotions in the reader and to manipulate the way a story is pitched and sold: literature has become a form of advertising.[16] And if Irene the cultural studies academic embodies the importation of the ideas and language of theory into the contemporary novel, then Thomas stands for the acknowledgement of the effects of the writing program. When Charlotte innocently asks why, in discussing her life story in her presence, Irene and Thomas constantly refer to "her" and not "you," Thomas remarks that it is a "habit from creative writing class" (254). His language, in this scene and elsewhere, is dominated by the rhetoric of the program: "I'm saying *find* the drama, *find* the beauty, *find* the tension and give it to us" (255). And often finding the drama means excising those aspects of Charlotte's life that do not fit the pre-ordained "realist" formula, so that the norms of fiction come to overrule the contingencies of fact. Hence Charlotte finds her homeless friend Pluto written out of her narrative, when Irene and Thomas agree that such a relationship, despite its empirical existence, "may be kind of a stretch" in narrative form (262).[17]

Witnessing the details of her real life debated in this unsettling manner leads Charlotte to "a revelation": "that as the 'subject,' I was both the center of attention and completely extraneous" (262). As her theoretical insight suggests, narration here functions for Charlotte less as the organic

representation of her experience than as a displacement of her identity onto a notion of the subject defined from without. This division of the self—in which, as we have seen above, the invasive materiality of writing increasingly plays for Charlotte the role of a posthuman prosthesis—is nonetheless uncannily familiar to her: "The feeling brought with it an eerie, stultifying familiarity; I was still a model, after all. I was modeling my life" (262). Earlier, Irene had informed Charlotte that "a model's position as a purely physical object—a media object, if you will— . . . is in a sense just a more exaggerated version of everyone's position in a visually based, media-driven culture" (74). In her reluctant acceptance of the mediatized narrative rewritten by Thomas and Irene—in modeling her life for them—Charlotte is thus morphing into the "`prototype`" fashion model that she dismisses in one of the passages Irene writes in her voice (252).

That these posthuman strands of the novel intertwine with its gothic texture is no surprise: from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* onwards, it has consistently fallen to gothic writing to register a haunted anxiety at the human repercussions of technological advancement. In Egan's novel, a variety of technologies—from writing to visual media to the internet—combine to create a posthuman landscape and a divided sense of identity. In *How We Became Posthuman,* N. Katherine Hayles finds a strongly utopian dimension and an "infectious power" in this division of the self into its constituent parts:

> Speaking for myself, I now find myself saying things like, "Well, my sleep agent wants to rest, but my food agent says I should go to the store." Each person who thinks this way begins to envision herself or himself as a posthuman collectivity, an "I" transformed into a "we" of autonomous agents operating together to make a self. (6)

Although in *Look at Me* Charlotte's story tracks a similar division of the "I" into a "we," the results are far more troubling: "And a strange feeling overtook me then; it flared at the word 'we,' a kind of vision—myself and Irene moving together into another kind of life: a life in which my choices were all different, in which *I* was different. The life of someone else" (266). The advent of the "we" here means that the history of the "I" is repressed or even eviscerated; this repression or evisceration of personal history is yet another spur to the novel's posthumanist gothic.[18]

In *Look at Me,* posthuman prostheses proliferate. Charlotte Swenson has a "head full of titanium bolts and screws" (11). Charlotte Hauser regularly considers how taking on and off her glasses alters not only her vision but her identity. Her beautiful brother Ricky wears a Mediport under the skin of his chest that keeps him alive. Michael West has a Walther handgun constantly strapped to his calf for the feeling of power it gives him, and thinks of himself as "a machine of adaptation" (237). Abby Reece tells Michael that people in LA "have no souls. They're not real people—they've got plastic in their faces, their legs, their breasts . . . these are not human beings in the traditional sense" (305), a view which echoes Moose Metcalf's anxiety that the contemporary world is full of "people without souls, people assembled from parts like shoes or guns of a hundred years ago" (390). Toward the novel's end, as Charlotte and Irene drive into Rockford, Charlotte compares "the rusted, jiggling trucks that looked hopelessly irreconcilable with the digital age" with "the freestanding mirrored office cubes that seemed not just postindustrial but posthuman" (315). Yet if technology—especially in the postindustrial, posthuman, postmodern age—represents the annihilation of history, then the gothic reminds us, through its dessicated forms, of history's nagging power. Moreover, in the connection Charlotte makes here between two eras of Rockford's history, these gothic forms find their counterpart in the novel's content; this is where *Look at Me* opens most fully onto the question of history itself.

Seeing and reading

As I implied at the outset of this essay, if *Look at Me* and novels like it do offer an outside to the postmodern web of text, technology, and theory, this outside lies in the promise of some kind of renewed historical understanding. But gaining access to history in a postmodern context requires alternative forms of seeing and reading to those provided by the theoretically-inculcated Thomas and Irene. Early in the novel, Charlotte and her fashion agent Oscar walk out onto the New York streets after meeting for the first time since Charlotte's surgery. In response to a wry joke by Oscar, Charlotte remarks that she

> laughed, my head back, so that suddenly I was looking above the buildings, up at the winter sky. And then I saw the sign. It snagged my gaze and held it, an old advertisement painted on the side of a brick building. Griffin's Shears, it read. The paint

> was faded but still legible, a faint chalky blue, and beside the words I made out the silhouette of a pair of scissors . . .
>
> Oscar looked up and down, then swiveled his head. "What?" "That old ad! Griffin's Shears." Oscar looked at me. "It's like a ghost," I said.
>
> We stood there, looking at the ad. I felt moved by it in some way I couldn't explain. It reminded me of Rockford, of its factories and smokestacks and industry. A glimpse of New York's shadow face. (38)

The visual advertisement is the postmodern image *par excellence,* usually connoting, for Jameson and others, a free-floating, intensifying, seductive quality. Such a sign can sometimes take on a religious or pseudo-religious aura—as for example does the billboard at the finale of DeLillo's *Underworld*—but although it might promise transcendence, what the postmodern advertising image is normally taken to deny is any kind of coherent historicizing impulse. On Baudrillard's celebrated analysis, the endlessly circulating sign is always a copy of a copy, a simulacrum, so that reality morphs into hyperreality, and the everyday experience of history becomes irredeemably mediated.

In the passage above, Egan is obviously engaging with these postmodern ideas and discourses, but with a subtle difference. Here the sign suggests to Charlotte not a depthless simulacrum, but the ghost of an identifiable history, specifically the faded industrialism of her home town of Rockford, which, we are told elsewhere, remains known for the production of manufacturing tools, "for dull, invisible things that no one in the world would ever know or care about" (10). The material reality of these tools, represented in the old sign with uncommon directness by the ghostly image of the shears, is here glimpsed by Charlotte as the "shadow face" of postmodern New York, a reality metonymically connoted by the image rather than simply replaced or destroyed by it in a process of metaphorical transference. There is a connection here, too, to Charlotte's private life, in which she is obsessed with identifying what she calls the "shadow self" of every person she meets, "that caricature that clings to each of us, revealing itself in odd moments when we laugh or fall still, staring brazenly from certain photographs" (34). In a world obsessed with image over reality, and with lying over truth, these "shadow selves," where detected, offer Charlotte the comfort of accessing something authentic, some reality that is not being simulated.

And yet, just as these shadow selves are identified solely through Charlotte's potentially unreliable first-person narration, it remains unclear in the quoted passage whether Charlotte really is seeing the image of Griffin's Shears on a New York wall, or, more accurately, whether the image really exists to be seen. It is notably uncertain, for instance, whether Oscar also sees the sign—he looks up and down, and then at Charlotte, but his silence does not confirm for the reader whether or not he shares her vision. This uncertainty also marks a similar passage from a little later in the text, when Charlotte, now on her own, sees another of these signs, this time for "Hollander Ladies Underwear":

> It's a sign, I thought, the wind gulping my laughter. A sign in the form of a sign.
>
> At the corner of Sixth Avenue and Twenty-eighth Street I stopped and turned slowly around. They were everywhere—signs and the possibility of signs, many faded to translucence, as if I'd gained some new power that allowed me, finally, to see them. "Harris Suspenders Garters Belts." "Maid-Rite Dress Co."; mementos of the gritty industrialism I'd come to New York to escape. But today the signs looked honest, legible in a way that the negligéed models I'd seen this morning in *Vogue,* prone in a parking lot surrounded by broken glass, would never be. (71)

On this occasion the change is more firmly located not in the object of Charlotte's gaze—the built environment of New York—but in Charlotte's own subjectivity: "as if I'd gained some new power that allowed me, finally, to see them." Charlotte feels empowered by interpreting her vision as "a sign in the form of a sign," thereby turning that vision into something other than a postmodern in-joke. The suggestion in Egan's passage is that seeing "signs and the possibility of signs," and connecting them to historical referents, to the depth they might connote, involves an ability to see the world as characterized less by the loss of history than by its suppression, its retreat to the status of a haunting that can return. Yet the ambiguous existence of these images means that it remains significantly uncertain whether reality in these scenes exists primarily on the side of the subject or on the side of the object, the historical mark on the wall.

This analysis can be extended and clarified with regard to the character in *Look at Me* who most embodies its historicizing project, the academic historian Moose Metcalf. Moose's award-winning Ph.D. disser-

tation was entitled *Bathe the World in Light: How the Dissemination of Clear Glass Altered Human Perception,* and his interest in the topic is explained in the following paragraph:

> It transfixed Moose to imagine those early years of quickening sight made possible by the proliferation of clear glass (perfected in Murano, circa 1300)—mirrors, spectacles, windows—light everywhere so suddenly, showing up the dirt and dust and crud that had gone unremarked for centuries. But surely the most shocking revelation had been people's own physicality, their outward selves blinking strangely back at them from mirrors—*this is what I look like; this is what other people see when they look at me*—Lacan's mirror phase wrought large upon whole villages, whole cultures! And yet, as was the case with nearly every phenomenon Moose observed (his own life foremost), a second transformation followed the first and reversed nearly all of its gains, for now the world's blindness exceeded that of medieval times before clear glass, except that the present blindness came from *too much sight,* appearances disjoined from anything real, afloat upon nothing, in the service of nothing, cut off from every source of blood and life. (109)

We go, in this Foucauldian reading of history, from the medieval to the postmodern, from visual ignorance to the birth of modern self-consciousness. Even Lacan's mirror stage—posited by psychoanalysis as a universal experience in infancy—is here historicized, presented as originating in historical advances in the technology of looking. And here again, as in the passages involving Charlotte, a paradoxical blindness has resulted from the suppression of shadows brought about by the dream of visual perfection in the postindustrial age. The dishonesty Charlotte sees in the negligéed *Vogue* models—the way their metaphoric relation to beauty replaces the more grounded metonymy of the ugly sign—is repeated here in Moose's denunciation of the postmodern image disjoined from its referent and its history, "cut off from every source of blood and life." As with the ambiguities surrounding Charlotte's first-person testimony, however, the parenthetical reference in this passage to Moose's view of his own life hints at doubt about the objective reliability of his account, a doubt that will grow as his story builds to conclusion.

Moose's second major academic project, a history of Rockford, comes to him in a moment of vision not unlike Charlotte's: "Moose looked across the river and felt the past unroll suddenly from behind the present

panorama of dead chrome and glass and riverfront homes as if a phony backdrop had toppled, exposing a labyrinth. 'It's all here,' he murmured wonderingly, and experienced a lifting within himself. 'Everything is here'" (56). Just as Charlotte has witnessed the connection of postindustrial to industrial New York in the ghostly old signs, so Moose sees the history of Rockford unroll from behind its current postmodern façade. It leads him to embark on "a multivolumed history of his hometown whose explicit purpose was etiological: to discover *what had gone wrong* between its founding in 1834 and the present day—what, precisely, had been lost in the ineluctable transformation from industry to information" (57). Charlotte Hauser's father Harris has a different, more symptomatic reading of Moose's venture, however: "'It's so sad,' Charlotte had heard her father say. 'What's he's trying to figure out is why he cracked up. Like a hundred and fifty years of trivia is going to answer that question'" (57). That the project might indeed be a byproduct of Moose's own pathologies is likewise suggested by the way a vision of himself as a young boy begins to intrude upon his consciousness as the novel wears on; with his "prolonged stare," the boy provokes in Moose the question he most wants to avoid: "What had happened to him?" (384). Moose's preferred answer to this question, the one he clings to, is that he experienced, in his early twenties, an epiphanic vision that revealed the objective truth of the present age to him. The content of this vision is withheld from the reader until a moment late in the novel when Moose returns to the vision's original site, a hill overlooking a motorway interchange:

> The answer lay in the vision itself: a different man than Moose was the one who thrived in this new world, a sociopath who made himself anew each afternoon, for whom lying was merely persuasion. More and more they ruled the world, these quicksilver creatures, minotaurs who weren't the products of birth or history, nature or nurture, but assembled for the eye from prototypes; who bore the same relationship to human beings as machine-made clothing did to something hand-stitched. A world remade by circuitry was a world without history or context or meaning, and because we are what we see, *we are what we see,* such a world was certainly heading toward death. (390)

Moose's account of the new man of the postmodern era, the "sociopath who made himself anew each afternoon," should remind us of no literary figure so much as Patrick Bateman, the protagonist of *American*

Psycho. Ellis's novel, published in 1991, is, I would argue, one of the latest American novels that could be considered classically postmodern, reminiscent of the fiction of John Hawkes in the blankness of its parody, the lack of ethical distance that it offers to its reader. Moose, on the other hand, is a character whose self-conscious doubt encourages empathy in the reader, a character who engages with his own postmodernity and tries to find a way beyond its limits.[19] Equally significant is the resonance of the quoted passage with a famous one from early in *The Crying of Lot 49,* when Oedipa Maas looks down on the houses of San Narciso and thinks "of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit" (14). This circuit speaks to Oedipa of "a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. . . .a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding" (15). Oedipa's tools for interpreting this revelation and others like it are, as Rachel Adams has recently reminded us, those of the New Critic: "Oedipa behaves like an ideal Cold War subject by seeking out irony and contradiction rather than understanding herself as a political agent" (256). But if *Lot 49* is therefore a response to New Criticism as well as to modernism, then *Look at Me* is as much a response to "theory" as to postmodern literature. By contrast with Oedipa, Moose's vision is less transcendental than historical in nature, and it produces a reading that is less religious than political. That such a vision and such a reading bespeaks the outlook of the theorist makes Moose entirely typical of his generation: the impulse to political activism has led him, like so many others, to the university, into the bosom of humanities scholarship.

Teaching and learning

In his recent account of the impulses that shaped American postmodern fiction, Sean McCann remarks that "the university, which epitomizes the worst features of a manufactured society, also becomes the indispensable launching pad for the effort to imagine one's way beyond its limits" (302). So it is with Moose, who attempts to attack the manufactured quality he observes in his postmodern surroundings from inside the walls of academe. Yet unlike the postmodern novelist who McCann sees glorifying himself as a non-alienated creator, Moose places his emphasis less on writing than on teaching. This concern with the pedagogic is Moose's response to the ironic but telling realization that his Foucauldian historical

insights are rendered uncertain by another branch of theory that focuses on language rather than history, namely poststructuralism. As with Charlotte, it is the specter of metaphor, that "white mythology" in Derrida's terms, which provides Moose with his major anxiety:

> what proof did Moose have that his vision was not, itself, just a metaphor? His mind wheezed like a bellows as he attempted to grasp the implications of this query: that the revelation he'd devoted his life to understanding might not exist in itself, might be a metaphor for something within Moose—a mistake, a mutation, a disorder of the brain. (395)

Just as Charlotte's vision of "signs and the possibility of signs" may be simply her own subjective fantasy, the disastrous possibility exists for Moose that his own vision is "not the cause of his isolation, as he had always supposed, but merely an expression of it." In his culminating scene in the novel, Moose rages against this possibility: "'*No!*' Moose shouted at his windshield. 'No! I reject that vision, that antivision. I reject the accusation of solipsism because I know I'm right. I know I'm right. I know I'm right!'" But knowing one is right, being sure that one has seen the truth, turns out to depend on more than one's own attestation to an epiphanic vision. As Moose remarks to himself elsewhere in the novel: "If two people saw it, did that not make it true, in some sense?" (116).

Moose's academic career is therefore dominated by the need to transmit his apocalyptic vision to his students. But the requirement for proof means that he cannot simply tell them of it: they must witness it for themselves. This appears to be what leads Moose to engage in what lawyers later term "Reckless Acts in the Guise of Pedagogical Tools" (54), where students in his classrooms in Yale take part in "thought experiments" that involve firing loaded guns and taking charge of detonators that may cause carnage if operative. The purpose of these experiments is that students will not only "pass the time discussing humankind's ability to resist the lure of destructive technology," but that Moose's metanarrative of history—"a terrible reversal was in progress, a technological disaster whereby the genius of the Industrial Revolution would be turned on people themselves" (53)—can be experienced by his students as an *event*. After he is sacked in disgrace from Yale and has obtained a part-time job at Winnebago College in Rockford, Moose switches his pedagogical sights to his niece Charlotte Hauser. Through a series of writing assignments on

the industrial history of Rockford, he hopes to make Charlotte experience his vision for herself. The irony is that the very moment he believes he has succeeded, that Charlotte has seen the vision and confirmed for him its truth, is the moment when Charlotte rejects him: "'I don't want to be like you, I don't! I'd rather die. I'd rather kill myself!'" (366). She has indeed had a vision, but it is not historical or political but personal, and is less about the importance of remembering, as Moose would want, than about the liberation of forgetting: "She could walk away and not think about Moose anymore, forget him as she already was forgetting Michael West, wiping the thoughts from her mind" (367).

The model Charlotte Swenson and the academic Moose Metcalf are two characters who push at the limits of conventional postmodern epistemologies, though in an uncertain and incomplete manner. In this, they join a range of individuals from other post-boomer novels who find themselves confronting the spectral forces of history. In Whitehead's *John Henry Days,* for example, the protagonist J Sutter constantly appears on the verge of identifying his deep connection with John Henry—as equal participants in an ongoing dialectic of man and machine—rather than perceiving only the differences between their historical situations and stature. In a similar manner, Gary Lambert in Franzen's *The Corrections* feels only his disconnection from his father Alfred, rather than seeing the continuities between his postindustrial lifeworld and Alfred's industrial one. In this falling short of insight, Sutter and Gary are not unlike the main character in Powers's *Gain,* of whom Andrew Hoberek writes: "Laura Bodey's role as epistemologically challenged consumer marks her as a residually postmodern character in a novel trying to move beyond postmodernism" (*Twilight* 128). Another epistemologically challenged consumer is Dwight Wilmerding in Kunkel's *Indecision,* who deals with postmodern uncertainty by writing a comically faltering memoir. And like Dwight, Mark Nechtr's aim in Wallace's "Westward" is to write a story "that stabs you in the heart" (333), though Mark does not yet possess the tools to do it (as Wallace, at that early stage in his career, arguably also did not).

The underlying issue that these characters, and the novelists who create them, must struggle with concerns the relationship of theory to history in a late- or post-postmodern age. This is equally a central concern for contemporary literary studies, and despite the confidence of some claims made for the current historicist turn, theoretical vigilance needs

to be maintained, lest the process of historical remembering turn out to be a kind of forgetting. In conclusion, it may be worth bearing in mind the words of one of the most influential voices of the age of theory, words that were written and published before what we now know as "theory" even existed as a glint in the historian's eye. In "Force and Signification" (1963), Jacques Derrida considered whether, one day, "the structuralist invasion might become a question for the historian of ideas, or perhaps even an object":

> But the historian would be deceived if he came to this pass: . . . it is the nature of this development not to be able to display itself in its entirety as a spectacle for the historian, if, by chance, he were to attempt to recognize in it the sign of an epoch, the fashion of a season, or the symptom of a crisis. Whatever the poverty of our knowledge in this respect, it is certain that the question of the sign is itself more or less, or in any event something other, than the sign of the times. To dream of reducing it to the sign of the times is to dream of violence. (3)

How do we historicize postmodernism without reducing it to nothing more than a sign of the times? How do we historicize "theory" without simply moving blindly on, joining Charlotte junior in a movement of violent forgetting? Would arguing for a continued role for theoretical speculation in the face of pressing historical realities simply mean shirking political responsibility and retreating further into "magical thinking"? These questions, and others like them, are raised by the fates of the characters in Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me,* and they are questions that literary studies as a whole must address. Beginning with postmodernism enjoins writers, readers, and critics not to forget the lessons of postmodernism, however liberating such forgetting may sometimes feel. And this remains true whether the aim is to affirm the story of "postmodernism, then," or to reject the legitimacy of such a story.

Notes

1. On Mexico in *Lot 49,* see Adams 256-58; on Vietnam and Iran in *White Noise*, see Hoberek, "Foreign Objects."

2. See Hoberek, *Twilight* 113-30; McCann, "Training"; McGurl; Punday; Szalay 257-71.

3. So, for example, the category of postmodernism is retained in Hoberek, "Foreign Objects" and Hungerford, "Don DeLillo's," but DeLillo's fiction is read in both essays as responsive to specific historical contexts (modernization theory and religious rituals, respectively) rather than an "abstract model of postmodernity" (Hoberek 108) or an "abstractly defined realm of postmodernism" (Hungerford 346). In Sean McCann and Michael Szalay's "Do You Believe in Magic?" the category of the postmodern is also retained, but postmodernist aesthetics in DeLillo, Toni Morrison and Ursula K. LeGuin are criticized as evincing a "high-minded irrationalism" that invests in "the therapeutic value of ineffable mystery" rather than the "mundane political efforts" that McCann and Szalay would endorse (451).

4. In Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* the analytic category of postmodernism is relegated in favor of an account of the institutionalization of modernist aesthetics within the creative writing program. This results in a three-way tracking of postwar aesthetics into technomodernism ("best understood as a tweaking of the term 'postmodernism'" [32]), high cultural pluralism, and lower-middle-class modernism, although McGurl is careful to make clear that these categories do overlap in particular texts. In "On the Period," Hungerford cites McGurl's work as central to her preference for "long modernism" as a term that can account for the insight that "the second half of the twentieth century sees not a departure from modernism's aesthetic but its triumph in the institution of the university and in the literary culture more generally" (418).

5. In his review of *The Program Era*, Daniel Grausam suggests that McGurl's book may play for postmodernism the foundational role that Lawrence Rainey's *Institutions of Modernism* played for the new modernist studies; hence it is legitimate to see the new postmodernist studies as a later but parallel critical development to the historicist turn in the study of literary modernism. Another way to see this revisionist historicism is as constituting a fifth stage to supplement the four-stage grand narrative of the postmodernist debate outlined by Steven Connor in his introduction to the 2004 *Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*. There Connor offers the following chronology of postmodernism: "accumulation" through the 1970s and early 1980s, in work by Hassan, Jencks, Lyotard and others; "synthesis" from the mid-1980s into the 1990s, particularly in the work of Jameson; "autonomy" by the mid-1990s, when "postmodernism became the name for the activity of writing about postmodernism" (4); and "dissipation" in the new century, when mainstream debate moved elsewhere. If we are now in a "historicizing" stage, then it is apt that it has begun with a focus on US fiction, just as initial debates about postmodernism did before expanding outwards.

6. Of course (and as this list of names unavoidably suggests), another and perhaps more obvious explanation for Egan's relative critical neglect is her

gender, with the canon of postmodern fiction often appearing to be, even (and perhaps especially) in revisionist accounts, overwhelmingly a (white) male preserve. Egan has registered her anxiety about this literary inheritance in an interview: "I'm not sure exactly what tradition I'm part of. I hate about myself the fact that I tend to model myself consciously after male writers. And I think that's because again there's this association that I'm very suspicious of that somehow men take on the big topics more than women do, which I don't think is necessarily true. But I sometimes fall prey to that supposition myself, and I sometimes feel a bit confused about what I fit into" ("Face Value"). It should be noted that Egan's critical eclipse is likely to be substantially rectified in the near future, with her profile having been greatly ameliorated by the success of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), which won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Circle Critics' Award among other major awards.

7. The parallels between *The Real Charlotte* and *Look at Me* are many: both explore the relations between the haves and have-nots in their respective societies; both are dark social satires in which class and gender play determining roles for the female protagonists; both involve love plots in which the two female principals have romantic attachments to the same man; both focus on questions of identity, authenticity, and deceit with regard to the main character, the question of who the real Charlotte might be. *The Real Charlotte* is usually read as concerned with the coming collapse of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy at the end of the nineteenth century (see Laird), and the gothic sensibility of *Look at Me* can similarly be related to what Egan has described as "being buoyed up on the exalted fat times of the '90s and feeling that somehow it was going to come crashing down" ("Face Value"). One aspect of this "crashing down" is the novel's inclusion of a plotline concerning a planned Arab terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center; the fact that *Look at Me* was published one week after September 11, 2001 only adds to its uncanny quality.

8. Jeremy Green thus remarks that DeLillo's works "bridge the two generations of postmodern fiction" (4), but it is also worth noting here Andrew Hoberek's recent revisionist account of DeLillo's writing "as engaged in a shared project with the minimalist school that came to prominence during the same period in which his career took off" ("Foreign Objects" 102). Hoberek contends that this understanding "should replace our standard accounts of DeLillo as a second-wave postmodernist"; it seems more circumspect, however, to see DeLillo's minimalist influence as supplementing rather than replacing his debt to and continuity with the earlier postmodernists.

9. If postmodernity is a kind of trauma (for Jameson, a trauma predominately registered as schizophrenia), then one way to conceive of post-boomer writers

is as second-generation survivors of the postmodern trauma, whose natural response is to look to provide a broader and deeper historical context for that trauma.

10. By "theory" I mean to include here both what can loosely be termed "theory of postmodernism"—comprising constructions of literary postmodernism from Hassan and Fiedler to Hutcheon and McHale, as well as analyses of cultural postmodernism from Jencks to Lyotard to Jameson—alongside what often gets called "postmodern theory." This latter might in turn be further subdivided into "French theory"—which takes in the work of Barthes, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, etc. (see Cusset)—and "identity theory," referring to post-1960s critical movements from feminism to queer theory to race studies to postcolonialism. One basic insight is that beginning with "theory" means beginning with what Brian McHale calls "the discursive and constructed character of postmodernism" (1).

11. Kunkel's own debut novel *Indecision* (2005) can be read as a theoretically-informed response to the postmodern paralysis he finds in Jameson and in theory more generally. However, in its refusal to historicize beyond one generation, *Indecision* joins other important post-boomer novels such as Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003), Susan Choi's *American Woman* (2003), Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document* (2006), and Zoë Heller's *The Believers* (2008), in taking as its main project an assessment of the fallout of the 1960s for the present day.

12. This layering of representations, a recognizably postmodern gesture, is repeated regularly throughout the novel, as for example when Charlotte describes "watching *The Making of the Making of*, a documentary about how documentaries were made about the making of Hollywood features" (78).

13. Written accounts within the frame of the novel are set off in distinctive type by Egan: this applies to Irene's narrative of Charlotte Swenson's life, to stretches of Charlotte's "own" thought, and to the essays on the industrial history of Rockford written by Charlotte Hauser for her uncle Moose. The materiality of text is particularly important to the novel's posthumanist concerns, and I will return to it below.

14. The numerous similarities between the story of *Look at Me* and Wallace's "Westward"—the central Illinois setting, the importance of a car journey, the apocalyptic ending filmed as an advertisement, the foregrounding of a dialogue with postmodernism—adds to this quality of uncanny repetition.

15. The following description of Oswald's consciousness is typical of *Libra*: "he experienced what was happening and at the same moment, although slightly

apart, recounted it all for Robert. He had a little vision of himself. He saw himself narrating the story to Robert Sproul, relishing his own broad manner of description even as the moment was unfolding in the present" (45). As with Oswald, for Charlotte in *Look at Me* this sense of detachment had begun in early childhood, when she remembers thinking of her life as "a movie projected onto a giant screen before an audience who watched, rapt" (131). Conceiving of one's life as a movie in this way is a trope now so embedded in the work of contemporary novelists as not to require further examples; what is important is to recall that it is the mark of a specifically postmodern consciousness, and therefore open to a historical analysis.

16. Again, this is an idea anticipated in Wallace's "Westward," where JD Steelritter remarks: "'Stories are basically like ad campaigns, no?'" (330). Elsewhere, I have explored how the contemporary dominance of advertising, the cultural appropriation of realism, and the insights into language provided by poststructuralist theory have combined to influence the anxious search for a "new sincerity" that distinguishes the fiction of the generation that begins with postmodernism (see Kelly). *Look at Me* is centrally concerned with the (im)possibility of sincerity in a world characterized by artificiality, as for instance when Charlotte comments on the ending of her only major relationship: "After Hansen, I was careful to limit my promises. If I cared about someone, I did my best to mean what I said when I said it. But I'd given up on the whole truth, much less my ability to tell it" (84).

17. This explicit acknowledgment of the influence of the writing program in Egan's text both confirms McGurl's analysis and offers a renewed challenge to his critical method. Although he ends *The Program Era* with a reading of a novella by George Saunders, and makes fleeting references to the likes of Wallace, Junot Díaz, and Edwidge Danticat, McGurl more or less concludes his account of postwar American fiction before the rise to prominence of the generation of Wallace, Díaz, Saunders, and Egan at the century's end. At the same time, his discussion of the role of the program in the work of their forebears is consistently *allegorical* in method. McGurl demonstrates how texts by writers as diverse as Flannery O'Connor, Ken Kesey, Thomas Pynchon, and Toni Morrison can be read as veiled allegories of the dictates and problematics of the program, whether formally, as in O'Connor's experiments with point of view, or in terms of content, as in the reference to schoolteacher in Morrison's *Beloved*. Against this background, we might legitimately ask what implications direct references to the program, in works such as *Look at Me*, Wallace's "Westward," and Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* have for such an allegorical method of interpretation. Egan's novel offers some hints at an answer to this question: for instance, deliberate reference to the program forms part of the novel's subtly metafictional commentary on its own approach to

creating character in the contemporary moment. On the renewed importance of character in post-postmodern fiction, see Burn 23-26.

18. For a discussion of Wallace's "sentimental posthumanism," which might be productively compared with Egan's gothic posthumanism as outlined here, see Giles.

19. This kind of character, whose processing of postmodern tropes is a feature of his/her interiority, and whose language is inflected with the insights of theory, is typical of the post-postmodern novel. Examples include Dwight Wilmerding from Kunkel's *Indecision,* Nash and Jason from Spiotta's *Eat the Document,* and the hideous men who outline their experiences in Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). I will mention others at the conclusion of this essay.

§

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