

## CHAPTER 1

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# Finite and Infinite Games

### *Terminal Illness and the Genre of the Literary Memoir*

Changes in medicine, media, and mores in the last forty years have repositioned the discussion of illness in society. In particular, the emergence of AIDS, and its growth from what was thought to be an illness attacking only gay men to a widespread epidemic (although often considered a “manageable” disease for those with access to the right medications), has forced the public to look at the politics and social structures that shape our understanding of particular diseases. AIDS helped make the topics of medical research, health education, and sexual and racial stereotyping pressing issues, and in the process it placed the particulars of the disease and the people with it in the public eye. Although the symbol of illness as punishment perseveres, a greater openness toward the personal experience of disease complicates and diminishes that signification. The sophisticated discourses emerging out of this openness consequently suggest new ways of defining disease and new methods of narrating the stories of the ill.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the long gestation period of the HIV virus, medicine’s increasing ability to treat HIV, and improvements in the treatment of cancer, many people are able to live quite long periods with these still-frightening diseases. The result is a body of writing perhaps unique in the history of literature. Although many artists have written under the burden of terminal disease, especially tuberculosis, never before has such candor emerged in speaking of illness, nor has such writing become so enmeshed in the political, cultural, and sexual issues of its day. In addition to creating works of art that include terminal

illness as a subject, many artists have written autobiographical pieces describing their own particular experience of disease. These texts address not only illness, but they also show how illness and creation interact, providing insight into how various genres (novel, poetry, essay, autobiography) are suited to convey different aspects of that experience. As a result, a new literary field has emerged in the last twenty years that addresses the reciprocal relation between the ill and disabled and their culture.

Such scholars as Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, G. Thomas Couser, Arthur Frank, Nancy K. Miller, Susanna Egan, Ross Chambers, and Sarah Brophy have outlined the terms and parameters of this new field, giving it a variety of names to reflect their particular emphases. Miller (1994) coined the term *autothanatography* to describe the proximity to death within autobiography, and Susanna Egan further develops the term in her 1999 study *Mirror Talk*. Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, a groundbreaker in the field, prefers the term *pathography*, which she defines as simply “an autobiographical or biographical narrative about an experience of illness” (1999, 229). G. Thomas Couser uses the term *autopathography* in his 1997 study, primarily because he is interested in issues of authorship and authority, and in the particular ways in which authors use writing to counter oppressive medical discourses or broader social stigmatization. And in *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995), Arthur Frank clearly summarizes what I see as the connection between these different projects by placing them in a postmodern context: “The postmodern experience of illness begins when ill people recognize that more is involved in their experiences than the medical story can tell” (6). Both medical and cultural narratives addressing illness and death reflect a loss of what Slavoj Žižek would call “symbolic efficiency”; they display a loss of belief in the traditional power structure’s ability to provide meaning. As a result, individuals feel a need to tell their own stories, seeking “not to provide a map that can guide others” (Frank 1995, 17) but to serve as an example of how we all, when faced with mortality, must create our own maps.

Through this discussion I hope to show how these narratives of terminal illness are relevant to all of us. As Frank Kermode has written, “It is not expected of critics as it is of poets that they should help us to make sense of our lives; they are bound only to attempt the lesser feat of making sense of the ways we try to make sense of our lives” (1967, 3), and in these texts we see extremely focused efforts at making sense out of life. Of course, all individuals, because we are mortal, are in the same position as these authors. But for most of us, death is not persistently conscious. Absorbed with the elements of life—work, sex,

family responsibilities, success, material goods—we allow the idea of death, of life outside of these signifying systems, only infrequent and fleeting expression, perhaps primarily in art and religious ceremonies. This avoidance contributes to both the otherness and the authority of these texts. As Mark Nash writes, “Because those who are dying are so close to us, and we know that we will follow in one way or another, that we are simply watching a time-lapse version of our own mortality reflected in others, these narratives have a particular poignancy and force” (1994, 97). How others cope with death exerts a strange fascination; thinking of death and illness may upset our routine, but we are always looking for a model that will make these certainties less frightening. Time, perspective, and reality are redefined when an end point comes into view, providing the writer of the memoir with an increased authority over his or her life story.

Many of the changes in tone and genre that are observable in late works support Walter Benjamin’s assertion in “The Storyteller” of a connection between death and authority in narration:

It is, however, characteristic that not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life—and this is the stuff that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story. (1968, 94)

Just as the interpretation of a text is more credible if the interpreter has finished reading it, the interpretation of a life is deemed more valid if the author is aware of the means and time of his or her death. Benjamin suggests that the knowledge of death initiates a new awareness of self, because the significance of events in the subject’s life story is now knowable. Moreover, he asserts that this awareness is outwardly visible and strengthens the knower’s ability to convey experience.

In what follows I argue, however, that the understanding that these authors possess goes beyond a simple knowledge of the end of the story. Indeed, a common trait within terminal illness memoirs

is the loss of interest in beginnings, endings, and the linear life plot. Prior to that discussion, however, it is important to recognize that the freedom and authority that come with an awareness of death present their own difficulties. The subject is still living and must interact with those who value the world's objects just as he or she previously did. Thus terminally ill artists find themselves in the unusual position of being caught in a continuous circle that asserts life and also acknowledges death, forced to maintain a precarious balance. The literary memoir emerges as a tool with which to achieve that balance in that the author translates into communicable terms the effects of an unrepresentable experience.

In her chapter on terminal illness memoirs in *Mirror Talk*, Egan provides an insightful overview of the thematic, aesthetic, and ethical issues raised by these texts. Indeed, I view two passages from her study as springboards for my own project in that she highlights the heightened intensity that appears after the terminal illness diagnosis and the subsequent disregard for linear plot structures. Egan explains, "Full awareness of mortality, from which most of us protect ourselves most of the time, generates a fullness of being to which these texts bear witness again and again" (1999, 199). She elaborates:

They redeem their lifetime not by narrative, and certainly not by making sense or meaning out of their experience, but rather by a strenuous focus on illness, pain, and imminent death as crucial to the processes of that life. Their texts depend, accordingly, on strategies that deconstruct personal autonomy and continuity—strategies that mirror the unpredictable quality both of the lived experience and of life itself, reaffirming only the moment and that, too, only as process. Such strategies serve to express and to "realize," or make real, identities at the very point of demolition. (1999, 224)

Reading terminal illness memoirs in the 1990s, I was struck by the number of writers who experienced an added intensity to their lives and a fullness of being described in the epigraphs that begin this book. The intensity came not from the anticipation that life would soon end but from a new freedom: freedom from the fear of living. Indeed, frequently the proximity of death leads to the removal of a fear of death that manifests itself as our fear of "getting life wrong," or the fear of dying before we have "conquered" life in the proper fashion.

Therefore, here I take Egan's insight one step farther by analyzing more specifically the causes and effects of this "fullness of being," how they connect to the subjective demolition she describes, and how these insights might further our understanding of existence in general. In addition, I am interested in what these recent autobiographical writings can tell us about the impact of a consciousness of death on artistic production and the significance of the memoir as a genre. When faced with mortality, why do these authors turn to the memoir and away from their usual art forms? What kinds of knowledge or experience can the memoir convey that the novel, philosophy, film, and criticism cannot? In many texts written by the terminally ill, the sense of ending provokes a profound reevaluation of life and art and produces a desire to speak directly to the public. A consciousness of death can initiate forms of openness and change that provide significant insights into how one is indeed able to change one's life view, or "traverse the fantasy," as Jacques Lacan has described. Therefore, my approach will be primarily psychoanalytic, looking at the causes of particular mental states and how trauma, illness, and mortality affect structures of enjoyment and the objects and activities that give life meaning, always keeping in mind that meaning and enjoyment are produced in relation to established social structures.

### Finite and Infinite Literary Games

I begin this discussion by introducing a tool that risks oversimplifying many of the issues at stake here. I believe, however, that its illustrative power justifies that risk. In 1986, philosopher and religious scholar James P. Carse (1986) published a small, epigrammatic book entitled *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*. In his book Carse uses these two kinds of games in order to explain differences in human motivation in a diversity of fields, suggesting that desires can be better understood if we recognize exactly what kind of game the subject is playing. According to Carse, finite games are played to win, while infinite games are played to keep on playing. Thus the rules of a finite game remain fixed and lead to the establishment of a clear winner, while in the infinite game the rules change when a winner begins to emerge; the goal of the infinite game is to play, not to win. Of course, establishing a distinction between acts done for utilitarian gain (the finite game) and acts done out of a detached goodness (the infinite game) is not particularly new or original, but Carse's use of the "game" vocabulary highlights the everyday applicability

of the distinction and connects it to theorizers of play in other fields, such as D. W. Winnicott in psychoanalysis and Hans Georg Gadamer in philosophy.

Carse, Winnicott, and Gadamer (and, as I will discuss later, Freud, Lacan, and Žižek) are all interested in how playing and games take the subject beyond itself, thereby determining particular trajectories of growth and change. They all show that the games we play significantly affect who we are as subjects. Winnicott's lasting legacy is his examination of the "transitional objects" with which children play and the "holding environments" in which play occurs. In "The Location of Cultural Experience" he extends his analysis of childhood play to adult life, contending that all cultural experience replicates the dynamic exchange between the individual psyche and the physical world. For Winnicott, art functions as a form of transitional object, something that is neither us nor completely other.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Gadamer is interested in the ways in which play—also manifested in art and culture—diminishes the psychological extremes of, on the one hand, "subjective" isolation or, on the other, insignificance in the face of the "objective" (big) Other: "The structure of play absorbs the player into itself, and thus frees him from the burden of taking the initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence" (2004, 105).<sup>3</sup> Both Winnicott and Gadamer examine how play provides life with those moments that are most intense and most meaningful. Winnicott's claim that "This intermediate area of experience [the transitional] . . . constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work" (1971, 14) is very similar to Gadamer's statement, that "the concept of the game becomes important, for absorption into the game is an ecstatic self-forgetting that is experienced not as a loss of self-possession, but as the free buoyancy of an elevation above oneself" (1976, 54–55). Both thinkers use the absorption of play to illustrate how the subject experiences pleasure beyond simply surviving or fulfilling social demands.

Carse also uses his two-game theory to show how games relieve some of the burdens of existence, but his primary interest is in how the finite and infinite games relieve this burden differently. One might say that the finite game provides security, while the infinite game provides flexibility, and in this way the two kinds of games reveal different approaches to living that are, in fact, determined by different conceptions of death. According to Carse, "What one wins in a finite game is a title" (1986, 19), and the title provides a kind of

immortality. Once the title is won, it cannot be taken away: "What the winners of finite games achieve is not properly an *afterlife* but an *afterworld*, not continuing existence but continuing recognition of their titles" (22, emphases in original). By winning a title, one can use past accomplishments as security for the future; no matter what happens, one has gained that title and the consequent position in the symbolic structure.

Death for infinite players is more complicated and suggests a different conception of immortality. Carse connects infinite play to the consciousness and acceptance of death: "Infinite players die. Since the boundaries of death are always part of the play, the infinite player does not die at the end of play, but in the course of play" (1986, 24). But for infinite players, the game does not end with death. Carse characterizes the infinite point of view as one that conceives of existence as something that transcends the individual. When the infinite player dies, the game does not come to an end: "On the contrary, infinite players offer their death as a way of continuing the play. For that reason they do not play for their own life; they live for their own play. But since that play is always with others, it is evident that infinite players both live and die for the continuing life of others" (1986, 24). Clearly Carse's pamphlet privileges the infinite player and the infinite game, but he acknowledges that the infinite view is made up of many finite games, and that existence demands a kind of "self-veiling" in which we temporarily forget the finite nature of particular games. His point is that we "drop the veil and openly acknowledge, if only to ourselves, that we have freely chosen to face the world through a mask" (13); that is, he recommends that we accept that we have freely chosen to play the finite game, and that we acknowledge the often (but not always) limited significance of those games. In turn, this freely chosen participation in the game makes the game enjoyable and prevents it from becoming an agonizing, life-or-death test that only intensifies our fear of living. Winnicott also addresses the problematic nature of the finite game, finding that many psychological problems stem from an inability to play. Often his patients were so overwhelmed by anxiety, so in need of security, that they could not creatively enjoy the transitional object or facilitating environment. Carse's terminology shows that one way of conceiving of the goal of psychoanalysis is to change the patient's focus from the finite game (which is terrifying) to the infinite game (which is freeing).

I begin my use of Carse's terminology by looking at writing itself as a kind of game. Like the transitional object, the written text does not completely belong to either the author or society. The text

provides a space for the author to play with personal ideas within a communicative framework established by a greater authority, a framework that enables the sharing of experiences between individuals. Winnicott explains that the transitional object occupies an intermediate space that is essential for the individual in that it provides what we might conceive of as a flexible “connecting zone” that negotiates the demands of subjective and objective worlds:

The third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated. (1971, 2, emphasis in original)

Winnicott goes on to argue that this intermediate area is the place of shared illusions, inherent in art and religion, through which human beings naturally group together. Here Winnicott provides a useful insight into the pleasure of reading and the feeling we receive when we read a “kindred spirit,” or what Emerson described in “Self-Reliance” as the excitement of reading an idea (illusion) that we ourselves have experienced but have not been able to properly formulate or understand.

In addition, in any quick survey of writers on the pleasures and pains of writing, we see feelings and intuitions similar to those described by Winnicott and Gadamer. In *Love's Work* (1995b), Gillian Rose describes writing as “that mix of discipline and miracle, which leaves you in control, even when what appears on the page has emerged from regions beyond your control” (59), which reiterates the *intermediary* aspect of writing: we have some control over how we play, but the rules of the game also control us. Other authors emphasize the role of negotiation necessary for mental health, as when Audre Lorde explains that “this was the first reason for my own writing, my need to say things I couldn’t say otherwise when I couldn’t find other poems to serve” (1984, 82). Lorde relieves the frustration of not seeing representations of herself in the culture by creating those images in works of poetry and memoir, thereby narrowing the gap between what Winnicott calls inner and outer experience. And, as a final example, Allon White illustrates Gadamer’s description of being caught up in a game that frees him from some of the strains of existence:



But weaving backwards and forwards between childhood memory and recollections of the unfinished fiction, under the duress of my present illness with its closeness of death, I unearth, here and there, bits of understanding and connectedness. It gives me a luxurious sense of indulgent self-archaeology. It also helps to keep me alive, like refusing to die because I haven't heard the end of the story. My Scheherazade. (1993, 35)

White's weaving metaphor gracefully illustrates the connective and transitional aspect of writing, as he ties together past and present as well as his individual memories and social reality. Understandably, the Scheherazade image appears frequently in terminal illness memoirs and shows how writing connects authors to something greater than themselves. It is important to remember, however, that Scheherazade is no ordinary storyteller. Her stories have no end, and as a result she plays a kind of infinite game. Her story emphasizes that although literary games are traditionally finite games, literature does provide an infinite paradigm. Art and transitional objects can function within both finite and infinite paradigms, but my argument here is that the paradigm within the text radically affects the kind of pleasures provided by the text.

Art's ability to work within both finite and infinite games has, historically, presented problems within debates on art's value and social function. A particularly relevant example for my topic is Arlene Croce's discussion of "victim art" in her 1994 *New Yorker* article "Discussing the Undiscussable."<sup>4</sup> Croce laments what she feels as her exclusion from choreographer Bill T. Jones's work *Still/Here* because of his inclusion of the ill and dying in the production of this piece. Ross Chambers explains that in creating this work, Jones

organized what he called Survival Workshops across the United States, with people already sick or dying from a range of fatal diseases. He coached these people through a series of exercises in which they were asked to translate into gesture and movement the course of their lives, their image of the moment of their own future death. . . . But Jones and his company then retranslated these gestures to make movements, "phrasing" them into the more fluid movements and gestures of choreography. (2004, xiv)

Croce's complaint about *Still/Here* is that Jones has "crossed the line between theatre and reality," and by crossing this line he has excluded

her, as a critic, from the theatre game: "My approach has been cut off. By working dying people into his act, Jones is putting himself beyond the reach of criticism" (1994, 54). Croce presents, in a somewhat muddled fashion, T. S. Eliot's familiar argument that art should be impersonal, and by incorporating even distantly personal elements into the choreography Jones has violated this aesthetic rule. In her view, Jones is producing not art but therapy or community activism.

The disinterested point of view, however, is not the most provocative element in the article. By holding the survivor workshops, Jones was clearly interested in challenging the traditional parameters of dance and the function of art, and therefore he would not disagree with elements of Croce's reading. What is striking about Croce's article is that, behind the screen of aesthetic objectivity, she conveys how deeply offended she is (and her heightened language suggests that this offense is personal) by Jones's alteration of these rules. Croce, throughout her years in the powerful position as dance critic for *The New Yorker*, has established standards for determining what is good and bad, and clearly if others do not follow those rules (*Still/Here* sold out the Brooklyn Academy and was an undeniable success) then she loses power and, in fact, her job of deciding who wins and who gets the title. Croce sees the critic's role as being of the utmost importance: "Criticism had always been an issue in postmodern dance. I'm not sure that criticism wasn't *the* issue" (1994, 58, emphasis in original); "I do not remember a time when the critic has seemed more expendable than now" (60). One can imagine that in the long view held by Jones's workshop participants, the critic is indeed unimportant, and Croce's argument for the value of the finite game provides few reasons to change that opinion.

Within her victim art article, Croce lets slip a partial awareness of when the rules of the dance game changed and when she was left behind: "The sixties, it turned out, had been not the golden dawn but the twilight of American modern dance, and suddenly there was Pina Bausch and Butoh. And AIDS" (1994, 58). Surprisingly, Croce does not pick up the AIDS reference in the following paragraph. Placed in a two-word sentence fragment, "AIDS" is dropped like a bomb and then completely ignored, just as Croce chooses to ignore AIDS when it comes to twentieth-century American dance. But the acronym explains, at least for this reader, the dramatic changes in American dance that seem to baffle Croce. One can easily imagine the devastating effect of AIDS on the dance community and the inability of choreographers to exclude that experience from their understanding of the body and the role of movement. In short, the trauma of AIDS and the pervasive

experience of death inevitably changed dance, for artists such as Bill T. Jones, to a game with an infinite context.

If we look closely at *Still/Here*, its infinite qualities become even more apparent.<sup>5</sup> The work is, to a certain extent, about Jones's partner in life and dance, Arnie Zane, who is *still here* in ways that can only be understood from an "un-finite" point of view. But more than that, Chambers explains how the work's goal is to go beyond the comfortable conventions of form and structure to the personal experience of trauma:

In so doing, he asked his audience (signaled them) to attend to a signified that "lay beyond" the threshold of the choreographed gestures, movements, groupings and images, the phrasings of dance . . . something was being given to us as beyond the reach, precisely, of more conventional representations, as if the dancing was an extremely complex equivalent of one of those intrusive and untimely phone calls in the night that remind us of the reasons we have to be anxious but do not designate them. (2004, xxviii)

Chambers captures that opaque element within the work (one might call it an allusion to the Lacanian real) that evokes something beyond signification. Carse writes, "In infinite play one chooses to be mortal inasmuch as one always plays dramatically, that is, toward the open, toward the horizon, toward surprise, where nothing can be scripted. It is a kind of play that requires complete vulnerability" (1986, 25). This unscripted vulnerability is precisely what Chambers describes in the passage just cited, and it is also what angers Croce so much in "Discussing the Undiscussable."

So we see that admirers of Jones's work such as Chambers do not read it that differently from detractors such as Croce. They simply disagree on the value of Jones's use of an infinite point of view. For Croce, the finite game has clear rules, and following these rules draws out the best elements from the artist. By enforcing the rules, the critic plays an important function in producing worthwhile cultural products. In the infinite game, the rules change in order to avoid designating a clear winner. In Croce's view, if you make up the rules as you go along, then they cannot have much value. But we see that for Chambers this challenge to the rules is precisely what gives the work relevance and what relieves us from what he calls the "cultural dalmane" of the mass media. Croce wants the rules of dance to remain the same,

and Jones is a problem to her because he will not leave things alone; he plays by his own rules.

Looking at the specific content of *Still/Here*, we see how that work's proximity to death nullifies its value for Croce. Death challenges the necessity of playing in itself and exposes the conventional and therefore limited meaning of the symbolic order: the world of titles and prizes. As Carse explains:

Properly speaking, life and death as such are rarely the stakes of a finite game. What one wins is a title; and when the loser of a finite game is declared dead to further play, it is equivalent to declaring that person utterly without title—a person to whom no attention whatsoever need be given. Death, in finite play, is the triumph of the past over the future, a condition in which no surprise is possible.” (1986, 20–21).

The presence of death exposes the insignificance of the title, and it is precisely the role of conveying titles (deciding “to whom no attention whatsoever need be given”) that Croce embodies. Death puts an end to finite play because, within this vocabulary, “death” means the literal end. Within the vocabulary of the infinite game (in works such as *Still/Here*), “death” takes on a different meaning, signifying an unknowable space that marks the end of one phase and the beginning of another. For Croce, AIDS makes serious art meaningless, while for Jones, AIDS forces him to conceive of art and dance in new ways: to create new meanings.

### Freud, “Death,” and the Death Drive

I analyze Sigmund Freud’s discussion of death in several different texts to support what I have introduced here as two different meanings of “death” that connect to two different forms of aesthetic pleasure. Freud addresses the psychological effects of death in such texts as *The Ego and the Id* (1960) and *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1959); in addition, the essays “The Disillusionment of the War” and “Our Attitude towards Death” (1915) (both in *Character and Culture*, 1963) address broader social responses to death. Generally, Freud represents death as another form of loss and links the fear of death to the fear of castration. He contends that we have metaphors that enable us to comprehend castration: “Castration can be pictured on the basis

of the daily experience of the feces being separated from the body or on the basis of losing the mother's breast at weaning" (1959, 58). This metaphorical linking ties "castration" to the primal losses that humans are continually attempting to replace in their relations with other objects and people. If the loss of feces or the breast enables us to "picture" castration, then there must be a similarity to the forms of loss, even if they vary in degree.

However, in making the connection between castration and death, Freud's phrasing introduces an interesting problem:

Nothing resembling death can ever have been experienced; or if it has, as in fainting, it has left no observable traces behind. I am therefore inclined to adhere to the view that the fear of death should be regarded as analogous to the fear of castration, and that the situation to which the ego is reacting is one of being abandoned by the protecting super-ego—the powers of destiny—so that it has no longer any safeguard against all the dangers that surround it. (1959, 58)

It seems that the fact that castration can be "pictured" while death cannot implies a difference and suggests that death and castration are not completely analogous. This does not necessarily mean that Freud's conclusion—that both death and castration suggest an abandonment by the superego—is false. The idea of death may evoke a sense of loss that one continually attempts to avoid or paper over. I believe the confusion lies in the two possible ways of interpreting the term *death*. On the one hand, death is an abstract concept that designates that unknown space beyond life (what I later explore as the Lacanian real). On the other, it is a specific experience that marks the end of life (an element of the symbolic). In the passage just cited, Freud moves from the idea of death that is unknowable to the death that can be experienced metaphorically. The first definition is unlike castration in that there is nothing after it—no diminished postdeath—it lies outside of time and space and is therefore similar to the infinite game. The second meaning is similar to castration in that it marks the end of life—a clearly finite life. To rephrase, I believe that a distinction needs to be made between a fear of death (the unknown) and a fear of dying (lacking life), and that what Freud actually addresses with the analogy of castration is a fear of dying. "Dying" suggests an abandonment by a protective force, while "death" suggests a completely different realm, a realm that evokes an odd form of pleasure, perhaps best explained

by Freud himself as what lies beyond the pleasure principle: that which we cannot name but which continuously attracts us. This odd or unexpected pleasure frequently emerges in terminal illness memoirs and is, I contend, what gives them their intensity. But to understand how this pleasure brings both satisfaction and pain we must look closely at how Freud describes it in his later work.

Freud presented his much-debated and often-misunderstood concept of the death drive (or death instinct) in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961). This text developed out of his observation that many human actions could not be explained by adherence to either the pleasure principle or the reality principle. He noticed that people consistently repeated unsatisfying behaviors, and this repetition provided a clue as to how and why people make their own lives difficult.

Freud's interest in repetition led to his description of "Fort-Da," the game played by his grandson that has become the Ur-game for all psychoanalytic theorizing of play. "Fort-Da" is primarily thought of as the game in which the child throws a reel attached to a string over the side of the cot, yelling "fort" ("gone"), which he then retrieves by pulling the string and stating "da" ("there"). Freud points out, however, that this was an infrequent form of the game, and that "the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending" (1961, 9–10). Freud connects the child's playing of the game to the absence of the mother and sees the game as the great "cultural achievement" of instinctual renunciation, "which [the child] had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach" (9). Freud's observation of this repetition of an apparently unpleasurable action (throwing away the object) leads him to a temporary dead end, however, because—as he explains—the repetition turns into pleasure through mastery, and therefore the actions still follow the pleasure principle.

In *Darwin's Worms* (2000), Adam Phillips provides further insight into the significance of "Fort-Da," and, as a result, he provides a path out of Freud's logical dead end. Phillips explains that in playing this game, "it is not as though the child is merely making a choice to manage his suffering, but rather that the mother's absence is an opportunity for the child to find another pleasure. And not only the ascetic pleasure of instinctual renunciation, but the pleasure of symbolization itself; the delight of making up the game" (121).<sup>6</sup> The creating and playing of the game engage the child in life and help him manage the universal anxiety that comes from being a human,

without a clearly defined purpose or goal. The development of that new engagement *requires* the loss of an earlier pleasure, and Phillips shows how destruction and creation are, as a result, intertwined: two parts of the same drive moving life forward.<sup>7</sup>

This understanding of “Fort-Da” can now be placed back into Freud’s conception of the death drive, which he hypothesizes as the instinct to return to inorganic matter. Freud suggests that we are driven by competing goals: the desire to return to stasis and complete rest, and the desire to increase living connections and pleasures, avoiding death at all costs. These competing goals create a constant tension for the subject:

The tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavoured to cancel itself out. In this way the first instinct came into being: the instinct to return to the inanimate state. . . . For a long time, perhaps, living substance was thus being constantly created afresh and easily dying, till decisive external influences altered in such a way as to oblige the still surviving substance to diverge ever more widely from its original course of life and to make ever more complicated *detours* before reaching its aim of death. These circuitous paths to death, faithfully kept to by conservative instincts, would thus present us today with the picture of the phenomena of life. (1961, 32–33, emphasis in original)

In this context, the game played by the child becomes one of the detours that distracts the child from loss and provides life with pleasure. We saw in White’s description of writing as a Scheherazade experience a quite literal example of writing and memoir serving as a detour from death. What is particularly relevant here, however, is the different detours from which the subject may choose. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud makes the famous statement that “the organism wishes to die in its own fashion,” but what exactly determines which fashion is one’s own? One could argue that the “fashion” of one’s life is determined in dynamic relation with the narratives presented and sanctioned by society. And we see in the terminal illness narratives I analyze (as well as in the culture at large) that these narratives often differ in their relation to what I am calling a finite or an infinite point of view.

Two *Sight and Sound* articles from June 1993 help exemplify how finite or infinite ideologies determine narrative approaches, and

how those narrative approaches in turn manifest themselves in the cultural work on AIDS from the 1990s. First, Simon Watney's (1993) "The French Connection" attacks *Savage Nights* director Cyril Collard and French homosexuals in general for their lack of community activism and politicization in the face of the epidemic. Paul Julian Smith (1993) expands on Watney's observations in "Blue and the Outer Limits," in which he sets up a dichotomy between Continental and Anglo-American approaches to AIDS:

While the Anglo-American approach to AIDS has been largely political (protesting against the injustice and ignorance of government policies), the French and southern European response has often been metaphysical (seeking release from pain in transcendence, in a universal love without limits). (Smith 1993, 18)

Smith's example describes in different terms what I have been calling the finite and infinite perspectives and has the added benefit of showing how we cannot automatically privilege the infinite perspective, as Carse tends to do. The political action attributed to Anglo-American society displays a need for factual understanding; it demands recognition by established power structures, and it foresees a cure for AIDS as the attainable and only meaningful prize. Perhaps best exemplified by the writings of Larry Kramer and Paul Monette, these "finite" writers seek to create support and political change through their writing in order to win a defined battle.

The French metaphysical response (with which Smith groups Derek Jarman's [1994a] *Blue*), perhaps best represented by Collard and Hervé Guibert, looks beyond practical solutions, attempting to fill the lack created by AIDS and the expectation of death by exploring new permutations of desire or being. At the end of *Savage Nights*, Collard writes: "The world isn't just something set down out there, beyond me; I belong to it, it's mine. I will probably die of AIDS, but this isn't my life any more; I am in life" (1993, 222). He suggests that he feels a connection to existence that will continue even after his death. Collard's movement outside of his life into the greater world (exemplified by the ocean, which is the backdrop for this scene) exhibits his embrace of the infinite, the transcendent, and the dissolution of the isolated "I."

Similarly, Monette's (1988, 1992) autobiographical work derives much of its power from his commitment to the present and his refusal of metaphysical comforts.<sup>8</sup> I am more interested, however, in the "Con-



tinental" approach, because I believe that the infinite view—a view focused on openness, surprise, and incompleteness—reflects broader cultural developments, developments that are frequently called "post-modern." Moreover, I will argue in what follows that the memoir—that messy, unseemly, barely canonical genre—frequently operates according to rules that reflect the openness and improvisation of the infinite view. The rise of the memoir as a genre is, I suggest, connected to the increasing failure of traditional grand narratives to convince us that the finite game has meaning.<sup>9</sup> Forced by terminal illness to question the detours that have filled their lives, these authors must reconstruct their identities on an entirely new foundation, and the writing of the memoir is an integral step in negotiating between the past and present, the inner and the outer, to determine what is meaningful in this new context.

### Lacan between Two Deaths

I finish laying my theoretical groundwork by translating some of the terms and issues I have discussed into Lacanian terminology, or "Lacanesque," as Žižek has phrased it. The productivity of the Lacanian framework for this project becomes clear when we see how easily the discussion of finite and infinite games fits with Lacan's vocabulary. Lacan's division of experience into the three categories of symbolic, imaginary, and real is strikingly evident in Carse's discussion of games as well as Croce's views of art and dance. The finite view derives its power from what Lacan calls the symbolic order, that is, the social and signifying order governing culture. This is the world of prizes and titles. For example, you may be the fastest swimmer in the world, but unless the organization that governs competitive swimming gives you that title, you will not enter the record books and attain a lasting place in the world order.

In the early part of his career, Lacan emphasized the relationship between the imaginary and the symbolic orders. He presents the imaginary as the accumulation of images leading us to believe in a coherent, unified self. The psychoanalytic cure was originally imagined as the integration of imaginary elements into the symbolic order through the paternal metaphor, or law of the father. In his later work, however, Lacan emphasized "the real," that which predates or resists symbolization, and clearly the real is what the infinite player attempts to integrate into the game. As seen in Croce's comments, the finite player clings to the symbolic as all that is knowable or meaningful,

which is why the rules cannot change. In contrast, the infinite player acknowledges the real and this is reflected in his or her willingness to alter the game. By changing the rules, the infinite player is looking for something more, driven by what Lacan will call interchangeably *jouissance*, *objet a*, or *das Ding*.

It is this constant striving for more that interests Lacan and leads him to reformulate Freud's death drive not as a desire for stasis but as the drive that will not let things be. Indeed, as Lacan presents it, the death drive is precisely that which is unkillable, that which insists that the game continue endlessly. This is why, for Lacan, death and life drives are really the same drive: "The distinction between the life drive and death drive is true inasmuch as it manifests two aspects of the drive" (1978, 257).

For my purposes here, Lacan's most useful application of the death drive appears in Seminar VII: *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1992), in which he presents the concept of the "second death," "the one that you can still set your sights on once death has occurred" (294).<sup>10</sup> For Lacan, the death drive leads the subject past physical death to the realm between physical and "absolute" death. Lacan develops the concept of the second death through an analysis of Sophocles' play *Antigone*, focusing on what he calls the unusual beauty emanating from the heroine because of her position outside of society but not yet with the gods. This limbo position is referred to frequently by the terminally ill and is evoked in several memoir titles such as Monette's (1992) *Borrowed Time* and Brodkey's (1996) *This Wild Darkness*. But in focusing on the beauty possessed by Antigone in this realm, Lacan provides insight into my previously stated goal of determining how these texts acquire their intensity and what creates the particular "fullness of being" that they emanate.

In a way, the character of Antigone is a confusing vehicle for the concept of the second death. One might reasonably think that the first death is a symbolic death, what Antigone experiences because of her incestuous relationship to her father and her banishment from society. The second death would then be the physical death that follows, and the space between two deaths would be the action of the play. This obvious reading is, however, not what Lacan means. As stated earlier, the second death occurs *after* the physical death, and therefore it reflects a psychological state that is in fact detached from the symbolic order but that adopts what Lacan refers to as the Position of Last Judgment, the death that comes when all existence ends, and meaning is fixed absolutely. Slavoj Žižek explains that Lacan's concept

implies a distinction between the two deaths: natural death, which is a part of the natural cycle of generation and corruption, of nature's continual transformation, and absolute death—the destruction, the eradication, of the cycle itself, which then liberates nature from its own laws and opens the way for the creation of new forms of life *ex nihilo*. (1989, 134)

Thus the zone of the second death resembles that of the infinite player, in that both assume that physical death is not the end. Furthermore, Lacan shows how the meaning of the infinite game also depends on this concept of the second death, of a moment when change will stop and retroactively fix meaning. Without the second death, infinite play also becomes meaningless.

Antigone is between the two deaths, in that she has lost interest in world of "goods" represented by Creon, but she envisions herself reuniting with her family's dead after her own physical demise. Her desire for death and reconnection with her family competes with more ordinary finite desires, but in the end, Antigone's infinite view wins out, and her beauty comes precisely from her connection to death, from her willingness to repudiate the symbolic order and "man's law." Thus according to Lacan, beauty comes from the ability of aesthetic form to provide a temporary proximity to death:

That is why I have tried to have you recognize it in our recent meetings in an aesthetic form, namely, that of the beautiful—it being precisely the function of the beautiful to reveal to us the site of man's relationship to his own death, and to reveal it to us only in a blinding flash. (1992, 295)

The proximity is only possible, however, when the goods of the finite game have been given up, or when they are understood as occupying a position with limited significance. Therefore, Antigone's physical death is not absolutely necessary for her beauty, nor is suicide the supreme ethical act, as some of Žižek's writings seem to convey. Antigone's beauty comes from her psychological awareness of her own mortality and her detachment from the finite games of the social world, an awareness and a detachment that she derives from the tragic events of her family. The play, like the terminal illness memoir, provides access to and protection from the absolute destruction of the relentless drive through its use of language. The language does not function

monumentally to validate the symbolic order but instead alludes to a yearning that constantly destroys and recreates (Antigone's loss of status *enables* her to bury her brother), recognizing that no final end or final satisfaction exists.<sup>11</sup>

### Lacan's Masterplot

One can imagine that for a critic such as Arlene Croce the proximity to death provided by a play such as *Antigone* bears no resemblance to the way death is included in Jones's work *Still/Here*. For Croce, the play's status as canonical drama and fiction protects it from the "bad taste" that would be proclaimed if a real incestuous family went on the road telling its story.<sup>12</sup> My point here is that Croce's taste does not coincide with a large number of current readers and viewers. The evidence suggests that audiences today can tolerate—and may even demand—a closer proximity to the traumatic real than Croce herself can endure. Of course, even with these new rules the real continues to be shielded by the protective cover of fantasy (no one claims that reality television is "real"), but one cannot help but think that a cultural shift has occurred to create the current public fascination with the real lives of other people.

In his influential essay "Freud's Masterplot," included in *Reading for the Plot* (1984), Peter Brooks argues, "It is rather the superimposition of the model of the functioning of the psychic apparatus on the functioning of the text that offers the possibility of psychoanalytic criticism" (112). Brooks's psychoanalytic criticism imposes the Freudian model of the psychic apparatus onto the nineteenth-century novel to explain how the novel engages the reader and provides pleasure. In fact, Brooks's method creates fascinating readings of novels by Dickens, Flaubert, and Conrad. But does the success of this method then imply that if a style or genre *no longer* gives pleasure, a particular psychic model has atrophied or been replaced? Does Croce's brain bind energy differently from someone born in the Internet age? Perhaps. But as Susan Winnett's response to "Freud's Masterplot" reveals, many different models, both within psychoanalysis and without, can produce insights into how and why we enjoy texts.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, my goal here is to show precisely how a different model provides different pleasures.

Therefore, in the rest of *Final Acts* I explore what the Lacanian model of psychic functioning, when superimposed on the late twentieth-century memoir, might tell us about the social function of these texts. How do they withhold or provide pleasure? I see the Lacanian model