The Treacherous Imagination

Robert McGill

Published by The Ohio State University Press

McGill, Robert.
The Treacherous Imagination: Intimacy, Ethics, and Autobiographical Fiction.
The Ohio State University Press, 2013.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/27563.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27563
When authors’ intimates identify themselves with characters in fiction, some may be expressing their own form of biographical desire: a wish to be the object of an artist’s attention, to serve as a muse, to be immortalized, to be given a flattering portrait. For instance, when Bharati Mukherjee’s father encountered his fictional double in her novel *The Tiger’s Daughter*, he is said to have told her: “Oh, I like what you’ve done with me” (qtd. in Busby 21). After all, for intimates to find themselves in fiction proves that the author has at least considered them interesting enough to represent. As a character in Philip Roth’s novel *The Counterlife* observes: “If you’re written about, if you’re turned into a character in a book, unless it is really crushingly derogatory, the very fact of being focused on like that is somehow curiously romanticizing” (249). For some intimates, autobiographical fiction can even have the ludic function it often has for authors and its wider readership. They can indulge in guessing which of the author’s acquaintances are the models for characters, while taking pleasure in resemblances as well as transforma-

---

**Fiction’s Betrayals, Intimacy’s Trials**

We might envy museum pieces that can be pasted together or disfigured and feel no panic of indignity.

—Robert Lowell, “Home” 824–25

A book is a great cemetery where the names have been effaced from most of the tombs and are no longer legible.

—Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* 6: 212
tions; they can playfully speculate about the author’s intentions and psychology. They can also enjoy their own privileged hermeneutic position, given that unlike most readers, they may possess inside information about the author’s relationships, experiences, motives, and so on. For many intimates, though, the same referential indeterminacy that allows a fiction’s other readers to engage in hermeneutic play is a source of anxiety, anger, and humiliation.

Tellingly, a favorite trope of writers to describe autobiographical fiction’s offensiveness is adultery. Like “That Was Then,” the short story by Hanif Kureishi discussed in the introduction, metafictions that dramatize the writing of transgressively personal fiction also often depict sexual infidelities, as though to draw attention to the fact that the two activities share the same triangular structure, as well as similar impetuses, rewards, and risks. To be sure, family members can feel betrayed by autobiographical fiction as much as authors’ lovers do, but if adultery in particular has been a popular metaphor for such fiction’s crimes, it is not least because monogamous sexual relations are seen as paradigmatic of intimacy. Lovers and life partners choose each other as family members do not, and often they agree to choose each other exclusively. As a result there is all the greater potential for betrayal when one’s significant other goes on to choose intimacy with someone else, as authors do when they make their confessions to readers. Even worse for authors’ loved ones, it can seem that they are being dragged into the public spotlight, too. Autobiographical fiction feels like something done apart from them and, at the same time, something done to them without their consent. For that reason, it is not surprising that autobiographical fiction has also been compared to rape. For example, in Kureishi’s novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, one character asks his friend, an actor, not to base a character on him, saying: “Now promise you won’t enter me by the back door and portray me in your play” (185). Although the metaphor seems overblown, it draws attention to the fact that autobiographical fiction has an erotic aspect in its relation to intimacy, desire, and control over personal boundaries.

The importance of such boundaries is especially evident in A. S. Byatt’s 1967 novel *The Game*. The story of two sisters, Cassandra and Julia Corbett, who in childhood create stories together about a magical land of their invention, *The Game* would have readers believe that when the adult Julia writes a novel about a character based on Cassandra, her sister’s instinctive reaction is to commit suicide.¹ Through this scenario, *The

¹ The reaction may seem implausible, but Byatt has claimed that she refusal to base
Game presents a metafictional case study offering insights not only about how intimate relationships are affected by fiction but also about how they catalyze its writing in the first place. The novel suggests that to understand people’s feelings of injury, one must appreciate how autobiographical fiction challenges assumptions and expectations bound up with intimacy. In the face of these expectations, authors can seem like detached observers of intimate relations rather than merely participants in them, people who privilege autonomy above all. But while Byatt’s novel pays attention to the kind of betrayal that fiction represents for family members, it also depicts the varieties of betrayal that family loyalty can require. The central conflict between Cassandra and Julia in The Game emerges from their attempts to accept the social constitution of the self even while establishing sovereignty over their lives. If in previous chapters I have argued that authors’ desire to write autobiographical fiction has been informed by changes in literary culture, Byatt’s novel suggests that such desire also emerges as a psychical response to intimate relationships and that to understand why people find such fiction injurious, one must look to the family as well as the desires and frustrations found in childhood. The Game makes the case that fantasy’s impositions are inevitable with regard to intimate relationships and that fiction may serve as an attempt to bridge a preexisting interpersonal chasm between authors and their loved ones.

While the example of Julia’s fatal novel implies that such attempts can be as problematic as the situations they seek to remediate, the self-reflexivity about fiction and intimacy found in The Game itself raises another possibility for the ethics of fiction: namely, that metafiction is a mode of writing ethically, one that diagnoses the problems of literature rather than perpetuating them. However, in this chapter I argue that there is nothing intrinsically ethical about metafiction and that, like autobiographical fiction, it is a symptom of confessional culture, not merely an intervention in it. As such, it is no less liable than other fiction to be biased in its creation of the world and to court biographical readings or give offense. Metafictions are wont to be self-scrutinizing, it is true, and some admit to their own potential ethical culpability, but such admissions risk standing as further acts of appropriation, stealing intimates’ very possibility of protest out from under them.

characters on living people because she knows of “at least one suicide and one attempted suicide caused by people having been put into novels” (qtd. in Shriver). Moreover, the French novelist Serge Doubrovsky was accused of bearing responsibility for his wife’s death after what one critic has called his “brutal” revelations about her in his autofiction Le Livre brisé (E. Jones 4).
This chapter also considers the arguments of writers who assert that the intimacy some people seek to protect is not something valuable in the first place. What is at first glance a debate about the ethics of fiction is also a debate about the ethics of privacy, intimacy, and decorum. Authors such as Kureishi have claimed for their fiction the role of challenging these values, which are criticized for suppressing fantasy life, trapping people in static identities, and insisting on silence. However, authors profit from the very culture of reticence they sometimes vociferously reject, and their framing of interpersonal infidelities as acts of social protest could be considered equivalent to adulterers calling their affairs ethical acts of rebellion against the oppressiveness of marriage. Accordingly, the pleasures as well as the politics of betrayal must be kept in mind when considering authors’ claims to rebel status.

MORTIFICATION AND UNCANNY DOUBLES

To describe the kind of offense that autobiographical fiction gives, those whose imaginations do not run toward metaphors of adultery often turn to deathliness, even homicide. The ability of a visual representation to effect the figurative death of its object has been observed frequently, from Oscar Wilde’s remark that there is “something fatal about a portrait” (112) to Roland Barthes’s discussion in Camera Lucida of photography’s sepulchral character. As we saw in the previous chapter with regard to Elizabeth Smart and her novel By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept, narrative representations of people can likewise freeze them in place, reducing them to a particular self recorded at a particular moment and from a particular vantage point. Indeed, A. S. Byatt has observed that people who are fictionalized may be “haunted thereafter by an almost certainly unwanted doppelganger, a public image or simulacrum whose sayings, feelings, and even life history, will be confounded with their own” (Portraits 40–41). As these representations circulate, they can shape opinions about their subject and threaten to overwhelm or efface that person.

Portraits in fiction might seem innocuous enough, given that they are not necessarily true. However, fiction’s lack of commitment to referentiality can be especially injurious, not only because people may feel inaccurately represented but also because the fictional portrait circulates with a greater degree of semantic autonomy. One cannot simply point to it and say “That is not me,” because a representation in fiction almost never strictly claims to depict a real person accurately in the first place. Even
when fictional characters have the names, traits, and life stories of real people, fiction retains a dramatic license. Accordingly, a fictional alter ego is not so much a copy of life but its own independent creature, akin to those uncanny doubles of oneself encountered in dreams, whom Sigmund Freud views as at once symbols of the self’s immortality and usurpers of the self, harbingers of death (Art 211). By itself, the trope of homicide inadequately conveys the sense of intimate violation that can attend these doubles, and it is common to find autobiographical fiction described using metaphors of vampirism and cannibalism as well. These metaphors suggest that if authors steal people’s stories, in some sense they steal the people themselves too, consuming them, so that what has been taken is digested and cannot be given back. What is more, tropes of vampirism and cannibalism touch on the uncanny transformation that authors of offensive autobiographical fiction can seem to undergo in the eyes of their intimates, changing into someone malevolent, parasitic, even monstrous. The shock of autobiographical fiction’s transformations is a twinned one for intimates, then: at their own doubling, and at the author’s.

Fiction’s unique power to mortify is further coextensive with its ambiguous referentiality in the sense that often people who take offense at it cannot be sure exactly to what degree they are an object of representation in the first place. Alter egos in fiction frequently have significant differences from their putative originals, and in cases where the differences are significant, those who think they are the models may be confused about whether the authors have attempted to be mimetic and failed, chosen to fabricate details, or perhaps revealed something about their models that previously the models had not seen in themselves. Authors’ motives can also be unclear: have they set out to wound or merely been reckless? Either way, the fictional doppelgänger is threateningly alive not only on the page and in public discourse but also in the imaginative life of the author, who has had some kind of intense relationship with it that challenges the exclusivity of the author’s real-life relations. Accordingly, the authors of autobiographical fiction also haunt their work, their elusive intentionality heightening the uncanny nature of intimates’ encounters with their doubles. To read fiction and identify one’s doppelgänger therein is like walking into somebody else’s daydream and encountering a strange version of oneself. Indeed, fiction can be especially mortifying when it goes so far as to represent characters’ thoughts.

---

2. Dorrit Cohn points out that “narrative fiction is the only literary genre, as well as the only kind of narrative, in which the unspoken thoughts, feelings, perception of a person other than the speaker can be portrayed” (7).
representations of their mental lives, they find that the authors somehow managed to depict them with some accuracy, such an unexpected public rendering can leave them feeling exposed if not paralyzed by the invasion of their most private life.

Fiction can also mortify intimates by unilaterally divesting them of control over narratives of themselves. People inevitably understand themselves through stories—whether written, told orally, or only mentally scripted—and most want a say in which parts of these stories are narrated, disguised, glossed over, or omitted. However, we are not the sole manufacturers of our own narratives. Other people necessarily have a role in our self-definition, whether they are telling stories to us or others. As Nathan Zuckerman asserts in Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife*: “The treacherous imagination is everybody’s maker—we are all the invention of each other, everybody a conjuration conjuring up everyone else. We are all each other’s authors” (145). It is not surprising, then, when intimates complain both that fiction takes too many liberties with the truth of their lives and that it takes too few, that it is libelous in its fabrications and an invasion of privacy in its facts, simultaneously a caricaturing mask and a revealing exposé. Underlying both these affronts is an appropriation of narrative control. People do not want certain narratives told by others, and with regard to those stories that do circulate, people often work hard to make sure those narratives are understood in a particular way. For example, in Raymond Carver’s story “Intimacy,” an author’s ex-wife who is upset by his writing about their relationship explains that she is hurt less by any factual mistruths on his part than by his selection of events on which to focus. She implores him to write more about the good times in their relationship, telling him: “In my opinion you remember the wrong things. You remember the low, shameful things” (366). What upsets her is not just his attitude toward their shared past but, implicitly, his seizing of the prerogative to shape the public narrative of that past.

Intimates can also feel paralyzed in terms of the responses to fiction that are available to them. Protesting in public is a perilous option when most readers may not even be aware of the fiction’s referentiality in the first place and when they may admire it for other qualities, making them the author’s allies from the outset. Moreover, fiction’s license to be non-referential means that authors need not admit to its biographical qualities. For instance, the writer Javier Marías reports that one person’s anger with him about his novel *All Souls* arose not just because she thought he had created a cruel caricature of her, but also because he denied that the character was based on her in the first place. She rebuked him by saying:
“You’re not going to deny that the story is out to get me, are you? You’re not denying that to me, Javier Marías” (Dark 83). Beyond the perceived libel is the offensive implication in Marías’s denial that the woman cannot even recognize herself correctly. It is one thing for the book to cast her as a bad person; now she hears Marías implying that she is also a bad reader. The sense of lost agency attending her mortification by fiction only increases by her being told that her grievance is not legitimate. Such people feel doubly coopted, made involuntary objects of representation and then denied a right to judge those depictions. Their concomitant effacement and loss of agency explain why the language of death attends the discourse of autobiographical fiction’s effects.

Fiction can be equally mortifying in the way it threatens to circumscribe intimates’ sense of their future. As fictional characters circulate in public, they can lead readers to treat the characters’ putative originals as though they are more or less identifiable with their fictional doubles. Linda Grant observes:

It must be strange and infuriating to go through life having people think that because they have read your relation’s books, they know who you are and what you came from. To be told, in effect, that strangers know you better than you know yourself, especially if you don’t even agree that the “truth” of those fictions is true. (3)

Fictional representations can be especially imprisoning for intimates due to the static nature of representation. A person ineluctably changes over time, but such change may be frustrated if people continue to view the original of a fictional character through the prism of the fiction. Even if the character is an accurate, comprehensive representation, at best it depicts the original’s past self, not necessarily that person in the present day, yet the character persists as a foil against which one must struggle to distinguish oneself. As people react to their fictional doubles and try to untangle themselves from them, it becomes clear that fiction does not only reflect, reveal, or distort the world but also has a hand in shaping it.

FAMILY AND FANTASY IN A. S. BYATT’S THE GAME

Concerns about fiction’s impingements on the future are forefront in A. S. Byatt’s novel The Game, and they are bound up closely with the nature of familial relations. The Game insists that the writing of autobiographi-
cal fiction gains an impetus as well as ethical complications from challenges of intersubjectivity that begin in early family life. However, the novel does not merely substantiate the psychoanalytic tenet that childhood family relations are crucial determinants of one’s adult self. It also dramatizes how family relations in adulthood can continue to affect one’s identity. The novel’s protagonists, Cassandra and Julia Corbett, are sisters who since their early youth have told stories together. When they were children, their collaborations included a sustained imaginative exercise they called “the Game,” which involved the creation of an elaborate fantasy world like the Brontës’ Zamorna. As the sisters invented their fantasy world together, Cassandra thought of herself and Julia as “not quite separate” (230). Their eventual shift into adulthood is distinguished by the loss of this dyad and the taking up of individual creative work: Cassandra paints and keeps a journal, while Julia becomes a novelist. These activities partly symptomatize the siblings’ shared desire to gain autonomy and shake loose the other, but each sister is painfully aware that much of what she possesses in terms of autobiographical material is possessed by the other too, such that completely sole ownership of experiences seems impossible.

This awareness become crushing for Cassandra when Julia makes her the main character in a novel. Even before the book’s publication, Cassandra has been discomfited by Julia’s narratives about her in their quotidian interactions. Not least, Cassandra feels that Julia still thinks of her as she once was rather than as the person she has become. Cassandra has attempted to cope with her sister’s misprisions of her by letting her “store and catalogue the limp relics of what had been Cassandra” (222–23). In other words, Cassandra has tried to slip free of her sister’s misrepresentations by focusing on their dated quality and refusing to identify them with her present self. However, Julia’s novel not only fictionalizes Cassandra but also imagines a future for her alter ego. In doing so, the narrative seems to anticipate the self that Cassandra will become, and she worries she will be unable to escape the future scripted for her. In this regard, the novel’s offense does not lie simply in the possibility that others will take its version of Cassandra to be true. Rather, the novel seems to have foreclosed a certain range of possibilities for her, preventing her from viewing the years ahead as a narrative she might script for herself. Now that Julia has publicly envisioned her future, Cassandra feels destined either to fulfill that vision or to struggle against fulfilling it. Either way, the mortification of Julia’s fiction lies in the sense of fatalism it produces. In that light, Cassandra’s eventual suicide can be read as an attempt to reclaim her life: she
is rejecting a future in which she would feel herself always in a dialectical relation to the narrative prophesied for her.

Cassandra’s suicide also underscores a sense of fatalism attending family relations in general, especially when one’s family includes a novelist. In the family, not only is one subject to others’ narratives about oneself, but often one also has little or no choice with regard to clan membership. This fact distinguishes the family from other kinds of intimate relations. For instance, adults who become the friends or lovers of established authors would be foolish not to recognize the possibility that versions of them might turn up in those authors’ fiction. *The Game* suggests as much when Julia’s paramour Ivan says to her: “I’m laying myself open to appearing as the selfish lover in one of your books” (133–34). As a result, an option for those uncomfortable with the possibility of being fictionalized is not to pursue such a relationship in the first place. In contrast, parents and siblings can hardly be expected to recognize a future novelist in the child among them. Even if they did, it is not clear what they could do about it. Given the intransigent intimacies of conventional family life—with its shared living spaces, mutual care, and affective bonds—there may be little chance for members to protect themselves from the developing author’s gaze. At the same time, the fact that so many experiences are shared by family members means that if a particular member goes public with stories of familial life, that person’s right to do so unilaterally may be disputed, as it is in *The Game* when Julia publishes her novel. Because the experiences have been shared ones, others in the family are liable to view them as joint property and want a say in decisions about how those experiences are publicly narrated.

Such a situation reveals a broad tension in family life between intimacy and autonomy, as well as more a particular one between the predominantly individual work of autobiographical writing and the social constitution of identity. It is difficult for authors to avoid introducing representations of other people into autobiographical narratives, because any one life inevitably involves the lives of others in fundamental ways.\(^3\) This is true with regard to life out in the world but also with regard to one’s psyche, as Doris Lessing observes when she comments: “Writing about oneself, one is writing about others, since your problems, pains, pleasures, emotions—and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas—can’t be yours alone” (13). Even one’s language and worldview are informed by others’

\(^3\) Lynette Felber acknowledges this fact by referring to fiction that draws on personal experiences as “auto/biographical” (28). I take the slash to be implicit in my use of the same term.
perspectives. In *The Game*, after expressing strong opinions about her family’s Quaker faith, Julia realizes: “Much of this speech was something Cassandra had once said to her in anger. It was also her own considered opinion” (85). Given such intricate connections with others in the very formation of one’s attitudes and ideas, it is impossible to tell one’s own story without telling others’ in some way too. A corollary is that authors’ depictions of their characters involve a certain amount of self-portraiture. In *The Game*, Julia insists that the protagonist of her novel is a “composite creature” partly modeled on herself (14); similarly, although critics of *The Game* have been tempted to see in the Corbetts certain echoes of the relationship between Byatt and her sister, the writer Margaret Drabble, others have claimed that Julia and Cassandra represent two aspects of Byatt herself.4 But because an author’s identity is relationally constituted, such a self-imposition still installs others in fiction, however indirectly. In *The Game*, Julia’s novel is intensely autobiographical not despite but because of the degree to which the protagonist is based on Cassandra. The more thoroughly Julia represents her sister, the more she testifies to her own longstanding preoccupation with her.

One reading of *The Game* would see it as contrasting the idyllic imaginative play of childhood with the betrayals of adult individuation. However, the novel is at pains to demonstrate that even while playing the Game as girls, Julia and Cassandra are already suffering from a fundamental sense of lack, the kind which Jacques Lacan associates with an infant’s lost sense of oneness with its mother.5 From a Lacanian viewpoint, the Game represents the sisters’ attempt to recapture that lost unity by bonding with one another. However, as a substitute for the maternal dyad of infancy, the Game is destined to fail. Instead, the girls’ joint imaginings create conflicts between them: for example, it is revealed that the young Cassandra repeatedly “twisted Julia’s stories towards her own grim conclusions” and that the sisters privately wrote down individual versions of their collaborative narratives (47). The girls’ supplements to the Game suggest that playing it is pleasurable but frustrating. Julia and Cassandra

4. For instance, Richard Todd sees the Corbetts as “representing two split facets of the creative writer’s imagination” (10), and Drabble herself has remarked: “I thought that [Byatt] had made both characters herself in some strange way . . . which I think writers always do; they split their characteristics up and give little portions to their characters” (qtd. in Creighton, “Interview” 24).

5. Addressing sexuality in particular, Lacan writes that it is “established in the field of the subject by a way that is that of lack” (204).
are caught between two impossible poles; namely, complete unity with one another and complete independence. Growing older, each character becomes eager to distinguish her imaginative productions from the other’s, but each is also unable to accept the other’s assertions of individuality without feeling betrayed, as when Julia discovers that Cassandra has been writing private narratives derived from the Game. The ostensible dyad is further fractured when, at the age of sixteen, Julia wins a short-fiction competition with a story she has written based on a jointly conceived episode of the Game, one that Cassandra herself has tried privately to write down. Each sister appropriates shared narratives as a way to assert her identity, and each does so without consulting the other, as though to speak with her sister about the betrayal would be to betray the betrayal and to fall back into the very intimacy from which she is ambivalently trying to escape.

For Cassandra, an escape feels especially necessary to safeguard her personal boundaries against invasions by Julia. Because of the sisters’ strongly interrelational identities, Cassandra cannot help assimilating Julia’s view of her—with all its attendant fantasies and misrecognitions—into her own self-conception. Even before her sister’s novel is published, she feels surveilled, studied, and narrated by Julia. Consequently, she believes her survival depends on creating a secret self that Julia and others cannot perceive. To that end, Cassandra lives a solitary life and remains a virgin, the latter choice literally and metaphorically suggesting her desire not to be known. She retreats to a world of private fantasy where she can feel hidden and maintain the illusion of complete autonomy. In this regard, the avoidance of surveillance is crucial. She writes in her journal: “We could not live if we were made to see ourselves more than conjecturally as others see us” (230). In making this claim, she speaks more to her particular anxieties than to a universal human condition, but she is right to the extent that individual flourishing sometimes requires a certain degree of unselfconsciousness. In contrast, when she confronts her alter ego in Julia’s novel, she is doubly alienated from herself, left to ponder both the character’s relation to her and the degree to which the character reflects Julia’s perception of her.

However, The Game suggests that Cassandra has been complicit in her own wounding by Julia’s novel insofar as her pursuit of separateness has paradoxically made her more, not less, vulnerable to others. While interrelationality is something she treats primarily as dangerous, it is also necessary to the formation and maintenance of healthy ego boundaries;
indeed, Ferdinand David Schoeman points out that “autonomy uncompromised is sociopathic” (*Privacy* 66). One learns one’s contours, powers, and limitations through social interactions, and one’s fantasies are usefully checked by external counterpoints. Cassandra’s avoidance of interactions leaves her perilously in her own head, so that her sense of self becomes attenuated and flimsy. She has little idea of where her identity ends and the imagination—either her own or others’—begins, so she is ill-equipped to see Julia’s novel as anything but an imposition on her. At the same time, Cassandra’s self-isolation only fuels her sister’s interest in her. As Julia says after her sister commits suicide: “She locked me out until I was crazy to get in” (233). What is more, Cassandra’s self-protective withdrawal forces Julia to rely on her own imagination to engage with her sister. Accordingly, Cassandra’s insistence on complete privacy makes her an ironic, unwitting coauthor of Julia’s novel about her. *The Game* suggests that if writers recreate their intimates, intimates are all the time shaping the authors among them too, not least by positioning them as writers and telling stories in such a way as to catch their attention or evade it. The narrative insists that the kind of author one becomes is determined in part by the kind of author others direct one into being.

In this way, while *The Game* does not laud Julia for her use of fiction to engage with her sister, it also does not simplistically condemn her for the theft of Cassandra’s life story, for the invasion of her privacy, or for misrepresenting her. Rather, it characterizes injurious autobiographical fiction as the result of a family dynamic that has failed to produce for both sisters a balance of intimacy and individuation, a sense of personal freedom that also allows for the accommodation of the other’s needs and desires. For the Corbett sisters, the desire for autonomy is predicated upon a feeling of being too well-known by and too vulnerable to the other, but the gap that opens between the two characters as a consequence means that what one “knows” of the other comes to be constituted by fantasy rather than interaction. A paradox of Julia’s fiction, then, is that it seeks to recover a past sense of unity with Cassandra but ends up effecting an even greater mutual alienation. In that regard, *The Game* suggests that both the desperate writing and the wounded interpretation of autobiographical fiction can hyperbolize everyday anxieties about intimate relationships: for instance, that the other’s surveillance and narratives of us will not allow for independent self-discovery; that the other’s love is not exactly for us, but for some illusion of us; that the other’s interests are not ours, and that eventually when those interests come into conflict, our intimates are going to sell us out.
AUTHORIAL DETACHMENT AND IMPOSITIONS

In the previous chapter’s discussion of Philip Roth, I identified various reasons for writing autobiographical fiction, not least the opportunities it provides for gaining distance from oneself and exploring hypothetical situations. The case of Julia and Cassandra in *The Game* adds a number of interpersonal motivations to the list. For one, fiction can be a means of engaging with intimates in the way that Julia’s novel is an attempt—however misguided—to come to terms with her sister. Writing it helps her address the question that plagues her: “What was it like to be Cassandra?” (112). Because fiction allows authors to explore a character’s internal life, it can be a particularly powerful way of entering another’s shoes, facilitating a sympathetic apprehension of a close relation. For example, after the writer Margaret Laurence fictionalized her grandfather in her story collection *A Bird in the House*, she claimed: “I think I honestly kept on disliking him until I’d got all the way through these stories . . . and when I finished the last story I realized that I didn’t dislike him anymore, but that there were things about him I greatly admired” (qtd. in Busby 58). However, *The Game* depicts the writing of fiction as a hazardous way of engaging with otherness. Because its authors are freed from nonfictional standards of referentiality, they might begin to merge representations of others with self-portraits, outrageous fantasy with facts, leading to exercises in domination. Julia hopes to know her sister better by writing about her, telling herself, “Knowledge, after all, was love,” but the desire for knowledge of Cassandra might also be a desire to possess her (122). Indeed, Jean-Paul Sartre explicitly equates such a possessiveness with the creation of art, asserting:

> If I create a picture, a drama, a melody, it is in order that I may be at the origin of a concrete existence. This existence interests me only to the degree that the bond of creation which I establish between it and me gives to me a particular right of ownership of it. It is not enough that a certain picture which I have in mind should exist; it is necessary as well that it exist through me. (Being 736)

Julia’s novel threatens to be an appropriation of her sister precisely in this way: its possession of Cassandra is even more complete because it is fiction and need not admit to presenting a partial, subjective view of her.

Fiction can also manifest a detachment in authors that is at odds with expectations of intimacy. By using fiction to gain a more distanced per-
perspective on her sister, Julia is not unusual: Nadine Gordimer argues that being a writer involves an “excessive preoccupation and identification with the lives of others, and at the same time a monstrous detachment,” so that there is a “tension between standing apart and being fully involved” \textit{(Selected 4)}. For Julia, the intimacy of writing about Cassandra is revelatory, and the detachment is a relief in the face of the sisters’ otherwise suffocating interrelationality. For Cassandra, however, the intimacy of the fiction is stifling, and she takes the detachment it evinces to signal Julia’s lack of care for her. In Erica Jong’s novel \textit{Fear of Flying}, the writer Isadora Wing’s lover Adrian charges her with a similar crime, telling her: “You sit there the whole time keeping tabs, making mental notes, imagining people as books or case histories—I know that game. You tell yourself you’re collecting material. You tell yourself you’re studying human nature. Art above life at all times” (120). If such an activity really is a game as Adrian claims, then to intimates it seems to be a zero-sum one in which authors gain at their closest relations’ expense. When autobiographical fiction is published, intimates are both implicated in the fictional text and alienated from it, readers like any others, forced to witness only retrospectively the author’s imaginative treatment of them and subsequently estranged from the relationship themselves.

Meanwhile, authors’ focus on engaging with others by writing fiction can hinder them from dealing with their intimates directly in all their uniqueness. In \textit{The Game}, Julia finds herself viewing her life as a future fiction and “constructing a chain of near-sentimental thoughts about her father as though he was a character in a novel” (43). It might be said that Julia is simply performing a version of the everyday narrativization of experience in which all human beings engage. However, by bringing generic conventions of fiction to bear on her father, she risks failing to recognize his particularities. As she goes on to write her novel based on Cassandra’s life, Julia’s imagination similarly rules supreme; she does not have to collaborate or compromise with anyone. Effectively, she has become as closed off from social interaction as her sister, and thus she is equally subject to the pitfalls of scripting otherness rather than reckoning with it. Cassandra herself worries that imaginings in fiction “may be positively dangerous—not a lighting up of facts but a refusal to face facts” (68). To be sure, fiction may provide writers with a comfortingly mediated relationship to others who are difficult to confront in person. But the notion that such mediation can fully substitute for a more interpersonal engagement is problematic, if not unusual. As Edward Said observes, “It seems a com-
mon human failing to prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human” (93).

Moreover, if models for characters can become trapped by fiction, so too can authors become trapped by a fascination with their intimates. Although writing fiction can be an attempt to detach oneself from relationships and gain authority over them through narrativization, this process can involve rehearsing stories of those relationships over and over, not just in the writing of the fiction but in the promoting of it, such that authors risk becoming identified with the very experiences from which they were trying to gain critical distance. That much is clear from the case of Elizabeth Smart discussed in chapter 2; almost forty years after the publication of her novel *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, Smart still found herself facing questions from interviewers about the youthful affair with George Barker that had provided material for the novel. And in *The Game*, although Julia believes she will free herself from Cassandra by writing about her, she becomes only more haunted by her sister, something she realizes when she says to herself: “We think . . . that we are releasing ourselves by plotting what traps us, by laying it all out to look at it—but in fact all we do is show the trap up for real” (208). After Cassandra’s suicide, Julia worries that her sister will continue to “gnaw intolerably at her imagination,” and the final image in *The Game* is of Cassandra’s private papers, now in Julia’s possession and already possessing her in turn, such that she recognizes she will eventually be compelled to read them (237).

With the sisters’ alienation from each other complete in a physical sense, in another way their mutual inextricability has only deepened.

Perhaps no story represents an author’s compulsion to return in fiction to intimate moments better than Raymond Carver’s short story “Intimacy.” The confession of an unnamed narrator who recalls dropping in unexpectedly on his ex-wife and being berated by her for having written about their marriage, “Intimacy” ostensibly focuses on giving voice to the ex-wife’s feelings of having been “exposed and humiliated” (363). At the same time, “Intimacy” stands as the narrator’s implicit admission of his writing’s psychological investments, which become clear when his ex-wife asks if he is paying attention to her. He replies: “I’m listening. . . . I’m all ears” (364). The response reminds readers that he is recording the entire encounter on paper retrospectively, and that during the actual moment of confrontation, even while his ex-wife condemned him, he was mentally taking notes, preparing to transform the very scene of condemnation into a further written narrative. The ex-wife turns out to have been at
least partially correct in her belief that he was visiting her because he was “hunting for material”: even her castigation of him for doing so becomes fodder for his writing (365). Carver further emphasizes the appropriative character of the narrator’s writing by staging the encounter in a minimalist prose that is constituted almost entirely by dialogue, giving it the quality of a transcript and suggesting that if the narrator’s work is at all artful, the artfulness is in the creation of words that seem directly taken from reality. The narrator appears exquisitely detached from his situation, impassively recording what he hears and sees. At the same time, his seeming ability to record the encounter with such fidelity bespeaks a different sort of closeness to his ex-wife. She remembers: “We were so intimate once upon a time I can’t believe it now. I think that’s the strangest thing of all now” (364). The possibility that haunts the story is that the narrator has been capable of such intimacy in part, paradoxically, because of his authorial attention to her words and feelings.

“Intimacy” hints that the narrator’s close attention is paralleled and perhaps even driven by a compulsive need to record what is experienced, suggesting that the production of fiction can be symptomatic of unconscious drives. At first the narrator’s ex-wife implies that he is coldly calculating in his writing about their relationship, but his eventual prostration before her with her sleeve in his fingers is a gesture signaling more complex motivations. He says of the sleeve: “I won’t let it go. I’m like a terrier, and it’s like I’m stuck to the floor. It’s like I can’t move” (369). Finally, disconcerted, his ex-wife forgives him, saying: “You just tell it like you have to, I guess, and forget the rest. Like always. You been doing that for so long now anyway it shouldn’t be hard for you. . . . There, I’ve done it. You’re free, aren’t you? At least you think you are anyway” (369). Her last sentence is striking; Carver implies that the writer’s transgression is against not only the other person but also his own psyche. Like Julia in The Game, the narrator’s writing about an intimate relationship traps him in an unhealthy attachment to it. In that respect, it is notable that he admits to having previously sent his stories to his ex-wife, claiming: “I don’t know what I had in mind except I thought she might be interested” (363). More honestly, he might confess that sending the texts was a way of maintaining his intimacy with her, as well as a way of admitting to guilty behavior without apologizing for it. In that respect, it is notable that Carver’s story ends with the narrator departing from his ex-wife’s house, noticing the leaves scattered on the ground, and observing: “Somebody ought to get a rake and take care of this” (370). The leaves, suggesting
leaves of paper, symbolize the fact that the story the narrator has told retrospectively does not offer the ethical, psychological, and interpersonal tidiness—nor the “care”—he might wish. He is detached enough to write about his ex-wife but not enough to stop writing about her, and while his narrative of their encounter is an admission of a discomfiting compulsion, it rehearses that compulsion more than working through it.

It seems easy enough but too superficial merely to condemn such an impulse in writers. For example, in Roth’s novel *The Anatomy Lesson*, Nathan Zuckerman at once derides and expresses a certain fatalism about his own desire to fictionalize experience, declaring:

> Monstrous that all the world’s suffering is good to me inasmuch as it’s grist to my mill—that all I can do, when confronted with anyone’s story, is to wish to turn it into material, but if that’s the way one is possessed, that is the way one is possessed. There’s a demonic side to this business that the Nobel Prize committee doesn’t talk much about. (133–34)

Zuckerman’s invocation of demonic possession recognizes that the uncanny doubling which intimates experience when confronted with their fictional alter egos is a feeling also experienced by authors. They can become preoccupied by the partly referential fictions they create at the expense of interrelational engagement; they are also liable to apprehend in their own preoccupation the presence of frightening unconscious motives. However, one need not be quite so demonizing of this preoccupation as Zuckerman is. There is nothing intrinsically immoral in writing about one’s intimates. As *The Game* suggests, such writing might even express a genuinely ethical impulse to understand loved ones better. It may also manifest an intuition on the author’s part that something in an intimate relationship needs addressing. In that regard, the fiction might stand as a catalyst for change, a statement that the status quo in a relationship is untenable and that some kind of dialogue is necessary. Accordingly, *The Game* serves as a reminder that many of the ethical issues involved in the writing of autobiographical fiction are ones that pertain likewise to close relationships more generally. As Julia recognizes, to imagine the thoughts and emotions of one’s intimates is not something only writers do; rather, it is “simply another part of that structure of our thought about another person which we do not admit to, and therefore do not have to justify, or stand by” (216). Authors are unusual only in the extent to which they publicize such imaginings.
METAFFCTION'S TURN OF THE SCREW

Part of the ethical difficulty for authors as they publish autobiographical fiction lies in anticipating what a text’s ramifications will be. Authors cannot be certain as to what identifications readers will make between characters and real people, and authors also cannot know how widely these identifications will be publicized. What is more, no matter how careful authors are to disguise their models, and no matter what state of denial or silence they maintain about their writing’s referentiality, they are largely unable to discourage a biographical hermeneutics. Given the conventional ironies of authorial claims about fiction’s referentiality observed in chapter 1, authors who insist that their fiction is not autobiographical are liable to be greeted with skepticism. Consequently, for authors who wish to engage in an authentic public dialogue about autobiographical fiction, a more promising option has been to write metafiction on the topic: stories that dramatize fictive responses to invented texts. Metafiction about life-writing issues is not new. As early a novel as Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* includes self-reflexive meditations on the process of writing autobiographically. What is more, in the first decades of the twentieth century there was a certain amount of fiction published about authors drawing on their own and others’ lives, such as O. Henry’s “Confessions of a Humorist,” Thomas Wolfe’s *You Can’t Go Home Again*, and Randall Jarrell’s *Pictures from an Institution*. However, it was in the 1960s that narratives treating the ethics of fiction began to be more common. Byatt’s *The Game*, Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*, and Ingmar Bergman’s film *Through a Glass Darkly* are examples of texts that dramatize situations in which authors confront the ethics of fictionalizing their intimate relations. These texts follow the example of confessional poetry from the period, which was often self-reflexive about its apparent betrayals of intimacy, thus anticipating the third-party public debates it catalyzed. Indeed, the growth of paratextual production and candor in the 1960s helps to explain the proliferation of metafiction in the same decade. Both literature and a commentary on literature, metafiction is fiction approaching the status of paratext.

More recently, authors such as Kureishi, Carver, and Roth have followed Byatt in producing metafictional texts concerned not just with the ethics of writing autobiographical literature but also with its reception by authors’ intimates.6 One might view the turn to this subject matter as part

---

6. These texts support Linda Hutcheon’s contention that postmodern metafiction de-
of a cultural shift in views of authorship: Lee T. Lemon, for one, argues that while early modernists depicted artists as “isolated rebels,” novelists of the postmodern era have tended to present the artist as “primarily an ordinary human being trying to live in a world peopled with individuals as important as himself” (xiii). If this is true, it makes sense that contemporary metafiction would attend to readers as much as to authors. At the same time, the confessional imperatives of the mass media have rendered authors more accessible and susceptible to public scrutiny than in the past. In that light, it is not surprising that some authors have turned toward assessing their profession ethically in fiction as well. Metafiction about autobiographical fiction demonstrates to readers that authors are conscientious about the ethics of their work and the public perception thereof. Furthermore, metafiction promises to grant its audience a glimpse of the personal conflicts that fiction can create in authors’ lives; in other words, metafiction also exploits readers’ biographical desire.

More particularly, authors’ dramatization in metafiction of characters responding to literature draws the authors into a closer relationship with their audience, insofar as the fiction mirrors for readers their own interpretative processes. Brian Stonehill observes this audience-oriented quality of metafiction in general, asserting: “By dramatizing within its pages a version of its own reader, the self-conscious novel welds a bond of intimacy with its actual readers that is beyond the means of naturalistic, non-self-conscious novels” (7). In the more specific case of metafiction about autobiographical fiction, the texts foster an even greater intimacy by anticipating and identifying readers’ desire for closeness with the author. Indeed, it is authors’ felt need to address this desire—even if only to dismiss it as a reductive way of reading fiction—that often seems to have sparked the writing of the metafiction in the first place. This possibility heightens the reader’s sense of intimacy with the author insofar as the metafiction is then effectively the author’s response to the reader’s desire. By acknowledging readers in this way, metafiction satisfies their wish not only to know authors but also to be recognized and even desired by them in turn.

Meanwhile, metafiction offers authors a unique opportunity to engage with issues confronting them as writers. For instance, a book like Byatt’s The Game makes a significant contribution by examining ethical questions more rigorously and honestly than might be possible for an author parts from its antecedents in that it accounts for the reading process as well as the writing process (Narcissistic 27).
in nonfictional commentary. If writers believe strongly in protecting their own or others’ privacy, then answers to questions such as “Are your characters based on real people?” are sometimes impossible to answer publicly without evasions or lies. It is no wonder, then, if most writers’ responses in interviews are often clichéd, enigmatic, or pointedly disingenuous. For instance, when Kurt Vonnegut was asked where his characters came from, he replied: “Cincinnati” (qtd. in T. Jones 18). In metafiction, authors have more control over the conversation. They can dwell on examples and complexities while avoiding the explicitly personal. What is more, they can encourage readers to focus on complexities as well. By presenting characters who practice a biographical hermeneutics, metafiction often encourages its audience to recognize the reductiveness of such an approach and develop alternative modes of reading.\(^7\)

If metafiction can be didactic, it also allows authors to explore a diversity of perspectives on the ethics of their art. The Game, for one, presents an assiduously dialogical debate, sympathetically depicting both Cassandra’s and Julia’s points of view in a nuanced manner. Cassandra may be the novel’s chief prosecutor of autobiographical fiction and Julia its most prominent apologist, but Cassandra is usually sensitive to her sister’s position and Julia is conflicted about her own choices, admitting that although she has tried to “tug” her novel away from Cassandra, she has “perhaps . . . not tugged it far enough” (145). The manner in which a metafiction dramatizes such issues inevitably sways readers in favor of certain positions over others, but if a dialogic story as Mikhail Bakhtin defines it is one in which there is “one point of view opposed to another, one evaluation opposed to another, one accent opposed to another,” then The Game fits the bill: free indirect discourse gives readers access to the thoughts of both sisters, while other characters offer supplementary views about authorial ethics (314). For example, Julia’s lover, Ivan, is the mouthpiece for a particularly elitist, aestheticist perspective, claiming that authors are “both different from and the same as the common man,” and telling Julia about her novel: “Publish and be damned. I don’t think you can be scrupulous. A writer can’t, with his good stuff. That overrides any other consideration” (49, 145). In contrast, one of Cassandra’s colleagues attacks Julia by asserting: “There are moral obligations that come before self-expression” (220). In presenting both sides of the debate,\(^7\)

---

7. Hutcheon makes this point about metafiction more generally when she observes that its “parody and self-reflection . . . work to prevent the reader’s identification with any character and to force a new, more active, thinking relationship upon him” (Narcissistic 49).
The Game functions ethically by elucidating the subtleties of the issues involved. Philip Roth has remarked that “one of the strongest motives for continuing to write fiction is an increasing distrust of ‘positions,’ my own included” (qtd. in Shostak 7). Metafiction permits authors to eschew an explicit stance in favor of putting a variety of perspectives under the microscope while remaining catholic in their sympathies, referees of arguments rather than antagonists in them.

However, the distinction between dialogism and appropriation is by no means always clear, especially if the metafiction in question uses material from the author’s own experience of causing offense. Such fiction might be defended as giving a voice to the author’s intimates; for example, one could view Roth’s dramatization in Deception of an author named Philip being castigated by his wife as Roth’s way of attending earnestly to the protests of his partner at the time, Claire Bloom, against being fictionalized—protests she subsequently recounted herself in her memoir Leaving a Doll’s House. Alternatively, Roth’s metafiction may suggest not only that he has appropriated the experiences of his significant other, but also that he has become caught up in a vicious circle of representation by appropriating her protests about being appropriated. From the perspective of intimates such as Bloom, this metafiction can be doubly mortifying, presenting them with another instance of theft while seeming to preempt further criticism by criticizing itself first. Metafiction thus conceived is an authorial mea culpa that recommits the very crime to which it confesses.

Metafiction about the ethics of autobiographical writing risks committing a similar appropriation in its relationship to the general reader by presenting a self-critique to forestall external condemnations. Marie A. Danziger argues that by occupying the hermeneutic space normally reserved for readers, the author of metafiction “shoots himself (or some lesser, alternate version of himself) in the foot rather than run the risk of a more lethal blow from his well-placed audience” (12). Roth’s fiction often leaves itself open to such accusations. Several of his writer-protagonists are excruciatingly self-conscious and self-interpreting: they tell stories and then recognize those stories’ weaknesses, presenting criticisms of those weaknesses as well as rebuttals of the criticisms. For example, Roth’s novel My Life as a Man begins with two “Useful Fictions,” short stories purportedly written by Peter Tarnopol about Tarnopol’s alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman. The second half of Roth’s novel is constituted by what Tarnopol calls “My True Story,” and this narrative includes various responses to the Zuckerman stories, giving Roth an opportunity to comment metafictionally on the poetics and ethics of autobiographical fiction. At one
point Tarnopol states his fear that he has turned his art into “camouflage for self-vindication,” and he also imagines his dead ex-wife telling him sarcastically: “Of course you know best how to exploit my memory for high artistic purposes” (231, 227). We know from Roth’s autobiography, *The Facts*, that in fictions such as *My Life as a Man*, Roth himself likewise created alter egos of his first wife and dramatized aspects of their marriage (107). Accordingly, although within the frame of *My Life as a Man* it is Tarnopol who has generated the Zuckerman stories, in a sense they have generated him: Tarnopol, not Zuckerman, is the “useful fiction” who provides Roth with a means of anticipatory self-critique. Echoing Danziger, Mark Shechner calls such metacommentary “Roth’s way of getting to the shortcomings in his writing before the critics do and softening the blows by striking them himself” (*Up* 61). In chapter 2, I have argued that such a complicated blending of referentiality and invention cannot simply be taken as a manner of self-defense on Roth’s part; instead, a key effect of such narrative complications is to exhaust the reader’s biographical hermeneutic drive. Still, to exhaust readers is also to master them in a way that is at once intimate and combative.

What is more, metafictions can court the same sorts of biographical readings that they dramatize and seem to repudiate, and authors discussing such metafictions may end up complicating their writing’s ostensible message by further stimulating biographical desire. For instance, although Byatt has declared with regard to *The Game* that her inspiration for the Corbetts was “taken from the family of a friend,” some critics might consider that claim to sound suspiciously vague and generic (qtd. in Dusinberre 188). Kathleen Coyne Kelly, for one, writes that “it is difficult to approach *The Game*, a tale of two sisters, without being conscious of the rivalry—real, imagined, or exaggerated by the literary press—between Byatt and her novelist sister Margaret Drabble” (25). Even more particularly, Joanne Creighton believes that “it is impossible not to think of Julia Corbett as an unflattering and hostile portrait of Drabble” (“Sisterly” 24). After all, Drabble, like Julia, is the younger sister as well a novelist, and her first book, *A Summer Bird-Cage*, which also focuses on the competitive relationship between two sisters, was published four years before *The Game*, making it attractive to read the latter novel as Byatt’s response to Drabble’s publication. Complicating the matter, Byatt has shown affinities with Cassandra in statements aggressively defending her privacy. With regard to her relationship with Drabble, she has said: “I have an absolute rule not to be interviewed on that topic” (qtd. in Creighton, “Sisterly” 15). And when she has in fact spoken about the subject, she has described
a process of artistic development mirroring that of the Corbetts in The Game, identifying her own move toward authorship with an attempt to delineate her identity, in contrast with a childhood of joint experiences, saying that is it “hard to have shared memories with another writer. So much of art is a transmutation of memory, and this needs to be private, not communal, or it is in danger of being destroyed” (qtd. in Dusinberre 190). This affinity between Byatt’s opinion and her fictional scenario in The Game abets those who would prefer to read her metafiction biographically.

In both refusing to discuss autobiographical aspects of her fiction and suggesting them, Byatt is not dissimilar to many authors in the confessional age, when the mass media have changed the stakes with regard to authorial confessions. The Game demonstrates a consciousness of this transformation, not least when Julia appears on a television talk show and discusses the connections between her fiction and her life as a stay-at-home mother, an action which, according to one viewer, amounts to Julia publicly “hacking away at [her] husband’s character” (116). The Game suggests the conventionality of such confessions in the mass media through its representation of Simon, the man whom Cassandra and Julia have both desired. Simon hosts a television nature show and becomes well-known for his introspective musings. Julia’s husband thinks of him as an exhibitionist, calling him somebody who “bares his soul for other people,” and this self-exposure is clearly one part of Simon’s public appeal (88). The Game suggests that television in particular has invested interactions between producers and consumers of cultural commodities with a new immediacy—what the critic Richard Schickel calls an “illusion of intimacy” (13)—while creating expectations that other art forms will likewise provide such closeness. In this regard, metafiction’s increasing presence through the 1960s and 1970s can be viewed not just as a response to the growth of biographical desire, with such texts providing another form of authorial public commentary of the sort expected by a confessional culture, but also as more particularly prompted by literature’s position in an evolving constellation of mass media. Metafiction gains an impetus from the appetite for spectacles of personal confrontation that televised media have helped to create. As we saw in chapter 1, fiction has long traded on its cachet as a transgressive form, and one way authors have sought to prove their fiction’s worth in this regard has been to provoke condemnations of their work. Although the fiction itself is not always sufficient to prompt such condemnations—whether by critics or outraged intimates—authors in the twentieth century had unprecedented opportu-
nities to prompt them through paratextual confessions, as in the case of Julia’s appearance on the television show. And one more way for authors to stage confrontations has been through dramatizations of them in metafiction, which allows authors to confirm their writing’s aura of transgression without relinquishing control over the script of accusation and self-defense.

HANIF KUREISHI AND THE TROUBLE WITH INTIMACY

In both metafiction and nonfictional commentary, certain authors have moved beyond dramatizing fiction’s betrayals to take up the project of defending them. They have done so by insisting on literature’s role in combating social norms such as privacy and interpersonal intimacy that, they say, are often upheld in a manner stifling free expression. Few authors have made this case so forcefully and controversially as the British writer Hanif Kureishi. Andrew Billen observes that “Kureishi enjoys a reputation as a perpetrator of artistic hate crimes”; his mother and sister were upset by the portrayal of their fictional equivalents in his novel The Buddha of Suburbia, and an ex-girlfriend referred to his film Sammy and Rosie Get Laid as “Hanif Gets Paid, Sally Gets Exploited” (8). Perhaps the most notorious of Kureishi’s alleged misdeeds came in 1998 with his novel Intimacy. It is narrated by Jay, a middle-aged, London-based, Oscar-nominated writer in the process of leaving his two sons and wife to be with his lover, a younger woman. Jay says and thinks various unkind things about his wife, and he is generally unsympathetic to her. Reviewers of Intimacy did not fail to notice that Kureishi himself was a middle-aged, London-based, Oscar-nominated writer who had recently left his two sons and his partner, Tracey Scoffield, and that shortly thereafter he had moved in with his lover, a younger woman. Moreover, they perceived little ironic distance between Kureishi and the voice of his misogynistic narrator. Intimacy only ever presents Jay’s perspective, and his opinions go largely unchallenged by himself or other characters. However, in real life Kureishi was taken to task by several critics, including Scoffield, who protested in a newspaper interview that the novel was much less fictive than he had publicly implied and that mutual friends agreed it was a disguised “hate letter” to her. She also declared: “There are sections and sequences in that book which are intended for me only and only I can understand them” (qtd. in Johnston 8). In return, Kureishi insisted: “The only thing that occurred to me in Intimacy is a bloke leaving his wife. . . . It is a mistake to believe I experi-
ence everything I write about” (qtd. in Ramesh 2). However, Kureishi also claimed to be suffering from cryptomnesia about the source of his material, saying: “Some stuff came from me, lots from other people. I can’t remember which was which” (qtd. in Higgins).

If Kureishi sometimes sounded unconvincing when defending Intimacy, at other times he has presented a more compelling case for the salutary social effects of fiction’s betrayals. For example, in his essay “Loose Tongues and Liberty” he rejects censorship of any sort by characterizing art as a “place where the speaking of the darkest and most dangerous things has always gone on, which we might call a form of lay therapy.” In an interview he has similarly avowed:

I think it would dangerous for writers to have too much of a sense of responsibility. And I would say, in so far as a writer has any responsibility, it’s to their own imagination, which is important, but also the responsibility of being sceptical, of asking questions, of being provocative, of looking at things.

What writers do, if writing has any value, is for us to have a conversation with ourselves and with each other, about the kind of men and women we are. About the relationships we have, about the society we live in. (qtd. in MacCabe 53)

Fiction so conceived is a form in which, among other things, readers may consider whether public reticence as a value associated with intimacy might actually harm the relationships it is supposed to protect. A similar debate about norms of privacy has taken place among philosophers and legal scholars. Every society has some concept and practice of privacy, but these concepts and practices differ significantly across cultures. For instance, contemporary Western prohibitions of public excretion, nudity, and sexual acts have not been held by all peoples. Even more germane is the increase in privacy accorded the companionate couple and nuclear family in the modern era, which strengthens their respective intimacies but also makes significant demands of them in terms of mutual loyalty and responsibility. Accordingly, it is debatable whether current norms of intimacy do more harm than good.

Those who support a strongly protected sphere of intimacy often argue from a psychological perspective, claiming that mental health depends on the existence of a space in which one feels secure and unobserved. Stanley 8. See Rosenberg 73–74 and Westin 59–60.
Benn writes: “To remain sane, we need a closed environment, open only to those we trust, with whom we have an unspoken understanding that whatever is revealed goes no farther” (241). Such an environment protects numerous interests. Not least, it allows one to discuss with a limited number of intimates certain secrets that, if publicly known, might damage one’s reputation. Also, most people need privacy in order to enjoy activities such as sex, in part because public exposure while engaging in them would involve too much self-consciousness. Indeed, most people require such activities to remain private not only in the doing but also in the telling. For example, a video of a couple having sex that found its way online might be humiliating to them even if the video disclosed nothing particularly unusual. Meanwhile, intimate relations allow likewise for the reduction of anxiety with regard to more prosaic activities. For many people, life in public involves varying performances of self in response to changing circumstances. As Adam Phillips remarks, “We are daunted by other people making us up, by the number of people we seem to be. We become frantic trying to keep the numbers down, trying to keep the true story of who we are really in circulation” (Monogamy 7). The private sphere allows people to try out and test ideas, opinions, and so forth, that they would be hesitant to voice in public; privacy also permits them to let down their guard and settle into a more limited number of social roles. They can put aside the multiple masks of identity that public social interactions demand in favor of less self-conscious performances. Accordingly, intimacy is attractive not least for the narrative security it provides, as partners become collaborators in privileged stories of personal identity. In that light, it is an especially cruel betrayal when, rather than helping to reduce versions of their intimates’ identity, authors begin instead to proliferate them in fiction, while putting into public circulation stories with sexual or other personal content that some readers will take to be drawn from intimate experience.

At the same time, such fiction can draw attention to the psychological and social costs that come with a privileging of privacy and intimacy. For instance, if the exposure of private life sometimes makes people injuriously self-conscious, it is likewise true that human beings are always already not only participants in moments of intimacy but also observers of themselves in those moments, even if they do not identify themselves as such. However, when authors write about intimate experiences, they are often reneging on a tacit compact among the participants not to admit their own detachment from those experiences. It is understandable if that
reneging is taken as a betrayal, but authors such as Kureishi might argue it is a necessary one drawing attention to aspects of human experience which otherwise can become dangerously shielded from public discourse by an overvaluation of privacy and secrecy. For instance, the very reduction of selves that Phillips identifies as one of intimacy’s attractions can be harmful in forcing people always to play a consistent, static role to avoid disappointing their intimates. Phillips himself recognizes that “we can suffer most as adults from not being able to let people down. And one lets people down—or ‘deceives’ them—when one refuses to be only one version of oneself” (Flirtation 169). Autobiographical fiction can create precisely such disappointment on the part of intimates by revealing alternate versions of the author that may surprise and discomfit them but that are nevertheless no less real or true than the authorial self with whom they are most familiar and comfortable. Likewise, such fiction may reveal disconcerting versions of their own identities that they did not realize the author apprehended, or ones they did not apprehend themselves. By creating fictional alter egos, authors unsettlingly reclaim some of their own and others’ possibilities. Lauren Berlant calls intimacy “a relation associated with tacit fantasies, tacit rules, and tacit obligations to remain unproblematic” (“Intimacy” 7). Fiction that explores these aspects of intimacy while foregrounding the plural nature of identity might seem painful, even treacherous, but it might also lead to more authentic, sustainable relationships.

Autobiographical fiction can similarly challenge intimacy by presenting scripts of intimate relations that have not been jointly authorized, that do not circulate exclusively among the intimates involved, and that testify to illicit desires. In this regard, autobiographical fiction can constitute a textual equivalent to adultery and a form of resistance to a demand for what might be called narrative monogamy. For example, in Philip Roth’s novel Deception, Philip’s wife confronts him after discovering a notebook that contains his recorded conversations with a lover. Philip reassures her that the relationship depicted is only an imagined one and that the notes are preparatory to a novel. Nevertheless, his wife takes his very fabrication as signaling his desire to escape their marriage, even if solely through the solitary pastime of imagining. She tells him: “I suppose I ought to interpret what I’ve read here as a measure of my terrific failure. Whether I believe she exists or whether I believe she doesn’t exist, certainly the love for her exists, the desire for her to exist exists. And that is even more wounding” (181–82). Philip accepts her rationale, admitting that he is “guilty of a sort of perverse betrayal” (179). However, his insistence that most married
men indulge in such fantasies points to a failure in monogamy more generally to accommodate the role of fantasy in psychic life and the persistence of polymorphous desire.

In that light, fiction and adultery seem to go hand in hand, channeling a need to tell new stories about the self. Not least, the narratives that adulterers invent to cover their tracks and make affairs possible are strongly reminiscent of fiction: fabrications are blended seamlessly with actual events, while lovers’ identities are masked by invented or ambiguously referential ones in the stories that are told: for example, “I’m having lunch with a friend.” Indeed, Louise DeSalvo asserts that narrativization is not just analogous to adultery but also foundational to it, and not only in terms of the lies that lovers invent in order to meet. She claims that one of the great pleasures of adultery can be “the talking about sex,” with all the anticipation, desire, and performances of new selves such talk involves (Adultery 21). When Laura Kipnis describes adultery’s attractions, she similarly pays attention to the rebellious recreations of identity permitted by it and draws a comparison to “aesthetic transgression,” suggesting that “in many respects they are not dissimilar. Don’t both make you see something differently—at least temporarily?” (“Adultery” 31). Elsewhere, Kipnis echoes Roth’s and others’ celebration of fiction as a subjunctive space of experimentation and performance when she calls adultery “a way to have a hypothesis, to be improvisational” (Against 9). This conception of fiction and adultery posits them as responses to intimacy’s unrealistic demands for discretion and exclusive desire. It suggests that a life lived in compliance destroys autonomy and that sometimes people betray their intimates simply to prove—to others and to themselves—that they possess the freedom to do so. But although fiction and adultery have affinities, fiction might function alternatively as Philip claims in Deception that it does for him: namely, as a way of exploring desire and fantasy without actually resorting to sexual infidelity. Indeed, given a characterization of ethics as “a process of formulation and self-questioning that continually rearticulates boundaries, norms, selves, and ‘others,’” autobiographical fiction might be considered a staunchly ethical project (Garber, Hanssen, and Walkowitz viii).

In that regard, it is notable that autobiographical fiction makes its interventions through publication. As it does so, it challenges the implicit or explicit demand for silence that can attend intimacy—a demand that can be harmful in preventing public awareness, debate, and action with regard to personal issues. Patricia Boling observes that such a strict emphasis on privacy “shuts off parts of our lives from public debates and
prevents us from taking political action to improve those parts of our lives” (xi). Sissela Bok notes that secrecy in particular can cause people to be “mired down in stereotyped, unexamined, often erroneous beliefs and ways of thinking. Neither their perception of a problem nor their reasoning about it then receives the benefit of challenge and exposure” (25). Likewise, a privileging of privacy breeds a shame culture in which people keep things from the public eye due to a fear of embarrassment. As Richard Wasserstrom puts it, “We have made ourselves excessively vulnerable . . . because we have accepted the idea that many things are shameful unless done in private” (330). The branding of various acts, statements, or beliefs as shameful leads to a society in which people devote enormous amounts of energy to dubious acts of self-discipline and self-concealment, as well as to the surveillance and disciplining of others, from governmental policing to gossip.

In terms of literature, censorship laws and book bans have their intimate correlatives in unwritten rules of propriety that act as explicit or implicit shaming devices, often before an author has written a word. Erica Jong points out that such mechanisms have affected female writers in particular, asserting: “Every woman artist has to kill her own grandmother. She perches on our shoulder whispering: ‘Write nice things. Don’t embarrass the family’” (“Grandmother” 106, 109). But if autobiographical fiction can seem like an indiscreet infidelity, authors such as Jong, Kureishi, and Roth have claimed loyalty instead to the combating of secrecy and shame. Roth argues: “Fiction has an obligation to be about those things that we’re too ashamed to talk about with those we trust the most” (qtd. in Danziger 96). Standing against reticence, authors of autobiographical fiction argue that their writing exposes the conservatism, stresses, and inevitable failures produced by an overvaluation of intimacy. Their stance receives an equivalent articulation in creative writing manuals, which sometimes configure writing as a battle for self-expression against family members who are externalizations of the superego. For instance, Anne Lamott advises aspiring authors in her book *Bird by Bird*: “Write as if your parents are dead” (199). Indeed, Lamott advocates a poetics that explicitly draws on antisocial impulses, claiming: “I tell my students that they should always write out of vengeance, as long as they do so nicely. If someone has crossed them, if someone has treated them too roughly, I urge them to write about it” (226). However, books such as Lamott’s are often silent about what one should avoid writing. This is not surprising, when their audience includes would-be authors who are desperate to confess, to be told it is all right, even necessary, to do so. As a result, the
imperative to “write what you know” is also often unapologetically one to “write about those you know.”

THE PROBLEM OF REBEL PRIVILEGE

Taking themselves to be among the cultural vanguard in challenging privacy and reticence, fiction writers sometimes propose that they should not be held to ordinary ethical standards in conducting interpersonal relations. Philip Roth asserts in his novel *Operation Shylock*: “I hadn’t chosen to be a writer . . . only to be told by others what was permissible to write. The writer redefined the permissible. That was the responsibility” (377). Likewise, Hanif Kureishi has articulated a rebellious authorial ethics in which “the job of the writer is to create argument and create dissent. That’s one’s integrity and it’s an integrity that involves letting other people down” (qtd. in Billen 9). Both authors find an ally in Jacques Derrida, who says that the writer

must sometimes demand a certain irresponsibility, at least as regards ideological powers . . . which try to call him back to extremely determinate responsibilities before socio-political or ideological bodies. This duty of irresponsibility, of refusing to reply for one’s thought or writing to constituted powers, is perhaps the highest form of responsibility. (38)

Given such claims, should writing that offends the author’s intimate relations be excused because it aims to effect social change? Anne Roiphe goes some way toward making this case when she states that authors “are rather like those ruthless explorers who kill off the natives, maltreat their own men, go to the ends of the earth for personal glory and riches. But if they’ve charted new territory, retrieved a few treasures, expanded our horizons, well perhaps they may be forgiven” (30). Roiphe’s ambivalence is clear, and forgiving authors is not the same as exculpating them. Still, her comment opens the door for an ethicality of authorial rebellion premised upon weighing private harm against public good. In Roth’s novel *Deception*, the protagonist Philip goes further by suggesting that when loved ones feel betrayed, their unwarranted expectations of authors are to blame. After writing about his ex-lover, he tells her: “I am a thief and a thief is not to be trusted” (201). Philip’s declaration implicitly characterizes authors as a Promethean class constitutionally predisposed to betrayal.
The figure of the rebel author has been conventional at least since the Romantics, and it remains a popular persona—especially, it must be said, for male authors, who have generally been more prominent than women in assuming the posture of the obstreperous aestheti
cist or subversive contrarian. Meanwhile, in cases such as Roth’s and Kureishi’s, those who have complained publicly about fiction’s betrayals have tended to be female lovers and family members. Accordingly, one might ask whether the mantle of rebel authorship serves to rehearse the dynamics of patriarchal gender relations, in which men have more broadly claimed a prerogative to be unfaithful. Moreover, male authors who identify themselves as rebelling against norms of intimacy might be seen to depend on the alignment of conventional morality with femininity in order to define their own daring and gender identity simultaneously. The narrator of Alice Munro’s short story “Five Points” has just such a suspicion about men’s habits when she finds her husband arguing with her in favor of taboo-breaking practices that she suspects he does not really support. “Men wanted you to make a fuss, . . . and why was that?” she asks. “So they could have your marshmallow sissy goodness to preen against, with their hard showoff badness?” (Friend 46–47). From this perspective, authors of autobiographical fiction are not so much exceptional as exemplary of a broader social dynamic, and their ethical situation does not exempt them from a need to consider the unconscious impulses and social advantages that might be directing their self-assertions.

Male or female, authors of transgressively autobiographical fiction also secure for themselves the cultural capital of what has been called “rebel chic” (Heath and Potter 4). Laura Kipnis observes that “when stamped with the imprimatur of Art and the Romantic myth of talent, all sorts of violations—aesthetic and social—can be regarded as their own sphere of inventiveness; rebellion and bad behavior much admired as privileged domains of truth and insight” (Against 113). Given this celebration of artistic transgression, it is not surprising that authors of fiction defend their betrayals as socially remedial ones. Indeed, it makes sense if they are intentionally courting controversy and censure. Seldom are these things injurious to an author’s public stature or pocketbook. Rather the opposite: as the proliferation of cultural products means that literature receives an ever-diminishing share of the public’s attention, a scandal remains a reliable way for a new book to garner headlines and a prominent space

---

9. With regard to the claim that defenses of sexual infidelity serve patriarchy, see Kipnis, “Adultery” 27.
in stores. What is more, a controversial work of fiction is more liable to appeal to a particular niche of consumers: those who, as Angela McRobbie and Sarah L. Thornton put it, “see themselves as alternative, avant-garde, rebellious, or simply young” (572). If authors say what others cannot or will not say, it may be for ethical reasons, but it is also because there is a market for such utterances.

Consequently, although autobiographical fiction challenges norms of privacy and intimacy, it profits from the existence of those norms. Authors require a culture of reticence against which to define their fiction as candid, even while they make strategic use of reticence in commentary to deny their texts’ referentiality and foster biographical desire. In that light, authors who take up the role of social contrarians might be regarded as rebels rather than revolutionaries, in keeping with Jean-Paul Sartre’s distinction between the two: “The revolutionary wants to change the world; he transcends it and moves toward the future, towards an order of values which he himself invents. The rebel is careful to preserve the abuses from which he suffers so that he can go on rebelling against them” (Baudeelaire 50–51). In other words, by positioning their fiction as transgressive, authors reinforce social conventions even while they defy them. Here there is another parallel between autobiographical fiction and adultery. As Kipnis puts it, the prevalence of the latter does not necessarily suggest an insurrection against monogamy so much as it signals that “the system needs propping up with these secret forms of enjoyment” (Against 188). Likewise, autobiographical fiction may function as a social coping mechanism, adding to the public sphere a certain indiscreet discourse that gives pleasure and, insofar as it is condemned, confirms conventional morality.

If authors have more self-interest and less sociotransformative efficacy in their writing than they admit, one might question the rhetoric of necessary transgression they use to legitimize their actions. In particular, those whose fiction has caused offense to their intimates might ask themselves Judith Butler’s question: “If there is no becoming ethical save through a certain violence, then how are we to gauge the value of such an ethics?” (“Ethical” 26). To ignore the question is to risk indulging in self-justifications that are exercises in egoistic sophistry, especially given the money and fame writing can bring. Authors also may not be admitting the degree to which there is a satisfaction in betrayal that has nothing to do with ethics. Roth suggests as much in his novel I Married a Communist when he has a character claim that people betray not least “for the pleasure in it. The pleasure of manifesting one’s latent power. The pleasure of dominating others. . . . You’re surprising them. Isn’t that the pleasure of betrayal?
The pleasure of tricking somebody” (262). Because fiction can transform lives even while its authors deny the referentiality of their work, they can enjoy unique feelings of control. What is more, an intimate’s sense that an author’s betrayal might have been pleasurable for the author potentially adds to the betrayal. In the same way, authors’ self-justifications may strike intimates as further treacheries, exercises in bad faith from which authors take satisfaction as they invent publicly laudable reasons for their private transgressions.

Should this possibility make rebel authors seem callous, even malevolent, it must be said that Kureishi, for one, is self-conscious about the personal consequences of the offense that authors give, acknowledging that “people can be formed and also deranged by the stories others tell about them” (“Loose”). He is almost painfully attentive to those aspects of intimacy most people cherish. This attention is no more evident than in the last paragraph of *Intimacy*, which is apparently a stand-alone coda to the novel with no transition from what came before. It reads:

> We walked together, lost in our own thoughts. I forget where we were, or even when it was. Then you moved closer, stroked my hair and took my hand; I know you were holding my hand and talking to me softly. Suddenly I had the feeling that everything was as it should be and nothing could add to this happiness or contentment. This was all that there was, and all that could be. The best of everything had accumulated in this moment. It could only have been love. (155)

The paragraph is striking for readers of *Intimacy* not least because until this point the narrative has documented a stream of infidelities suggesting anything but intimacy between Jay and his wife. However, this last paragraph implies that Jay is mourning a profound loss of connection. At the same time, readers cannot be certain that the “you” and “I” described in the passage are Jay and his wife. They might very well be Jay and his young lover. Readers might also see themselves in this paragraph, locked in their own intimacy with Jay and, phantasmatically, with Kureishi. The paragraph might even depict Kureishi stepping out of the fiction’s frame and addressing Tracey Scoffield directly, in a way that is both intimate and excruciatingly public. In this last paragraph, Kureishi implicitly connects all these relationships by suggesting they each bring together a self and another, a “you” and “I”—the relationship that is also arguably the fundamental one of ethics. At the same time, the text’s indeterminacy in terms of identifying the “you” and “I” renders the paragraph flirtatiously
uncommitted with regard to its apostrophic object of desire. If authors of fiction cannot be faithful to one person or cause without betraying another, the paragraph insinuates, then they might refuse to be strictly faithful to anyone. But because the addressee is undetermined, the paragraph also reminds readers that authors can never quite be sure who their audience will be, that readers as Others will not only differ from authors but also differ in unexpected ways, and that authors cannot always tell exactly what kinds of intimacies they will foster or what betrayals they will commit. The unpredictability of the relations created through literature presents a serious problem for those concerned with fiction’s consequences. For that reason, as I argue in the next chapter, uncertainty must be at the center of ethical thinking about autobiographical fiction.