of an abstract collectivity of middle-aged males engaged in a project of communal remembrance. And it is this plural narrator’s discursive strategies of historical reconstruction that we must now proceed to examine more closely.

Fall from Grace: Myths of Origin and Founding Trauma

While there is little doubt that the Lisbon sisters’ suicides would be perceived as disruptive in any community, Martin Heusser has shown that Eugenides’s plural narrator draws on a specifically American version of pastoral aesthetics to portray the time before the suicides as a prelapsarian, suburban idyll. According to Heusser, pastoral rhetoric has been a defining feature of American self-descriptions from its earliest days, with the country being imagined as a “Garden of the World”: a blessed new land in whose fertile soil a youthful nation can take root and prosper (“Et in Arcadia Ego” 176). In turn, it is this kind of imagery that, according to Heusser, informs American ideals of the suburb as a garden-like landscape “equally poised between the city and the wilderness” (ibid.). Moreover, just as the idea of a New World conjures up images of a space unburdened by history, so do pastoral landscapes appear as both secluded and outside the flow of historical time:

The cardinal convention of the pastoral […] is the opposition, explicit or implicit, between the idyllic pastoral environment and the reality of the world at large – the contrast between an ideal, secluded here and now, perfectly peaceful and timeless, and the outside world, haunted by continual change and death. (“Et in Arcadia Ego” 177)

Neither history nor death, Heusser notes, are supposed to disturb the peace of a self-enclosed, pastoral space – and if we examine how Eugenides’s narrator describes life in the suburban community before Cecilia’s suicide, then we find that his depiction of the boys’ communal home as an earthly paradise matches these pastoral conventions precisely:

There had never been a funeral in our town before, at least not during our lifetimes. The majority of dying had happened during the Second World War when we didn’t exist and our fathers were impossibly skinny young men in black-and-white photographs on jungle airstrips […]. Now our dads were middle-aged, […] but they were still a long way from death. Their own parents, who spoke foreign languages and lived in converted attics like buzzards, had the finest medical care available and were threatening to live on until the next century. Nobody’s grandfather had died, nobody’s grandmother, nobody’s parents, only a few dogs: Tom Burke’s beagle, Muffin, who choked on Bazooka Joe bubble gum, and then that summer, a creature who in dog years was still a puppy – Cecilia Lisbon. (35)
In the narrator’s account, death as such had of course always existed, but only in a different time and place. In the narrator’s description, history and death form part of an external, historical wilderness of “jungle airstrips” and world wars – until, that is, Cecilia, the youngest of the Lisbon sisters, takes the decision to end her life.

The irruption of Cecilia’s death into this pastoral suburban world thus constitutes, for the narrator, a fall from grace into a world of exile and death that is also imagined as the end of childhood innocence. As Heusser notes (“Et in Arcadia Ego” 181), the narrator portrays the immediate aftermath of Cecilia’s suicide as a moment of intrusion by the world beyond the home community:

From the roof of Chase Buell’s house where we congregated [...] we could see, over the heaps of trees throwing themselves into the air, the abrupt demarcation where the trees ended and the city began. The sun was falling in the haze of distant factories, and in the adjoining slums the scatter of glass picked up the raw glow of the smoggy sunset. Sounds we usually couldn’t hear reached us now that we were up high [...] – sounds of the impoverished city we never visited, all mixed and muted, without sense [...]. (35)

The irruption of violence and death is not only associated here with the realm of the sacred (“where we congregated”); it also propels the boys’ gaze outward, beyond the boundaries of their home community, and suddenly history – in the form of industrial production, urban poverty, and pollution – manages to intrude, even as the meaning of its disturbing signs continues to elude the boys (“mixed and muted, without sense”). The boys keep watching for a while, and though later, one by one, they turn towards “home” (35), they will never recover their earlier sense of unquestioned and ‘childish’ communal belonging.

We need to be clear from the outset about the extent to which this image of a fall from pastoral suburban grace is in fact an entirely artificial construct (Heusser, “Et in Arcadia Ego” 179). Slavoj Žižek’s notion of “the Fall” as one characteristic feature of ideological fantasies is useful in this context, for according to Žižek the Fall constitutes a decisive event in phantasmagoric narratives, but as such it has always already happened (The Plague of Fantasies 18). In addition, Žižek suggests that the Fall is a moment of symbolic castration that involves the “loss of something which the subject never possessed in the first place” (19). Both of these characteristics of the Fall suit the situation in The Virgin Suicides perfectly, for not only does the novel begin when the Fall has already happened (i.e. after the five suicides, which are already revealed as past in the novel’s very first sentence); the group of now middle-aged men are also still turning their gaze back longingly toward girls whom they never actually “pos-
sessed” in the first place. As we saw earlier, the Lisbon sisters are idealized figures of youthful adoration – “a purely potential, nonexistent X,” in Žižek’s terms (19) – and only in those rare moments when the boys actually spend time with the Lisbons does the “revelation” come over them that the girls “weren’t all that different” from their own sisters (123). Moreover, even the narrator himself admits that the prelapsarian idyll of suburbia had in fact been a conscious construct or fantasy world established for the children by their parents. Accordingly, when they note that their parents remain surprisingly stoic in the face of Cecilia’s death, the boys sense “how ancient they were, how accustomed to trauma, depressions, and wars. We realized that the world they rendered for us was not the world they really believed in” (55). The suburban community may have appeared Edenic to the group of boys, but this had never simply been the natural or true state of affairs. Instead, as a fantasied fall from grace, the suicides become a kind of mythical moment of origin for Eugenides’s plural narrator: an expulsion from the illusory plenitude of childhood innocence into a fallen subjecthood founded on absence or lack.

We may summarize the argument so far by noting that Eugenides’s novel constitutes a fiction of home in at least two different senses. On the one hand, _The Virgin Suicides_ personifies collective belonging in the form of an impossible narrative voice that is unlikely to occur in a non-fictional text. On the other hand, the narrator draws on partly fictional models – a pastoral aesthetics, in particular – in his (re-)construction of a childhood home whose innocence was lost in one exceptional moment of rupture. The ideological fantasy of the boys’ shared innocence and its tragic loss sustains the narrator as a plural subject. This loss thus constitutes the mythical moment of origin for the narrator as the personified voice of the boys’ community of memory. Which begs the question: What, precisely, is the relation between myth and collective memory?

9 The fact that the girls are constructed as idealized adolescent fantasies has been widely commented upon in the critical literature; see, for instance, Hayes-Brady (212) and McLennan (30).

10 See also Martin Dines: “[I]t is not only the novel’s narrators who appear to dwell in a ‘timeless zone’; their parents also seek suspension from history” (963). Interestingly, the narrators’ comments are echoed almost verbatim in Lynn Spigel’s discussion of real-life suburbia in postwar America: “Postwar Americans – especially those being inducted into the ranks of middle-class ownership – must, to some degree, have been aware of the artifice involved in suburban ideals of family life. For people who had lived through the Depression and the hardships of the Second World War, the new consumer dreams must have seemed somewhat pretentious” (220).

11 See McLennan, who suggests that “the narrator(s) construct [the suicides] as their own point of origin” (27).