

LAND OF TOMORROW: THE POSTWAR NOVEL AND THE RISE OF THE NEW
CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT

Benjamin Mangrum

A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department
of English and Comparative Literature

Chapel Hill
2015

Approved by:

Florence Dore

Eric Downing

Sean McCann

John McGowan

Matthew Taylor

© 2015
Benjamin Mangrum
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

Benjamin Mangrum: *Land of Tomorrow: The Postwar Novel and the Rise of the New Conservative Movement*
(Under the direction of John McGowan)

This dissertation charts a cultural history of the decline of the New Deal regulatory state and the rise of American income inequality through novels published between 1945 and 1968. While scholars such as Thomas Piketty, Paul Pierson, and Jacob Hacker have shown that political mechanisms during the 1970s eroded regulations on the capitalist economy, I argue that these shifts in policy developed from intellectual crises facing the American welfare state during the immediate postwar decades. I chart this political history through novels by Norman Mailer, Vladimir Nabokov, Ralph Ellison, Patricia Highsmith, and Walker Percy, who helped to define public animus toward the New Deal and gave intellectual legitimacy to an emerging political culture opposed to a progressive political agenda. These four authors are particularly relevant because they engage intellectual movements and historical phenomena that, I argue, contributed to the unraveling of New Deal reform: namely, the circulation of existentialist notions of authenticity and individual choice, which opposed expansive federal power; the association of progressive politics with totalitarianism; a growing demand among intellectuals for arenas of civil society autonomous from a managerial state; and the rise of personal psychology, rather than sociology, as an explanatory template for everyday life. By augmenting the public purchase of these trends, each author helped to shape a postwar culture that hastened the political death of the New Deal.

For Ashley

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: THE RISE AND TRANSFORMATION OF NEW DEAL REFORM	1
A Short History of New Deal Reform	9
From the New Deal to a New Conservatism	19
CHAPTER 1: A “WORLD OF INFINITE POSSIBILITIES”: <i>INVISIBLE MAN</i> AND THE TWILIGHT OF NEW DEAL AMERICA	46
<i>Invisible Man</i> , the Vicissitudes of the Left, and the Twilight of New Deal Liberalism.....	51
Richard Wright Goes to Europe.....	73
Existentialism Comes to America.....	86
CHAPTER 2: THE AGE OF ANXIETY: PATRICIA HIGHSMITH, EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY, AND THE “DECLINE” OF NATURALISM	97
Professional Psychology, Psychoanalysis, and Their Discontents	99
Existential Psychology and the “Decline” of Literary Naturalism	119
Tom Ripley, Kierkegaard’s <i>Sickness</i> , and the Devaluation of Structural Reform.....	138
CHAPTER 3: SOUTHERN COMFORT: AUTHENTICITY, ALIENATION, AND WALKER PERCY’S WAYFARING SEARCH	153
Citizenship, the State, and Sartrean Authenticity	157
Existentialism as a Novel.....	173
Intersubjectivity, Consciousness, and the Varieties of American Existentialism.....	200
BIBLIOGRAPHY	215

INTRODUCTION: THE RISE AND TRANSFORMATION OF NEW DEAL REFORM

In Norman Mailer's recollection of the 1967 march on the Pentagon, he describes the United States as a land pregnant with an uncertain future. "America," he muses in his novel *The Armies of the Night* (1968), "once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with a leprous skin. She is heavy with child—no one knows if legitimate—and languishes in a dungeon whose walls are never seen." The United States is on the cusp of giving birth, but "to what?" Mailer asks, "the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known? or can she, poor giant, tormented lovely girl, deliver a babe of a new world brave and tender, artful and wild?"¹ For Mailer, his moment in American politics is latent with ominous possibilities. The Janus-faced presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, as Mailer presents it, has been delegitimized because its so-called Great Society of domestic policies has as its underbelly the continued escalation of the war in Vietnam. The president's support for American intervention faced increasing opposition among certain segments of his Democratic base, and a rigorous revolt was organized by the New Left, which Mailer had helped to shape as an early editor of *Dissent* magazine in the mid-1950s. A variety of anti-war movements—student groups at Berkeley, intellectuals in New York and the East Coast, as well as civil rights activists in the South—had begun to organize their objections. The march on the Pentagon was one of the first expressions of this consolidated movement, mobilizing "somewhere between 75,000 and 90,000 people" at the Lincoln Memorial before the demonstrators proceeded to the headquarters of the Department of Defense (245). Mailer later

¹ Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* (New York: Plume, [1968] 1998), 288. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

felt ambivalent about the effects of this organized act of protest, but in *Armies of the Night* he nonetheless registers his hope that the America of tomorrow might be more just through its rejection of Johnson's militaristic interventionism.

In March of 1968, five months after the march on the Pentagon, U.S. Army soldiers killed as many as five hundred unarmed civilians in South Vietnam, an event the American media dubbed the My Lai Massacre after a small hamlet in the nearby Son My village. Reports of the massacre soured American public opinion of the war and deepened LBJ's already fracturing Democratic base of support.² On March 31 after a poor showing in a Democratic primary, Johnson addressed the nation announcing his decision not to seek reelection, thus creating an electoral lacuna that competing factions of his Party tried to fill during the 1968 Democratic National Convention.³ Held in Chicago during August of that year, the Convention was plagued by further violence as the same group who organized the Pentagon demonstrations mobilized protests throughout the city. The protests incited what Max Frankel says could "only be called a police riot."⁴ Broadcast on national television were scenes of "indiscriminate police assaults, with billyclubs and gas and Mace, against crowds of protestors and even onlookers,

² See Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1991), 244.

³ The deep ambivalence of the public regarding the Vietnam War was made more complicated when Russian forces invaded Czechoslovakia just before the Democratic Convention. The effects of this invasion, as John Schultz explains, was to give a momentary boost to public support for the war of "containment" in Vietnam, thus ensuring "the nomination of Humphrey [rather than the progressive Eugene McCarthy] and thereby have either Humphrey or Nixon as President of the United States." Schultz speculates that the timing of the Russian invasion was intentional, for "there is possibly nothing the Russian leaders fear more than a progressive United States." See John Schultz, *No One Was Killed: The Democratic National Convention, August 1968* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1969] 2009), 69.

⁴ Max Frankel, "U.S. Study Scores Chicago Violence as 'A Police Riot,'" *New York Times* (2 December 1968), page 1, column 1.

against apparently stray and innocent citizens in the streets and even against seriously injured victims of the melees.”⁵ The violence surrounding the protests at the Convention further unraveled the coalition of Democratic support and, as John Schultz recounts, “because of what was now happening in Chicago” Richard Nixon “would be elected President in November.”⁶ The rising tide of anti-war protest merged with the violence at the Convention, and the Democrats consequently lost their legitimacy as the Party of civil rights and progressive equality.⁷

Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* coalesced around this unraveling consensus for the Democratic Party. Mailer looked to the march on the Pentagon as an opportunity for national choice—a moment when the country will either emerge as force of global oppression or become a “brave and tender” leader. Mailer hoped that *Armies of the Night*, as well as his own account of the Democratic and Republican National Conventions, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), would influence American liberals much like his essays “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” and “In the Red Light” had influenced the 1960 and 1964 elections. These essays had provided a cultural rationale in support of the presidential campaigns of John F. Kennedy and helped to motivate an uneasy left-liberal coalition to back the Democratic Party.⁸ As Michael Szalay

⁵ Ibid., page 39, column 1.

⁶ Schultz, *No One Was Killed*, 257.

⁷ See Robert D. Schulzinger, “Richard Nixon, Congress, and the War in Vietnam, 1969-1974,” in *Vietnam and the American Political Tradition: The Politics of Dissent* (ed. Randall B. Woods; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 282-300. For a comprehensive study of the escalation of the war in Vietnam and its effects upon the politics of the 1960s and beyond, see Melvin Small, *At the Water’s Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005).

⁸ For a record of this influence, see Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 408. By “left-liberal,” I mean a prominent segment of Kennedy’s voting bloc who were suspicious of state capitalism but nonetheless would come to

argues, Mailer's work during the 1960s sought to "produce new kinds of political meaning and embodied experience," directing those innovations toward a new "branding" of the Democratic Party in progressive terms.⁹ In "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," for example, Mailer presents Kennedy as a suave hipster-cum-bullfighter able to keep at bay the danger facing an America "drifting into a profound decline." Kennedy, according to Mailer's presentation, transcends the muck of mainstream political life: "his good, sound, conventional, liberal record has a patina of that other life, the second American life, the long electric night with the fires of neon leading down the highway to the murmur of jazz."¹⁰ Enveloping Kennedy in a hip cultural cloth, Mailer presents the Democratic candidate as an embodiment of the hopes of American progressives, particularly insofar as he offers a style of politics alternative to the vanilla Eisenhower. As Szalay suggests, this depiction is part of wider white fantasies about blackness during the era.¹¹ With the aura of jazz surrounding him, Kennedy would be seen as uniquely positioned to understand the plight of African Americans, while at the same time Mailer also presented the Democratic nominee as part of a political counterculture, somehow foreign to the "bosses" of the Party.¹² In short, Kennedy's campaign in 1960 benefited from a cultural branding, a legitimization of his presidency through the work of critics, artists, and writers.

support the Democratic Party. Kennedy's ambivalence toward civil rights was cloaked in an aesthetic, which itself had a racially complicated history.

⁹ Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 31.

¹⁰ Norman Mailer, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," *Esquire* (November 1960). Rpt. in *The Presidential Papers* (New York: Berkeley Medallion Books, 1963), 44.

¹¹ Szalay, *Hip Figures*, 107-08.

¹² Mailer, "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," 43.

Mailer again sought to frame the political debates in 1967-1968 by calling the Democratic Party to return to its progressive roots. Rather than providing a cultural rationale, however, *Armies of the Night* only highlighted the fissures among the Democrats, seemingly exacerbating the split between supporters of Hubert Humphrey, George McGovern, and Eugene McCarthy. Rather than providing a shared vision for the uneasy liberals of the moment—one centering on civil rights, an opposition to militaristic “containment” foreign policy, and domestic support for labor unions—Mailer’s novels from the late 1960s signal the death knell of the Democratic political coalition underwriting the postwar New Deal. The Party had sustained the longest running electoral consensus in American history, enjoying control of both houses of Congress from 1932 to 1980 (except small Republican majorities in 1946 and 1952). The crown of that coalition was seven out of nine presidential victories. Yet, as Mailer presents it, the rebirth of the Democratic Party proved abortive in the late 1960s: as he worried, a “fearsome babe” comes to life instead of an “artful and wild” America (*Armies* 288). The coalition shatters, and “Tricky Dick” takes the White House instead of a progressive Democrat.¹³

Mailer thus contributes to what would later become the standard narrative about postwar liberalism: Johnson’s stance on Vietnam during 1967-1968 fractured a Democratic Party already reeling from the loss of its Southern base after the Party’s controversial stance on civil rights during 1964-1965. This convergence of challenges to the Party’s political consensus, so the story goes, meant that Humphrey not only lost the presidency to the “resolutely phony” Richard Nixon but also fumbled the progressive possibilities of the thirty-six-year-old New Deal.¹⁴ The year 1968 consequently marks the beginning of what Michael Schaller and George Rising call “the

¹³ Norman Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago: An Informal History of the Republican and Democratic Conventions of 1968* (New York: New York Review Books, 2008).

¹⁴ Qtd. in Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*, 405.

Republican ascendancy,” a return to the prewar dominance of conservative Republican politics, which would culminate in the electoral triumphs of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.¹⁵ Prior to this ascendancy, New Deal Democrats had formed a heterogeneous coalition of interests, including labor unions, racial and religious minorities, white Southerners, urban political bosses, intellectuals, and a collection of farm groups. Yet this coalition—and the New Deal welfare state that it had constructed—supposedly began to fragment in the mid-1960s as the contradictions and tensions of that disparate Democratic bloc could no longer sustain the illusion of political consensus.

This dissertation challenges that mapping of American political history by charting the unraveling legitimacy of New Deal reform politics during the immediate postwar years. Long before the tensions regarding the civil rights movement and U.S. campaigns in Southeast Asia fractured the Democratic coalition, I argue that a set of cultural and intellectual crises beset the American welfare state of the 1940s and 1950s. These challenges to the intellectual authority of the New Deal had mitigated, revised, and even undermined key features of Roosevelt’s early reform agenda, which was initially devised to usher the nation out of the Great Depression. The Second World War and a wave of intellectual movements, cultural voices, and public anxieties contributed to the eroding grounds for New Deal progressive politics during the postwar decades. I chart this political history through novels by Vladimir Nabokov, Ralph Ellison, Patricia Highsmith, and Walker Percy, who helped to define public animus toward the New Deal managerial state while at the same time circulating sensibilities about the self and the state that would help to reshape American political culture. These four authors are particularly relevant because they engage the intellectual movements and historical phenomena that, I argue,

¹⁵ Michael Schaller and George Rising, *The Republican Ascendancy: American Politics, 1968-2001* (Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 2002).

contributed to the unraveling of New Deal reform—namely, the translation of European existentialist notions of authenticity and individual choice into an American idiom, an association of progressive politics with totalitarianism, a growing demand for arenas of civil society autonomous from a managerial state, and the rise of personal psychology as an explanatory template for everyday life. The circulation of these ideas during the 1940s and 1950s, I argue, helped to shape an American political culture no longer amenable to an interventionist state or a reform agenda.

While only one feature of American culture, the novels of the postwar years occupied an important niche in the intellectual life of the nation. For one, a burgeoning publishing industry disseminated fiction on an unprecedented scale, outpacing the growth of the American population every year since the beginning of the postwar era.¹⁶ While selling books became increasingly lucrative for publishers, literacy and public reading also grew exponentially during the 1950s.¹⁷ Furthermore, as James F. English notes, the marked growth in the publishing industry during the 1950s corresponds to the expanding economic weight of reading and the proliferation of markers of prestige.¹⁸ In short, what may broadly be called “book culture”

¹⁶ James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 19. For example, a 1957 report in *Publishers Week* claims, “The increase in trade book sales during 1956 will top the 7 per cent increase which 1955 registered over 1954.” In contrast to the relatively small size of the book trade before WWII, the 1950s enjoyed successive years of significant growth in the economic value of the publishing industry. See “Highlights of 1956 News and Trends in the U.S. Book Industry,” *Publishers Weekly* (21 January 1957), 47.

¹⁷ See Carl F. Kaestle, Helen Damon-Moore, Lawrence C. Stedman, Katherine Tinsley, and William Vance Trollinger, Jr. *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 150-54. This study also notes the increase in library borrowing during the 1950s, which suggests that book reading more generally—not just the publishing industry—grew throughout the 1950s (165).

¹⁸ English, *The Economy of Prestige*, 19-20.

became an increasingly prominent feature of American life in the postwar era, and as reading seemed to garner a new scale of importance the markers of cultural legitimacy likewise began to multiply. In fact, as Evan Brier has shown, the expanding significance of novels during the postwar era were in large part a result of a series of successful marketing strategies by the book trade, which often presented novels as embattled holdouts against ostensibly vulgar mass culture.¹⁹ While novelists looked to new media to reimagine the form of their fiction, shrewd editors and a burgeoning mass publishing industry found the novel-as-cultural-bastion to be a widely marketable branding of the genre.²⁰ The novel, in other words, accumulated unprecedented leverage in determining which structures of thought and feeling—which sensibilities about the self and its status in collective space—would attain wider public legitimacy.

Vladimir Nabokov, Ralph Ellison, Patricia Highsmith, and Walker Percy helped to imagine what the critic Kenneth Burke describes as cultural “equipment” for navigating specific currents of American culture in ways that, as I show, helped to give articulate form to public animus regarding the American welfare state.²¹ Yet their contributions to the intellectual and cultural debates that preoccupied postwar life were often only indirectly political. That is to say, unlike Norman Mailer, Allen Ginsberg, or even Robert Penn Warren, who were often wont to provide direct commentary on the institutions and programs of the New Deal, the four authors

¹⁹ Evan Brier, *A Novel Marketplace: Mass Culture, the Book Trade, and Postwar American Fiction* (Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

²⁰ On the relation between the form of the novel and the new media of the postwar era, see Florence Dore, “The New Criticism and the Nashville Sound: William Faulkner’s *The Town* and Rock and Roll,” *Contemporary Literature* 55.1 (Spring 2014): 32-57.

²¹ See Kenneth Burke, “Literature as Equipment for Living,” in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 293-304.

considered in this study most often engaged the substantive intellectual underpinnings of American political culture: What is the relationship between the self and society's institutions? How does one determine the authenticity of action, or the attempts of the self to navigate public space? And what is the source of the malaise that is seemingly so pervasive throughout postwar society? Their answers to these social concerns cut to the foundations of the progressive sensibilities and *ad hoc* assemblage of ideas that comprised the New Deal reform agenda.

A Short History of New Deal Reform

To be sure, the shifts that I trace in American intellectual life were only part of a sequence of crises facing the New Deal welfare state. As Alan Brinkley explains, the postwar New Deal had already begun to depart in significant ways from the reform agenda established in the early years of Roosevelt's presidency (1933-1938). This period, often described as the "active phase" of the New Deal, was a moment in American intellectual and political life "awash in ideas," some of which "were rooted in the progressive philosophies of the first decades of the twentieth century, others in the experience of World War I, still others in some of the generally unsuccessful reform initiatives of the 1920s."²² Yet an economic recession during 1937-1938, the growing influence of Keynesian redistributive policy upon Roosevelt's advisors, and the

²² Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 4-5. Many scholars often make distinctions within this "active phase," describing Roosevelt's administration during the Seventy-third Congress (1933-1935) the "first" New Deal. It was comprised of fifteen acts passed by Congress and signed by the President, many of which were soon hotly contested. I am principally concerned with the entire active or reform phase of the New Deal era, however, because the contested legacy of legislation passed during 1936-1938 would also prove to be a significant marker of the changing sensibilities of the postwar era.

exigencies of WWII interrupted the activist reform agenda of the New Deal.²³ The legacy of that active phase—and the 1920s and 1930s Progressive Era more broadly—became increasingly suspect during the postwar years, particularly as intellectuals reflected upon the totalitarian regimes of WWII and identified their rise to power with the socialist welfare states of Europe. This convergence of historical features surface in Nabokov’s and Percy’s anxieties about the state, Highsmith’s repudiation of a narrative world governed by structural, socio-economic, and environmental conditions, and Ellison’s construal of the self as the only authentic locus for choice and political action in the postwar moment. The concerns and ideas of these novelists have precursors, of course, but the social demands and felt crises of their moment color the cultural equipment they offer for dealing with postwar American life.

The domestic anxieties that harried progressive Democrats during the postwar moment arose principally as reactions to the legacy of the reform agenda fashioned during the active phase of the New Deal. The fluidity of policies, programs, and ideas during this period attests to the fact that there was no single political philosophy or delineated theory of liberalism governing Roosevelt’s first two terms. Rather, the New Deal was an assemblage of ideas that developed in response to a unique crisis in American history—the Great Depression. The majority of Roosevelt’s advisors explained this crisis as a consequence of concentrated economic power and a speculative financial sector. The New Deal reform agenda thus sought to control overweening monopolies, strengthen organized labor, and regulate the economic vicissitudes produced by

²³ See Theodore Rosenof, *Patterns of Political Economy in America: The Failure to Develop a Democratic Left Synthesis, 1933-1950* (New York: Garland, 1983); Dean L. May, *From New Deal to New Economics: The American Liberal Response to the Recession of 1937* (New York: Garland, 1981); and Richard P. Adelstein, “‘The Nation as an Economic Unit’: Keynes, Roosevelt, and the Managerial Idea,” *Journal of American History* 78 (1991), 160-87.

American banks and industries.²⁴ While few in the administration were categorically opposed to capitalism, there was nonetheless a diversity of competing ideas about how to structure the national economy.²⁵ Some in the administration looked to centralized economic planning, while others pushed for policies and legislation that simply opposed monopolies. As Louis Menand puts it, “there was no master plan, no guiding philosophy, for the reforms that Roosevelt oversaw. Some were his idea; some were Congress’s; some were left over from the Hoover Administration. Roosevelt was improvising.”²⁶ The reform phase of the New Deal thus featured a “chaos of experimentation,” as Richard Hofstadter put it in 1955, in order to mitigate the economic uncertainties and wage inequalities produced by industrial capitalism.²⁷

From regulatory legislation such as the Banking Act of 1933 to compensatory welfare programs such as the creation of Social Security in 1935, the early New Deal tried to reform the socio-economic structures of American life through the mechanisms of a regulatory state and the expansion of activist federal power. The federal programs designed to usher the nation out of the Depression mostly involved either regional planning or agricultural reform, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (A.A.A.). One of the centerpieces of the early New Deal, the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 (N.I.R.A.), authorized the President to regulate industry, mandated a minimum wage, and established the

²⁴ Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, 5.

²⁵ For an anti-capitalist voice in the administration, see Carl Dreher, “The American Way: A Voice from the Left,” in *The American Way* (ed. David Cushman Coyle; New York: Harper, 1938), 75-88.

²⁶ Louis Menand, “How the Deal Went Down: Saving Democracy in the Depression,” *The New Yorker* (4 March 2013).

²⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 307.

Public Works Administration (PWA), which was led by Harold L. Ickes, a progressive Republican who had been a past president of the Chicago NAACP. Significant provisions of both the A.A.A. and N.I.R.A were later struck down or hamstrung by the Supreme Court, but their initial effects were momentous. These acts were part of the unprecedented (and as yet unmatched) first one hundred days of Roosevelt's administration. The Seventy-third Congress and the Executive branch limited deductions for capital depreciation, reorganized tax rates to remove the onus from the middle class, and ended the tax-exempt status of corporate dividends. During its short life, the PWA—replaced by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935—also provided well-paying jobs through public construction projects, such as dams, bridges, and hospitals.

Perhaps most remarkably, Roosevelt's administration and a New Deal-friendly Congress courted labor unions, which formed a central faction of their political coalition. For example, the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act) strengthened the collective bargaining power of American unions by requiring businesses to bargain with any union supported by a majority of its employees. Sensing the favorable winds that this legislation signaled, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)—which was open both to communist union leaders and African American members—became more aggressive in organizing previously non-union workers. During the 1930s and early 1940s, the CIO became one of Roosevelt's largest supporters.²⁸ The reform phase of the New Deal era also featured the Glass-

²⁸ See Gilbert J. Gall, *Pursuing Justice: Lee Pressman, the New Deal, and the CIO* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1999). I return to the labor movements of the 1930s and 1940s in the second chapter, where I discuss Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the decline of organized progressive politics in postwar America. It is also worth noting that the less radical American Federation of Labor (AFL) played a significant part in the labor movement in the 1940s, particularly after the CIO broke with the organization in the mid-1930s. See Andrew

Steagall Act of 1933, which was a response to what many in the administration felt was the direct cause of the Great Depression: the conflation of commercial and investment banking. A central provision of the Glass-Steagall Act established a rigid separation between these two forms of banking in an effort to protect citizens from speculative investments. At the same time, however, the Seventy-third Congress also authorized the President to promote free trade through tariff reductions. The hodgepodge of this active phase of the New Deal, in other words, crossed ideological lines for the sake of pragmatic political reform: aggressive regulation of concentrated economic power and a commitment to the rights of laborers to organize was matched by a commitment to anti-monopoly free trade.

The protean and seemingly *ad hoc* quality of Roosevelt's politics were later cause for suspicion among many postwar Democrats, who themselves fell under the long shadow of the ideological conflicts of the early Cold War. As Walter Benn Michaels puts it, "the Cold War may be (and often was) described as universalizing, as involving every part of the world and potentially every part of the universe." The conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union was dominated by "difference" understood in terms of mutually exclusive ideological disagreement.²⁹ According to Michaels' account, that construal of difference as disagreement came to dominate American intellectual life until the late 1980s. Perhaps for this reason, as Landon R. Y. Storrs explains, the federal government effectively cannibalized itself for the sake of the rigidities of ideological conflict, particularly through the Federal Employee Loyalty Program, which screened over five million of its employees from 1947-1956. The effect of the

E. Kersten, *Labor's Home Front: The American Federation of Labor during World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

²⁹ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 30.

program, according to Storrs, was to drive the postwar heirs of New Deal progressivism underground or off the government payrolls. In essence, the ideological conflicts of the 1950s suppressed the spectrum of policies and political philosophies that characterized the reform phase of the New Deal.³⁰

Despite Roosevelt's landslide electoral victories in the 1930s, the New Deal reform agenda had been under significant pressures before the contentious postwar moment. One of the principal sources of these challenges to the New Deal came from the Southern bloc of Roosevelt's coalition. The tensions within Congress regarding the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) is a telling example of the fact that the reformist impulses of Roosevelt's administration had begun to cut in too many directions. The Act established a forty-four-hour workweek, a minimum wage, and prohibited most forms of child labor. It also was particularly contentious for Southern Democrats, who began to worry that the federal dollars and employment initiatives of FDR's work programs came at the cost of greater equality for black laborers. On the one hand, the Southern Democrats were frequently given concessions during the early reform legislation of the New Deal era. Federal laws regulating the wages and working conditions of laborers, for example, were often passed with exceptions for farms, whose employees in the South were most often black. As a part of these employment efforts to support rural farming, Southerners also supported the Coalition's legislation regarding union activity. However, as the National Labor Relations Board enforced the Wagner Act and, later, the FLSA, an environment conducive to labor organization slowly began to achieve in the South what progressives in Congress failed to do: a wave of often effective strikes among industrial

³⁰ Landon R. Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013). I return to Storrs's argument in the second chapter, where I trace the diminishing fortunes of American progressivism during the 1950s.

employees, many of whom were African American, began to eke out better working conditions for all laborers.³¹ Thus, after the FLSA was passed, a segment of the New Deal Coalition began to work actively to undermine the legal framework of the Wagner Act and inaugurated an era of tensions within the Democratic Party that would come to a head in 1948 and again in 1964. After 1938, though, the Dixiecrats refused to pass any significant reform legislation based upon these fears. The result was that, as Ira Katznelson puts it, the Fair Labor Standards Act became “the last lawmaking victory of the New Deal’s radical moment.”³²

While the reform agenda of the New Deal was often contradictory and increasingly challenged by the members of its own Democratic coalition, the legacy of its active phase faced unique pressures following Roosevelt’s death and the end of the Second World War. As I show in subsequent chapters, the Democratic coalition associated with the New Deal had by the 1960s distanced itself from the earlier regulatory impulses toward concentrated economic power. The New Deal of the early 1960s focused instead on civil rights and compensatory welfare programs. It was a politics of redistribution, not regulation, such that the structural and pro-union reform positions of the early New Deal had either been mitigated or entirely abandoned. Johnson’s “War on Poverty” is a telling bellwether of these shifts. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (EOA) attempted to eliminate poverty by providing job training as well as loans and grants to small businesses through local Community Action Agencies (CAAs). Despite a concern for the economically dispossessed, Mical Raz argues that a theory of poverty unique to the postwar moment underwrote the EOA: Johnson’s “War” replaced the reformist New Deal explanation for poverty—i.e., as an effect of the structural inequities of concentrated economic power—with

³¹ See J. David Greenstone, *Labor in American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 408.

³² Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2013), 272.

the notion that poverty is the “deprivation” of opportunity.³³ This new view is peculiarly tautological: the cause of poverty is a lack of opportunity, while the causes of the lack of opportunity are the markers of poverty. This circularity is apparent during Johnson’s State of the Union address in 1964:

To help that one-fifth of all American families with income too small to even meet their basic needs, our chief weapons in a more pinpointed attack will be better schools and better health and better homes and better training and better job opportunities to help more Americans, especially young Americans, escape from squalor and misery and unemployment rolls, where other citizens help to carry them.

Very often a lack of jobs and money is not the cause of poverty, but the symptom.

The cause may lie deeper in our failure to give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities, in a lack of education and training, in a lack of medical care and housing, in a lack of decent communities in which to live and bring up their children.³⁴

This vision contrasts sharply with Roosevelt’s insistence that the crises of the 1930s derive from the power of “organized wealth.” For Roosevelt, at least during his first two terms, concentrated economic wealth was to blame not only for the Depression of 1929 but also the recession and spike in unemployment during 1937-38.³⁵ The cycle of poverty was a function of structural avarice and unchecked industry. Johnson’s commitment to alleviate the nation’s “poverty crisis,” in contrast, had already abandoned the regulatory language of the early New Deal in favor of “supply” rhetoric. The cycle of poverty is, according to the Johnson administration, a self-enclosed and self-replicating crisis. Its causes are its effects.

³³ Mical Raz, *What’s Wrong with the Poor?: Psychiatry, Race, and the War on Poverty* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), especially pp. 76-111.

³⁴ Qtd. in “Unconditional War on Poverty,” *Social Service Review* 38.1 (March 1964), 73.

³⁵ Qtd. in Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, 48.

The absence of a regulatory impulse and a nearly exclusive emphasis upon compensatory and “opportunity” programs in Johnson’s “War on Poverty” is emblematic of the turn that American liberalism takes in the postwar years. Following the planned wartime economy of 1940-1945—in effect, an interregnum in the conflict between progressives and other “liberal” Democrats, where the federal government’s control over the economy reached its historical apex—the New Deal coalition drifted toward a form of political economic organization called “embedded liberalism,” which refers to a state-sponsored economic and industrial strategy with a modest regulatory environment. The form of embedded liberalism dominant in the late 1940s and 1950s nurtured—often even planned at a federal level—a web of industrial production and global trade. Yet even those forms of central planning were, in effect, a compromise between the expansion of a global marketplace and a domestic welfare state.³⁶ As I show in the following chapters, the social and political pressures of the postwar era cultivated visions of American political (as well a-political and anti-regulatory) life that would slowly erode the economic restraints upon capital established during the reform phase of the New Deal era. The embedded liberalism of the postwar New Deal provided something like an historical border phase for this transformation. Indeed, it is commonplace among scholars to characterize the postwar decades as the “apex of American liberalism.”³⁷ After Johnson’s defeat of Barry Goldwater in the 1964 general election, the distinguished presidential scholar James MacGregor Burns even declared, “By every test we have, this is as surely a liberal epoch as the late 19th Century was a

³⁶ See Robert Wolfe and Matthew Mendelsohn, “Values and Interests in Attitudes toward Trade and Globalization: The Compromise of Embedded Liberalism,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 38.1 (March 2005): 45-68.

³⁷ See, for example, Clarke A. Chambers, “Social Security, The Welfare Consensus of the New Deal,” in *The Roosevelt New Deal* (ed. Wilbur J. Cohen; Austin: University of Texas, 1986); Walter I. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America*, 6th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1999), 304-35.

conservative one.”³⁸ Despite such sweeping declarations, the New Deal coalition during the 1960s had in fact drifted away from the progressive experimentation and regulatory commitments of the 1930s.

The struggle to define American liberalism during the postwar era took place on multiple fronts. Corporate interests, anti-civil rights Democrats, and anxieties about Soviet communism—juxtaposed with progressives like Henry Wallace, who had been one of Roosevelt’s most prominent advisors and his second Vice President (1941-45)—contributed to the changing shape of the postwar Democratic Party. The contribution of this dissertation is to point to certain as-yet unrecognized features of this transformation: a wave of intellectual movements and felt crises that, I show, garnered increasing cultural attention during the postwar years. Novelists writing in this moment of intellectual flux contributed to a new cultural rhetoric within the contested terrain of American public life. In particular, they helped to circulate emerging political sensibilities that privileged self-possession, the burden of individual choice, and a form of social thinking that was post-welfare, post-institutional, and thus opposed to an activist-managerial state. These political sensibilities surfaced in a variety of ways, including among the “new” professional-managerial class that, as Stephen Schryer argues, gave up on “building institutions” during the postwar era in favor of other forms of professionalism. The non- or post-institutional “fantasies” of this new class are not merely economic; rather, they are imbricated with larger intellectual trends and growing political opposition toward the expanding bureaucracy of the New Deal.³⁹ In contrast to the political discourse of the 1930s—which was formed in the wake of the Great Depression and

³⁸ Qtd. in Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), ix.

³⁹ Stephen Schryer, *Fantasies of a New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 6.

widespread public animus toward concentrated wealth—a political culture developed during the postwar era that would prove decisive against a New Deal reform agenda already forced into stasis by an international war, racial politics, and domestic economic pressures.

From the New Deal to a New Conservatism

When John Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the American economy had finally begun to emerge from the 1937-1938 Recession that stalled Roosevelt's recovery agenda. The Great Depression had by then been elevated to the status of a national myth. Steinbeck did not need to remind Americans of the national crisis, which still loomed like an ominous penumbra over the late 1930s and its slowly improving economic fortunes. That is to say, rather than preaching to the dispossessed choir, *The Grapes of Wrath* draws on the shared experience of the Depression to respond to the economic crisis and political demands of a Recession-hardened America. On the one hand, Steinbeck's novel is critical of the limits of New Deal reform—the state's failures to attain the social and political aspirations that had elevated the Democratic Party in 1932-1933. Roosevelt famously expressed such progressive aspirations in his address at the 1932 Democratic National Convention, when he warns,

These unhappy times call for the building of plans that rest upon the forgotten, the unorganized but the indispensable units of economic power, for plans [...] that build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid.

Roosevelt's vision of capitalism for the proletariat had coaxed GDP to climb back to its pre-Depression level by 1939, yet the simultaneous, mercurial rise of unemployment during his administration—hovering around 25% in the mid-1930s and still as much as 15% by 1940—

seemed to be at odds with the New Deal agenda of national restoration dedicated to providing economic security for the “Forgotten Man.”⁴⁰

This national dearth of jobs and dignity during the 1930s provides the impetus for Steinbeck’s novel, which embeds that experience within the seemingly impassible fury of an Oklahoma landscape. This coincidence of forces drives the Joad family to California in search of security and employment. After several deaths and desertions by family members, the beleaguered Joads arrive out West to find an oversupply of labor. Law enforcement officers harass the unemployed while large corporate farms collude to choke out smaller farmers and thus to ensure a system of cheap labor. The Joads soon discover Weedpatch, a “gov’ment camp” built in 1936 for the purpose of providing housing to migrant workers. Built by the Farm Security Administration, Weedpatch, as one destitute woman puts it, offers “water right handy” and “no cops let to come look in your tent any time they want.”⁴¹ However, as the Joads discover, this federal haven is an awning with too little cover. While the Joads eventually are given space in the government camp, they are consistently beleaguered with economic and political problems. Local police officers often try to break into or dissolve the camp, but more importantly the federal relief itself seems to be insufficient. As Ma Joad says, the family only eats “fried dough” and “Tom had five days’ work” in the one “month we been here” (478). After discovering that federal relief is spread thin, the Joads soon search for work elsewhere and become strikebreakers at a peach farm. Much like the winds of the Dust Bowl that had swept them toward the promises of California, the members of the family are again caught up in the wider forces of a conflict between labor unions and corporate farms. A family friend, Jim Casy, becomes a casualty of this

⁴⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt, Radio Address, “The Forgotten Man,” 7 April 1932.

⁴¹ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 346. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

conflict, and Tom Joad murders the man responsible for his friend's death. In turn, Tom becomes a fugitive in the land of opportunity; he is yet another "vagrant" dispossessed from within the life of the nation (456).

Despite Steinbeck's reservations regarding the deficiencies of New Deal reform, he nonetheless calls attention to precisely the confluence of social and political concerns underpinning Roosevelt's agenda: the lack of protections for workers' rights and organized labor, an anxiety about concentrated economic power, and the need for expanded relief programs for the unemployed. Indeed, as Alan Wald explains, *The Grapes of Wrath* "popularized numerous conventions of the American labor narrative."⁴² Steinbeck provides an account of politics that, rather than spurning the New Deal, demands the augmentation of progressive intervention and activist-managerial power called for by many of Roosevelt's advisors. Government camps such as Weedpatch are the only refuge in the novel from local police and the exploitative system of labor created by large corporate farms. What's more, despite the inadequacies of federal power in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck provides a cultural rhetoric for an activist political community by mythologizing the plight of the poor and dispossessed. "The migrant people," the narrator chronicles, are "scuttling for work, scrabbling to live, looked always for pleasure, dug for pleasure, manufactured pleasure, and they were hungry for amusement." The imaginative response for dealing with the tension between the migrants' aspirations and their dire circumstances is a secular, mythic community: "the story teller grew into being, so that the people gathered in the low firelight to hear the gifted ones. And they listened while the tales were told, and their participation made the stories great." The demands and needs of the masses inspire "great" tales, which in turn unite these migratory masses "in the

⁴² Alan M. Wald, *American Night: The Literary Left in the Cold War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 92, 93.

camps along the roads, on the ditch banks beside the streams, under the sycamores” (444).

Dispossessed migrants become an imaginary community, a nation all its own with a shared narrative life.

Steinbeck brings this narrative invention of a community to bear upon the political debates of the 1930s, specifically regarding the continued suffering of the rural poor. Steinbeck frames the crisis of widespread poverty through the travails of the Joads, whose family name alludes to the biblical Job, a “righteous” man who nonetheless experiences consummate catastrophe and whose experience calls into question the goodness of God. Whereas this biblical figure is a mechanism for scrutinizing the principal authority of the ancient world, the suffering of the Joads teases out the injustice of national life without socio-economic security and protections for the poor. Steinbeck puts this national mythologizing to political use most tellingly through Rose of Sharon, whose name is taken from the endearment given to one of the lovers in the biblical book Song of Songs. “I am the rose of Sharon,” the young woman of the poem proclaims, “the lily of the valleys” (2:1). The beloved’s assertion provides grounds for erotic linguistic play—her lover “feedeth among the lilies,” for example—yet, by way of contrast, the lover of Steinbeck’s young woman abandons her during the search for more secure social space. Steinbeck’s deserted beloved is a figure for possibility gone awry, a world without fulfillment or dignity.

Yet the Judeo-Christian tradition has also read the beloved in Song of Songs as an allegory of the Deity’s relationship to his chosen people—either Israel or the Church, as the case may be. In that religious tradition, in other words, “Rose of Sharon” more often than not signifies the beloved community, rather than a virginal beloved. Thus, even as Steinbeck’s turn on the biblical Job calls into question the goodness of national life without public securities, his Rose of

Sharon takes on secular allegorical status. In particular, during the novel's famed ending, Rose of Sharon and the remaining Joads encounter a nameless boy and his starving father. The Joad daughter, who has only recently given birth to a stillborn child, nurses the starved man: "Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously" (619). Steinbeck's Rose of Sharon—who here also seems to be a Madonna figure—becomes the image of a mythic community, a surrogate family for the nameless masses who are otherwise destitute in the world. She provides for the wellbeing of the poor; she stands in for the aspiration of a secular family to welcome the dispossessed.

Steinbeck's image of a political community responsible for the welfare of the anonymous masses is replaced with a different set of cultural metaphors during the postwar moment. In Mailer's work from the 1950s and 1960s, for example, Steinbeck's mythic aspiration for political existence is replaced with a new figure, which Mailer describes as "the American existentialist—the hipster." Writing in *Dissent* during the summer of 1957, Mailer argues that the Second World War of "super states" and the advent of "instant death by atomic war" has subjected the "psyche" of postwar Americans to a unique intellectual crisis. "One could hardly maintain the courage to be individual, to speak with one's own voice," Mailer says of this postwar milieu, "for the years in which one could complacently accept oneself as part of an elite by being radical were forever gone."⁴³ The collectivist politics of Steinbeck no longer seems plausible to Mailer, for a "stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve." How can there be a political community—a secular order of welfare—when the collective is itself systemically sick? The only hope to be found under such dire circumstances,

⁴³ Norman Mailer, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," *Dissent* (Summer 1957), 277. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Mailer insists, “has been the isolated courage of isolated people.” Mailer’s despair at the conditions of postwar life causes him to look toward the hipster of the 1950s because, he says, such a figure responds to the threat of “a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled” through “the only life-giving answer” available to him: “to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self” (277). In short, the collective condition of postwar society is either to be swallowed up by the state and mass society, or to be fractured from that collective. The self—the courage to be individual—becomes Mailer’s haven from the bleak conditions of the 1950s.

In “The White Negro,” Mailer insists that a fundamental, existential dilemma faces Americans, who now must either retreat into mass conformity or turn toward counter-cultural scripts. For those who follow the latter route, the “Negro” has become a model for life amidst the absurdities of postwar society. Mailer explains that black Americans must either “live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger” (279). By simply expressing the self—rather than suppressing it, becoming a subservient shadow of a self—black Americans face the lynch mobs of reactionary Southerners and the bellicosity of urban policemen in the North. Mailer argues that a particular subculture of the postwar generation “was attracted to what the Negro had to offer,” for the “existentialist synapses of the Negro” seemed to offer a universal pattern of existence that white postwar Americans could appropriate (278, 279). From this nexus of racial fantasies and cultural idioms, Mailer imagines that the “language of Hip” is born, giving “expression to abstract states of feeling which all could share, at least all who were Hip” (279). The hipster, in other words, becomes the principal figure for dissenting from the existential threats and oppressive social structures of the 1950s.

What's more, because this figure draws on the "existential" plight of black Americans, Mailer explains that the hipster "for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro" (279). Mailer's refraction of existentialism through the aspiration of crossing the color line is, as Szalay argues, "a complex variant of the peculiarly American tradition of blackface minstrelsy." Szalay explains that notions of hip such as Mailer's derive from the anxieties of "white men [who] sought and found in black subculture a means of negotiating the conflicted ideological and organizational imperatives of postwar liberalism."⁴⁴ In other words, because the New Deal Coalition was fraught with internal disagreement and beset with external pressures, American existentialists like Mailer looked to black Americans to sort out their sense of political displacement. Mailer's existentialist turn, in particular, centers on a crisis between "the Hip and the Square," that is to say, a "primal battle" over whether "to open the limits of the possible for oneself, for oneself alone." The collective, generally speaking, becomes "Square" while affirming the self and its desires is the essence of "Hip." Thus, whereas Steinbeck's leftism offers a script for collectivist political action, organized labor, a critique of concentrated economic power, and an urgent demand for socio-economic security, Mailer's progressivism looks to "Hip" to "return us to ourselves, at no matter what price in individual violence" (290). While marshaling crowds to protest the war in Vietnam was later Mailer's self-avowed *métier*, his turn toward existentialism during the 1950s and early 1960s displaced the locus of political action from the collective to the singular. The "heart of Hip," he says, is an "emphasis upon courage at the moment of crisis," the willingness to assert the self irrespective of social consequences (291). Mailer's notorious example in "The White Negro" is the *acte gratuit* of "two strong eighteen-year old hoodlums" who "beat in the brains of a candy-store keeper" (284).

⁴⁴ Szalay, *Hip Figures*, 8.

Such arbitrary acts of violence—“no matter how brutal”—offer something like a radical form of dissent from the social death of the self. Mailer thus insists that the singular—the daring of the unknown, an abandonment of premeditated behavior, the refusal to conform at any cost—achieves elevated status amidst the dire conditions of postwar life. As a result, the authentic life of the self becomes the touchstone for political action.

Before Mailer’s dalliance with existentialism, he wrote what would become a *New York Times*-bestseller, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948). Mailer’s first novel follows a platoon of soldiers during the fictional siege of the Japanese-held island of Anopopei during the Second World War. Throughout the novel Mailer explores the ethnic and nationalist impulses of the American soldiers and, more broadly, the American war effort itself. Mailer also calls attention to the divisions that stratified the military along racial and class lines. *The Naked and the Dead* was therefore hewn from the same cloth as his literary masters at the time—most notably, Tolstoy’s social realism in *Anna Karenina* (1878) and American naturalists like Steinbeck, James T. Farrell, and the early radicalism of John Dos Passos. In the vein of these literary predecessors, Mailer distributes the focus of the narrative across the lives and consciousness of over a dozen infantrymen and officers. Through free indirect discourse, the realist prose blends with both a Southern soldier’s untutored dialect and a well-born East Coast officer’s brooding meditations on mortality and the army. Mailer thus democratizes his war story, implying that a concert of voices from across the ranks of the platoon is necessary for understanding American intervention. Furthermore, through short accounts of the “life” and “education” of the soldiers, Mailer situates the siege of Anopopei within a wider account of social reality, one attentive to the

national myths and economic narratives that inform the behavior of the soldiers and provide the collective antecedents to the war effort itself.⁴⁵

The dispersion of social reality across classes and characters embeds an awareness of class consciousness within literary form, if not also an outright political commitment to analyzing the markers of socio-economic structures. In the case of writers such as Steinbeck and the Mailer of *The Naked and the Dead*, this brand of realism is, in effect, a function of progressive social thinking. While Mailer would return to these literary and political commitments in later novels such as *The Executioner's Song* (1979), his long *affaire du cœur* with existentialism had profound effects upon his work during the 1950s and 1960s. Even *The Armies of the Night*, with its progressive acerbity directed against liberal Democrats and their support for the Vietnam War, signals this intellectual shift by identifying the novel's narrative center with an absurd and self-reflexive comic hero—Mailer himself. The author-cum-protagonist is caught up in his own novelistic account, and the life of the self consequently becomes the governing window for political history. That is to say, in order to make sense of history, Mailer explains that the author himself becomes a central feature of an ambiguous social landscape: "Either the century was entrenching itself more deeply into the absurd, or the absurd was delivering evidence that it was possessed of some of the nutritive mysteries of a marrow which would yet feed the armies of the absurd" (54). Mailer's existentialist construal of an "absurd" century makes certain demands upon literary form, he claims, and so the authorial attempt to represent social reality itself mirrors that absurdity:

So if the event took place in one of the crazy mansions, or indeed *the* crazy house of history, it is fitting that any ambiguous comic hero of such history should be an egoist of the most startling misproportions, outrageously and often unhappily self-assertive, yet in command of a detachment classic in severity [...]. Such egotism

⁴⁵ Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (New York: Picador [1948] 1998), 159.

being two-headed, thrusting itself forward the better to study itself, finds itself therefore at home in a house of mirrors, since it has habits, even the talent, to regard itself. Once History inhabits a crazy house, egotism may be the last tool left to History. (54)

Mailer's image of the author—a disproportionately large head, who is preoccupied with regarding itself and whose "home" is amidst reflections of itself—departs sharply from the literary strategies of *The Naked and the Dead*. For Mailer the existentialist, the global threats and social malaise of postwar America requires the author to inflect political fiction through a "talent" for self-reflexivity. The life of the self, in other words, becomes the locus for political understanding.

The turn in Mailer's literary form signals wider intellectual currents, which I trace through work by several authors throughout the remaining chapters of this dissertation. The implications of these postwar developments for political culture are, as is the case with "The White Negro" and *The Armies of the Night*, often a question of shifting accents in literary representation, while at other times these shifts surface directly in the intellectual dialogue posed by the works themselves with specific political and historical determinants. The experience of totalitarianism in Europe is one of the principal historical phenomena informing this public dialogue during the postwar era. Intellectuals accounting for the rise of totalitarianism feared that similar political oppression might take hold in the United States, and they tried to shape policy and public sentiment about the New Deal welfare state based upon that fear. As a feature of that conversation, I argue in the first chapter that Vladimir Nabokov invokes a form of aestheticism—the idea that our existence ought to be governed by private judgments and pleasures—as a cultural strategy for dealing both with the specter of totalitarianism and the increasingly politicized society of his newly adopted American home. Beginning with *Bend Sinister* (1947), I argue that Nabokov's American novels reject politicized social space on

aesthetic grounds, and I show how this aestheticism offers a cultural permutation of the growing demand for arenas of civil society autonomous from an activist managerial state.

As is the case with Mailer and a collection of other postwar novelists—Saul Bellow and the Beats are among those whom I do not consider—the ascent and diverse rhetoric of American existentialism provided a cultural map for writers to navigate not only the reverberations of totalitarianism but also the competing ideas and social demands of postwar domestic life. George Cotkin rightly notes that ideas later associated with European existentialism had been expressed by American intellectuals long before the imported influence of Sartre, Camus, and de Beauvoir. Citing Melville’s “theology of absence” and William James’s pragmatism—surely Emerson’s philosophy is applicable, too—Cotkin notes that an “existential attitude” had a longstanding history in American culture.⁴⁶ Later, the progressive wing of the civil rights and student movements would draw heavily on Camus’s intellectual rhetoric to frame their activism and ill-treatment.⁴⁷ Yet, as I trace through novels by Ellison, Highsmith, and Percy, the invocation of “existentialist” ideas in the 1950s and early 1960s had a diverse range of effects upon postwar intellectual life. Indeed, I argue that the reemergence of ideas and cultural strategies rooted both in the work of nineteenth-century thinkers—specifically Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche—as well as the French existentialists of the twentieth-century had specific historical determinants. The proto-existentialists of the nineteenth century—with their preoccupation with the irrational, the estranged, and intellectual displacement more generally—provided a tableau of sensibilities for postwar intellectuals and artists to grapple with a seemingly absurd world, one characterized by the contradictory impulses of the “apex of liberalism” and institutional

⁴⁶ George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 31.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 225-51.

segregation, the anxieties of the nuclear age and increased professional attention to the psychological. European existentialism enjoyed a culturally symbiotic relationship with the likes of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche—in fact, the Anglophone translators and American critics who sung the virtues of the former also helped introduce the latter to a wider audience. (I trace relevant moments of this reception history in chapters two and three.) In effect, this web of sensibilities garnered legitimacy as a set of intellectual strategies for responding to the social crises of the immediate postwar years: How, for example, can one find meaning in the life of the self when everywhere private existence seems to be embattled? Many American writers retooled Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, and Sartre in their attempts both to define this crisis for a reading public and to resolve the inquiry in ways consistent with their framing of the problem.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) provides one of the earliest and most telling uses of existentialist sensibilities when reflecting upon the political culture of postwar America. In this second chapter, I trace the rising cultural currency of existentialism during the late 1940s and 1950s, while at the same time the fortunes of a spectrum of progressive thought was in decline. This flux of social concerns and intellectual movements informed Ellison's literary work, particularly as the invisible man navigates a variety of political demands—from communism and black nationalism to segregated assimilation into welfare liberalism. Reacting against the legalized marginalization of black Americans perpetuated by the New Deal Coalition, Ellison's protagonist finds himself alienated from institutional space. In response to this systemic estrangement, the invisible man repudiates the dehumanizing intellectual commitments of progressivism in favor of existentialist sensibilities about the self as the locus for freedom and political action. *Invisible Man* is thus among the first novels to give articulate form to public animus regarding New Deal liberalism within the context of anxieties regarding radical politics.

But, equally as important, Ellison's novel circulates a form of American existentialism that, I argue, undercuts the intellectual legitimacy of the New Deal reform agenda. In particular, the invisible man's alienation from national institutions and collective affiliations prompts his flight into the self as the only tenable avenue for subsequent political action. The retreat into the possibilities of the self in Ellison's National Book Award-winning novel thus marks the emerging cultural legitimacy of sensibilities about the self and the state that, I argue, would transform American political culture during the postwar decades.

Whereas Ellison's retreat into the self has direct consequences for institutional politics, Patricia Highsmith's fiction from the 1950s draws from the well of what Nathan Hale describes as psychoanalysis' "golden age of popularization" in the United States.⁴⁸ Psychoanalysis and its eccentric cousin, the existential psychology movement, provide for Highsmith an intellectual bannister for framing the anxieties of the early Cold War era. I argue, in particular, that the wider normalization of therapeutic psychology contributed to the eroding grounds for an interventionist welfare state by widely disseminating psychological—rather than environmental or socio-economic—explanatory templates for social phenomena. In contrast to the literature of the long Progressive era and certain strains of literary naturalism, which had acquired canonical status in the United States during the 1930s, the ego and its vicissitudes become the dominant template in the 1950s for understanding society and the self. While Highsmith's novels from the decade mark the development of these intellectual shifts, she also recasts cultural representations of phenomena such as violence, murder, alienation, class envy, and social mobility in ways that helped redesign a changing literary arena. Highsmith helps to circulate these templates by drawing on the tropes of psychoanalysis, but, more importantly, she repudiates a narrative world

⁴⁸ Nathan Hale, Jr., *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917-1985* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 276.

governed by structural, socio-economic, and environmental conditions. In effect, the existential turmoil of the mind becomes the chief structuring principle for her construal of social space. In contrast to naturalists like Theodore Dreiser, then, Highsmith presents the darker corners of human experience as phenomena of the largely autonomous, internal arena of an existential psyche. These shifts in literary tastes, I argue, augment the waning intellectual legitimacy of the New Deal regulatory impulse during the 1950s.

The role of American existentialist thought in transforming the political culture of the United States takes a distinctive turn in the work of Walker Percy. His National Book Award-winning novel *The Moviegoer* (1961) retools existentialist sensibilities about individual consciousness as the linchpin of authenticity alongside anxieties about the state as an alienating institution. Percy's nexus of concerns gives definition to the social *angst* that a bureaucratic New Deal state trivializes the self for the sake of social welfare. Percy's fiction after *The Moviegoer*—particularly *Love in the Ruins* (1971) and *Lancelot* (1978)—explores a form of existentialism that is shorn of the radical political commitments of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus. Among the consequences of this translation of existentialism is that Percy validates public animus toward an activist managerial state on the grounds that such an institution impinges upon the authentic life of the self. By following the development of these anxieties, I show that Percy's novels chart the cultural maturation of what he describes as a “sovereign” form of selfhood and its emergence at the center of gravity for American social thinking—a phenomenon that I suggest leaves partisan and institutional affiliations as casualties of an emerging political culture.

Even as these novelists bring definition to various aspects of the public animus toward New Deal reform, they also circulate alternative sensibilities about the self and the state that would contribute to the transformation of American intellectual life. The standard political

history after the collapse of the New Deal Coalition in 1968 is that American liberalism decamps from politics into “identity politics” and the cultural wars more generally. Tod Gitlin, for example, explains that after 1968 “activists cooled, beaten and disappointed *in the measure they were once hopeful and desperate.*” While the “Right counterorganized,” American progressivism “squandered its own values.” Those who had been mobilized against Johnson and the war in Vietnam were “pulled away: attracted to the once fortified, now alluring satisfactions of private life.”⁴⁹ While Gitlin laments the unraveling of the organized progressive movement, Walter Benn Michaels describes the post-1968 trajectory of progressivism within a wider drift “from the universalist logic of conflict as difference of opinion to the posthistoricist logic of conflict as difference in subject position.”⁵⁰ Michaels argues that this shift in American thought is rooted in the “postmodernism” (or “posthistoricism,” for the two are synonymous for Michaels) that was formulated in Europe in 1967-1968 and quickly imported into the United States. The “triumph” of this development is that culture, rather than ideology, becomes the site of disagreement.⁵¹ Similarly, for Gitlin, the New Left gets “dismissed” within an “antipolitical culture,” as if its brand of progressivism were “a set of discarded clothes or a groovy nostalgia trip.”⁵² Thus, the conflict between progressives and American political institutions fades into the background of the so-called “culture wars” of the 1970s and 1980s.⁵³

⁴⁹ Tod Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1989), 420.

⁵⁰ Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 33. For Michaels’ philosophical and literary history, see particularly pp. 51-66.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 181-82.

⁵² Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 421.

⁵³ For the standard account of the rise of the “culture wars,” see James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

Despite the perspicuity of these accounts of post-1968 American political culture, they nonetheless belie the intellectual settlements and cultural shifts that took place in American life from 1945 to the early 1960s. Indeed, rather than marking the creation of a political vacuum in 1968—a moment when conservative politics supposedly seized the day and thus enjoyed a period of ascendancy culminating in the presidency of Ronald Reagan—this dissertation traces a more fluid political history, one in which mutual but unevenly constitutive cultural voices and intellectual movements converge with wider historical phenomena to reshape American political sensibilities. The novels that I consider are at once markers of wider intellectual developments as well as determinative forces in their own right. They are, in other words, both causes and effects of the changing intellectual fabric of the postwar era—a cultural dialogue imbricated within a social debate. Nabokov, Ellison, Highsmith, and Percy contributed to the shape of American intellectual life by framing public animus toward the prevailing political order while at the same time circulating solutions tailored to the social crises they helped to define. Moreover, they gave a cultural imprimatur to emerging sensibilities while criticizing other forms of social thinking. That is to say, the causes-and-effects of these novels not only contributed to the unraveling legitimacy of the New Deal reform agenda; they also converged with other historical phenomena to change American political culture. The image here is a kind of historical atonality, a composition without a single governing key. Rather than a history of the conflicts and policies that ripple outward from the center of organized power, then, the crisis of the New Deal welfare state from 1945 until the early 1960s is, in fact, a labyrinth of forces and feelings, institutions and enthusiasms. The spread of American existentialism, a growing demand for arenas of civil society, the contracting spectrum of progressivism, and the development of private therapeutic psychology each provide threads for navigating this labyrinth.

One of the difficulties of tracing political history is the temptation to institute rigid breaks, moments of interruption where a new age or altogether different political order begins. The notion of the so-called “Reagan Revolution” is representative of such a tendency. According to this version of political history, Reagan, employing executive power, instituted major shifts in the landscape of American economics and politics that were patterned on the work of the economist Milton Friedman. In effect, Reagan did what the Republicans and Democrats of the 1970s had failed to do: he formed a broad, new coalition that consolidated partisan power and offered a distinctive vision for American political life. Thomas B. Edsall, sketching the backstory of this standard narrative, suggests that the electoral successes for Democrats in the mid-1970s were merely short-term gains that represent, if anything, the lack of cohesion enjoyed by either party. “Watergate, and America’s defeat under Republican leadership in Vietnam,” Edsall claims, “produced major congressional victories for the Democrats in 1974 and gave them the presidency in 1976.” That is to say, the Republicans fumbled the opportunity created by the Democratic crisis of 1968, but Edsall insists that conservatives soon recovered the ball: “All those [Democratic] gains and more were swept away in 1980 with Ronald Reagan’s victory and the Republican takeover of the Senate.”⁵⁴ The “Reagan Revolution” of 1980, according to this view, is the consolidation of electoral power that took place after the weak party coalitions of the 1970s and, in particular, the “stagflation” that plagued Democrats during Carter’s presidency.⁵⁵ Reagan stepped into a lacuna in political power, writing an original script for the United States.

⁵⁴ Thomas B. Edsall, *Building Red America: The New Conservative Coalition and the Drive for Permanent Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 3.

⁵⁵ See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24-25. Stagflation refers to the perilous convergence of inflation, unemployment, and economic stagnation that developed during the early years of Carter’s administration. Carter responded to this crisis, in part, by deregulating the airlines and trucking industries.

Among the problems with this version of political history is that it relies on an institutional view of politics and social power, one concentrated primarily in the Executive Office and presidential election cycles. When measured in terms of public economic policy, however, the transformation in American politics actually has a long legislative history preceding Reagan's election. One of the most conspicuous indicators of these shifts is the growing disparity of household incomes in the United States beginning in the mid-1970s. For example, as the political scientists Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson argue, one of the central contributing factors to growing income inequality is the shift in tax policy in the United States. Changing structure of federal taxation has, in effect, allowed those at the very top of the tax code to retain an increasingly larger share of after-tax income. As Hacker and Pierson summarize, "Although the early years of the Reagan administration figure prominently, the change began in the 1970s. The initial drop [in progressive taxation] came through large cuts in the capital gains tax and other taxes on the well-to-do passed, after very intense business lobbying, by a Congress composed of large Democratic majorities in both chambers and signed into law by a Democratic president."⁵⁶ Whereas other accounts of growing American inequality explain the shift as a result of global integration, changing technology, partisan occupations of the White House, or heightened domestic competition, Hacker and Pierson demonstrate that the sharp rise in income inequality since the late 1970s is "causally related" to dispersed and sustained shifts throughout the preceding decade in public political behavior and organized influences, which shaped "large-scale public policies that mediate distributional outcomes."⁵⁷ These policy shifts, in other words,

⁵⁶ Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, "Winner-Take-All Politics: Public Policy, Political Organization, and the Precipitous Rise of Top Incomes in the United States," *Politics & Society* 38.2 (2010): 184.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

were not caused by political-partisan fiat in 1979-1980; rather, organizational interests inordinately influenced the economic landscape of the late 1960s and 1970s, while policy makers either failed to update key public policies to reflect the growing strength of employers, or they even appeared to stack the political deck in favor of the wealthiest. Political history charted through momentous breaks such as the “Reagan Revolution” belie such cumulative changes across decades of public life, thought, and institutions.

For this reason, the often-invoked idea of “neoliberalism” is deeply suspect. Marxists such as David Harvey and conservatives such as Edwin J. Feulner more or less agree on defining neoliberalism as a political philosophy that promotes free markets, limited government, and personal liberty under the rule of law.⁵⁸ Dieter Plehwe, however, argues that this understanding is a “premature identification of one school of neoliberal thought with the whole.” Plehwe instead points to a “neoliberal thought collective” that differs drastically in both “political philosophy and political practice” throughout the world.⁵⁹ For Plehwe, the plurality of “hegemonic neoliberalism” demands comparative study: “Although individual freedom served as a key value of neoliberalism in the effort to rally the opposition against the socialist regimes of Eastern Europe,” he argues instead that “it continues to be difficult to reconcile the neoliberal message of individualism and freedom with the history of authoritarian neoliberal regimes in Latin America, for example.”⁶⁰ That is to say, “neoliberalism” is at its most coherent as a signifier when defining global phenomena that are themselves often disarticulated by conflicts

⁵⁸ See Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 23. Edwin J. Feulner, *Intellectual Pilgrims: The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Mont Pèlerin Society* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 1999), 2.

⁵⁹ Dieter Plehwe, Introduction, *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*, eds. Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

and contradictions. These global differences and even the notion of a “hegemonic” order depend upon too general of a register to provide any significant intellectual traction when describing the specific changes in a national political culture. To situate the transformation and dismantling of the American welfare state from 1945 until 1989 within the rise of “neoliberalism” is, in other words, about as helpful as describing a starfish as an organism. The global term would, when figured into a historically specific and geographically limited study, obscure the particular and the granular.

For this reason, I describe the political culture that develops alongside the transformation of the New Deal welfare state as the “New Conservatism,” although this term, too, perhaps implies a false rupture—a misleading “newness.”⁶¹ In point of fact, the history of New Deal reform seems to be an interregnum in the at best modestly regulated development of American industrial capitalism and the volatile, speculative financial sector of the late nineteenth century. The labor historians Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore show that the Depression created extraordinary circumstances leading to what they describe as a “Long Exception,” the temporary emergence of a New Deal regulatory state that serves as more of an aberration in American history tied to the exigencies of 1929-1939 and not the inauguration of a permanent break from the political economy of the 1920s. Thus, following the economist Paul Krugman, Cowie and Salvatore suggest that the 1970s, rather than being the institutionalization of a new form of

⁶¹ However, unlike the volatile economy of the 1920s, it is worth noting that the capitalist wage structure during the postwar era became entangled within an increasingly globalized market. For this reason, as well as the advent of nuclear warfare and a second “scare” regarding the spread of communism, the New Conservatism of the postwar era is distinguishable from the political culture that preceded the early New Deal.

political economy, were in fact the last days of the “interregnum between Gilded Ages.”⁶² Using income inequality as the guiding marker for this interregnum, Claudia Goldin and Robert A. Margo similarly show that an increased demand for unskilled labor incited largely by public works programs, the wartime economy of 1940-1945, and the efforts of the National War Labor Board “compressed” the wage gap during the 1940s. The regulatory and managerial reforms of the 1930s had not only ushered the nation out of the Depression but also into an unprecedented era of wage “compression,” which Goldin and Margo show lasted until the mid-1960s.⁶³ Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez likewise identify a “U-shaped pattern” in concentrated wealth across the twentieth century, while “top incomes” also began to expand in the late 1960s.⁶⁴ In both sets of accounts, by 1985 the wage gap had risen back to its pre-war disparities and the wage structure itself returned to the level of inequality sustained throughout the 1920s until the crash of the stock market.

If the opposition to concentrated economic power through a regulatory state was beset by intellectual opposition and public animus during the 1950s and 1960s through the advent of a “New Conservative” political culture, part of this story is undoubtedly non-literary. Thomas Piketty, in his theory of the general trend toward income inequality throughout the twentieth century, maintains that without firm regulations capital always increases at a greater rate than

⁶² Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore, “The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 74 (2008): 1-32. For Krugman’s description, see Paul Krugman, “For Richer,” *New York Times Magazine* (20 October 2002).

⁶³ Claudia Goldin and Robert A. Margo, “The Great Compression: The Wage Structure in the United State at Mid-Century,” *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper*, No. 3817 (August 1991), 1-14. According to the data by Goldin and Margo, the early 1970s are more or less a period of stagnant wages, while the late 1970s begins the period of rapid wage disparity.

⁶⁴ Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, “Income Inequality in the United States, 1913-1998,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118.1 (2003): 1-39.

labor, thus suggesting that income inequality is the inevitable result of a weak regulatory structure. Piketty traces a score of institutional shifts, tax-based disparities, and legislative mechanisms through which concentrated wealth (i.e. non-income) has acquired ascendancy over wage-earning labor. When describing these shifts in American monetary policy as they developed during the 1960s, Piketty notes a change in the economic theory surrounding the causes of the Great Depression and the subsequent deflationary spiral throughout the 1930s. Pointing to Milton Friedman's influential study *Monetary History of the United States* (1963), Piketty explains:

For Friedman, no doubt is possible: it was the unduly restrictive policy of the Federal Reserve that transformed the stock market crash into a credit crisis and plunged the economy into a deflationary spiral and a depression of unprecedented magnitude. The crisis was primarily monetary, and therefore its solution was also monetary. From this analysis, Friedman drew a clear political conclusion: in order to ensure regular, undisrupted growth in a capitalist economy, it is necessary and sufficient to make sure that monetary policy is designed to ensure steady growth of the money supply. Accordingly, monetarist doctrine held that the New Deal, which created a large number of government jobs and social transfer programs, was a costly and useless sham. [...] The work of Friedman and other Chicago School economists fostered suspicion of the ever-expanding state and created the intellectual climate in which the conservative revolution of 1979-1980 became possible.⁶⁵

The *severity* of the Great Depression became, according to Friedman's account, a *consequence* of New Deal interventionism. When Friedman won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1976, his argument had already become the last intellectual nail in the coffin of the New Deal managerial state.

Yet the changes in economic policy and theory that began in the late 1960s do not account fully for the growing din of public anxieties directed against the welfare state in the preceding decades. Indeed, the economic data on public policy, income inequality, and global

⁶⁵ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (trans. Arthur Goldhammer; Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2014), 548-49.

trends toward “neoliberalization” often overlook the fluid cultural debates that followed the Second World War. The intellectual framing of these debates and their various public settlements would shape how Americans understood their political institutions and individual liberties. The novelists and wider intellectual movements that I consider contributed to that intellectual framing in ways that would prove decisive for the collapsing legitimacy of the New Deal reform agenda and the decline of an American regulatory state. The “rise” of the New Conservatism, then, is a feature of the crises besetting the New Deal in the 1950s and 1960s—an intercalation in the shifting structures of thought and feeling in postwar liberalism.

It is worth noting finally that, not without irony, my definition of “conservative” agrees in its basic form with the libertarian thinker Friedrich Hayek, who claims, “A conservative movement, by its very nature, is bound to be a defender of established privilege and to lean on the power of government for the protection of privilege.”⁶⁶ Unlike Hayek, however, this dissertation maintains that a regulatory state and the broader reform agenda of the early New Deal impeded entrenched economic privilege, rather than fostered it. The transformation of the reformist legacy during the postwar years (1945-1968) into a contractual-compensatory set of programs divested of a regulatory edifice bore little resemblance to the *ad hoc* agenda constructed in 1933-1938. This transformation of the New Deal, in fact, allowed for the economic volatility of the 1970s (e.g., the so-called “stagflation” during the Carter administration), particularly by weakening securities for organized labor and allowing for a broader return to the income inequality of the 1920s. To put this point another way, the intellectual crises and cultural anxieties assailing New Deal reform structures during the 1950s and 1960s comprise the early history of the rapid income inequality that began in the late 1960s

⁶⁶ F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, vol. II in *The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 46.

and escalated in the 1970s. The political culture that first begins to circulate and garner legitimacy during the late 1940s and 1950s sowed the seeds for this increasingly unequal national landscape. Therefore, the resurgence of concentrated economic power is, I hope to show, to an important degree a consequence of postwar realignments in American political culture.

In the following chapters, I trace certain key features of these realignments as they emerge in the wake of postwar intellectual trends. An important part of this emerging New Conservatism is the rise of the idea of civil society in the political and theoretical discourse of the period. As I show in the first chapter, intellectuals and artists alike call for arenas of public life autonomous from a managerial state. The idea of civil society, for all its progressive possibilities, contributed to the public sensibility that federal interventionism constitutes the antithesis of democracy, the impoverishment of a vibrant private life. One current of this form of political thinking defined “liberty” in relation to—i.e. as a state of independence from—regulatory authority, rather than as a function of socio-economic mobility. John Locke had offered one form of such a definition in his *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1689): “The *natural liberty* of man,” Locke argues, “is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but to have only the law of nature for his rule.” Despite this aversion to abstract governmental power, Locke’s contractual argument nonetheless distinguishes between *arbitrary* and *consensual* forms of legislative power, where the former is defined as any law that subjects the individual “to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man.”⁶⁷ During the postwar moment, the legitimate “consensual” forms of legislative authority are not only increasingly contested—Is progressive taxation arbitrary? Do

⁶⁷ John Locke, *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 1980), 17.

protections for collective bargaining subject the individuals in the business community to undue authority? Is a planned economy incompatible with democracy?—but also a rising tide of voices helping to shape postwar American political culture construed the economic as a *function* of the private. That is to say, the economic as an arena of private life, rather than public conditions, gets new traction in the postwar decades. This aestheticization of the economic—its reemergence from a structural and public category to being a bellwether of the individual’s life and judgments—is one of the principal fronts in the shifting political terrain of postwar America.

Another feature of this emerging political culture is a resuscitated and reconfigured antipathy toward centralized authority, which becomes the *bête noire* not only of the likes of Barry Goldwater but also many postwar progressives who drank liberally from European existentialist thought. The HUAC investigations during the 1950s and mounting public fears regarding global communism cultivated an environment hostile to the spectrum of progressive politics. An American idiom of existentialist thought augmented this transformation of U.S. political culture in a variety of ways, not the least of which was that this intellectual trend nurtured suspicions of centralized authority and organized politics. The coincidence of existentialist anti-establishment sensibilities and Cold War anxieties would help to recast public perception of a strong centralized federal authority as a marker of alienation and unfreedom, rather than a conduit for equality.

Even as the spectrum of progressivism constricted during the immediate postwar decades, a new variety of modes of understanding society and the self competed for public viability on radio programs, television screens, and in the burgeoning book trade. The American “culture industry,” as Theodore Adorno argued in the 1940s, tended to subsume the particular under the

universal.⁶⁸ One way that many intellectuals and, pace Adorno, even the culture industry itself reacted against such anxieties regarding conformist scripts was to affirm the individual, the particular, and explore certain explanatory frameworks that were attentive to the diversity of private experience. This aspiration affected American political culture under the influence of a developing range of professional psychologies, which framed angst and socially aberrant behavior in terms of the individual psyche. In other words, many postwar critics and artists—for reasons that were far from economically or socially conservative—redesigned the modes of their social thinking to attend to the particular psychological vicissitudes of individuals, which in turn not only marked a shift away from environmental and socio-economic narratives in fiction but also a deprecation in the status of structural intervention among many intellectuals. The pseudo-science of postwar therapeutic psychologies contributed to the political sensibility that whatever social ills an American might experience, those troubles were phenomena of a largely internal arena. Thus, during the 1950s, the personal first became the political, and the upshot was that the idea of “social welfare” among postwar liberals increasingly became a measure of individual opportunity, not guaranteed security.

These particular shifts in the political culture of postwar America are limited but nonetheless important features of the transformation and dismantling of the New Deal. After FDR suffered what his cardiologist deemed a stroke on April 12, 1945, the challenges facing the New Deal quickly escalated. As Randall B. Woods puts it, “the political waters were roiled to a

⁶⁸ See the collection of essays on mass culture from the late 1930s and 1940s in Theodore Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 2001). See also Helmut Dahmer, “Adorno’s View of Psychoanalysis,” *Thesis Eleven* 111(1): 97-109.

degree the country had not seen since the onset of the Great Depression.”⁶⁹ A conservative coalition in Congress, which had gathered steam and crossed party lines after the debates among New Dealers in 1938, immediately seized upon this sense of crisis and began to roll back wartime controls on the national economy. Soon, the New Deal was beset in Congress, which in September of 1945 “enacted the most far-reaching antiunion bill ever passed by a national legislature.”⁷⁰ Even as legislative politics began to shift dramatically, an already diverse public political culture in the United States underwent considerable changes and further disarticulations. “So ended an era,” the novelist Allen Drury reportedly said upon hearing the news of Roosevelt’s death, “and so began another.”⁷¹ Many features of this new era, as the following chapters show, cannot be properly understood apart from the heterogeneous cultural and intellectual transformations in postwar American life.

⁶⁹ Randall B. Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 180.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁷¹ Qtd. in David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 427.

CHAPTER 1: A “WORLD OF INFINITE POSSIBILITIES”: *INVISIBLE MAN*
AND THE TWILIGHT OF NEW DEAL AMERICA

The bookends of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) depict the nameless narrator at a moment when he has “take[n] up residence underground.”⁷² As the invisible man flees two policemen, who suspect that he has somehow been involved in a Harlem race riot, he inadvertently falls down a manhole. In a figurative attempt to seal his fate, the policemen enclose the invisible man in the dark underground space by drawing the sewer’s metal cover. Being cordoned off from society as a “goddam black nigger sonofabitch,” as one of the policemen puts it, prompts the invisible man to draw larger conclusions from his social and political marginalization: “This is the way it’s always been,” he explains, “only now I know it” (566). Not only does the invisible man’s forced retreat underground become something of a metaphor for black Americans in the postwar era—a symbol of their invisible and subhuman status within society, as well as their legally sanctioned segregation—but the invisible man’s narration from the underground also situates his story on an existentialist threshold between alienation and action: “The hibernation is over,” he claims. “I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath. There’s a stench in the air, which, from this distance underground, might be the smell either of death or of spring—I hope of spring” (580).

The “stench” that concerns the invisible man recalls the “bad air” that vexes Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), where the philosopher asks, “What, of all things, am I unable to tolerate? The only thing which I find it impossible to deal with, which makes me choke

⁷² Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, [1952] 1995), 571. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

and languish? Bad air! Bad air!” Nietzsche later explains that this bad air circulates in a “workshop where ideals are fabricated—it seems to me to stink of nothing but lies.”⁷³ For Nietzsche, metaphysical illusions and the lies society tells itself about morality create an intolerable house of cards, a constructed and self-deluded world. He looks instead for the truthfulness and bold self-assertion of an individual (on the model of his *Zarathustra* (1883-1885)), who will demolish the teetering socio-philosophical structure. Ellison’s invisible man, directing his critique against the manufactured color line that belts American society, has similarly come to “better understand my relation to [the world] and it to me.” Much like Nietzsche’s disgust with manufactured ideals, the invisible man arraigns the unrealized American values of equality and freedom—what he terms “The Great Constitutional Dream Book” (280). He has “come a long way from those days when, full of illusion, I lived a public life and attempted to function under the assumption that the world was solid and all the relationships therein” (576). The invisible man discovers a false rigidity underlying the color line of his society: that world and its racial divisions, rather than being a fixed reality, are actually impermanent inventions. Far from being “solid,” the invisible man finds that his segregated and racially stratified world is constructed from a multitude of illusions.

Ellison also avowedly stylizes the invisible man’s predicament after the fashion of the vacillating, erratic narrator of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (1864) (*Invisible* xix).⁷⁴ Dostoevsky’s underground man “settle[s] into” a “wretched, bad” corner of a room on the edge of Petersburg, and this vantage point affords him the distance and clarity of thought to evaluate

⁷³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (trans. Douglas Smith; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 28, 32.

⁷⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky; New York: Knopf, 2004). Hereafter cited parenthetically.

his society (7). While critics such as Paul W. Nisly have long noted the parallels between *Invisible Man* and Dostoevsky's novel, the political parallels of the allusion have often been overlooked.⁷⁵ In particular, the underground man is especially galled by Nikolai Chernyshevsky's radical novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863), which was later a foundational text for Vladimir Lenin and the Russian Revolution. Chernyshevsky's novel provides the subtext for much of the underground man's harangues against rationality and deterministic forces. More pointedly, the underground man casts thinly veiled ridicule upon Chernyshevsky's philosophy for its socialist utopianism, advancing in its place a form of proto-existentialist individualism. Dostoevsky's narrator asserts, for example, that in contrast to the "science" that grounds his opponents' views, "the chiefest and dearest thing" is "our personality and our individuality" (28). The underground man explains that "choice can, of course, if it chooses, be in agreement with reason [...] But very often, and even most often, choice is utterly and stubbornly opposed to reason" (25). For Dostoevsky's narrator, the burden of individual freedom—the capacity for "free unfettered choice"—is greater than the rational or socially profitable (23). Collective planning and economic interest fall to the wayside when confronted with freedom, vacillating and contradictory as it may be. As a cousin to the underground man and his notions on selfhood, Ellison's protagonist likewise finds himself on the cusp of a world of freedom and self-creation at the expense of leftist politics. The narrator rejects "[Brother] Jack and the boys," a leadership

⁷⁵ Paul W. Nisly, "A Modernist Impulse: *Notes from Underground* as Model," *College Literature* 4.2 (Spring 1977): 152-58. For a now-dated survey of these connections, see Joseph Frank, "Ralph Ellison and Dostoevsky," in *Through the Russian Prism: Essays on Literature and Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990). See also Dale E. Peterson, "Underground Notes: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin, and the African American Novel," *Bucknell Review: A Scholarly Journal of Letters, Arts and Sciences* 43.2 (2000): 31-46; and Maria R. Bloshteyn, "Rage and Revolt: Dostoevsky and Three African-American Writers," *Comparative Literature Studies* 38.4 (2001): 277-309.

suggestive of the political left in postwar America,⁷⁶ along with their “scientific objectivity” about what is in the “best interest” of the masses (576, 505). Instead, the invisible man concludes, “I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of the times.” In contrast to the problems of class structures and rational socio-economic planning that avowedly preoccupy the Brotherhood, Ellison’s narrator concludes, “my world has become one of infinite possibilities” (576).

Given the racist cruelty and social barriers that the invisible man encounters, his final assertion of a world of unlegislated possibilities at first seems paradoxical, if not outright contradictory. The atavistic “battle royal” in which the invisible man is thrust by white men from his Southern town, the deceptions of Dr. Bledsoe that frustrate his employment in the North, the injuries and torturous shock treatment he receives at the paint plant—all of these affronts appear to undermine the idea that his world is “one of infinite possibilities.” In fact, the invisible man seems to encounter limited opportunity at every turn. His otherwise contradictory set of conclusions makes sense, however, when set in the context of the postwar decline of leftist politics and the rise of existentialism to cultural and intellectual importance in postwar America. As Arnold Rampersad explains, *Invisible Man* presents existentialism “to be uniquely authentic to the story of [the invisible man] and the Negro,” at least insofar as existentialism is “properly

⁷⁶ Ellison repeatedly asserted that the Brotherhood is an invention, not a veiled image of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). Still, as Arnold Rampersad puts it, “[the Brotherhood] is the key metaphor Ellison uses to assail the totalitarian left in its dealings with blacks” (245). Thus, even if it is not a caricature of the CPUSA itself, with its socio-economic analysis the Brotherhood is nonetheless a figure for the eroding intellectual legitimacy of the left during the postwar years. The Brotherhood’s commitment to the “class struggle,” for example, never seems to conquer *racial* politics, nor is it ever a sufficient answer for the invisible man (*Invisible Man* 418). See Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

identified in its Negro strain.”⁷⁷ In other words, the invisible man transforms his alienated underground position into a liminal space, a threshold for the prospect of individual self-production and existential possibility. Being forced into the role of an outcast, he retreats into the self and articulates a form of freedom tied to individual self-assertion. Emerging in the wake of his damning representations of the communist-like Brotherhood and the radical black nationalist leader, Ras the Destroyer, the invisible man has been ostracized from all other political and societal collectives, and thus he construes “freedom” and “action” as burdens of the self.

Despite the invisible man’s assertion that his existential humanism putatively contradicts the “trend of the times,” Ellison’s novel actually figures as an archetypal case in the eroding public consensus for progressive politics. To be sure, *Invisible Man* marks a transitional moment in the life of its author from his youthful leftism in the 1930s and 40s to his later alliances with the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in the 1960s. As Michael Szalay has shown, Ellison would later motivate support through his essays and unfinished novel for a Democratic Party that had recently reinvented itself through a public commitment to civil rights.⁷⁸ Situated between this later pragmatic liberalism and his early radical commitments, *Invisible Man* is thus a marker of Ellison’s development as an intellectual and, more broadly, the declining fortunes of leftist politics in the United States—of both the communist and New Deal varieties. Through its positioning of the invisible man outside the institutional mainstream of American society as well as nationalism and communism, Ellison’s novel marks a watershed in American cultural and political history for the felt crises about collective belonging it helps to define and, in turn, the sensibilities about the self that it helped to circulate.

⁷⁷ Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 245.

⁷⁸ Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

***Invisible Man*, the Vicissitudes of the Left, and the Twilight of New Deal Liberalism**

Ellison was completing *Invisible Man* as Senator Joseph McCarthy began a witch-hunt for communists. While it is not the case that Ellison simply kowtowed to early rumblings of the so-called Second Red Scare (1950-1956), this vitriolic conservative movement is nonetheless a marker of the shifting winds of the postwar era with which *Invisible Man* is in dialogue. Indeed, Ellison's unfavorable representation of the Brotherhood signals the waning intellectual and cultural legitimacy of leftist politics in New Deal America—a problem of societal validity that participated in the gradual decline of FDR's welfare state. Ellison's protagonist first encounters a representative of leftist politics when he meets a member of the Brotherhood. This organization approaches the narrator after he delivers an impassioned speech against the eviction of an elderly couple in Harlem. "Sister" Provo and her eighty-seven-year-old husband had lived in the apartment for over twenty years. However, having failed to pay the rent one month, a leasing agent evicts the couple, which incites a group of Harlem residents to disgust and anger. Before the group turns violent on the white "paddies" enforcing the eviction, the invisible man intervenes and delivers his second public speech of the novel. He insists that, rather than turning to violence, the group ought to be "law-abiding" and "*Organize*" (276). After learning that the elderly man is a "day laborer," the invisible man asks, "Where has all his labor gone?" Then, rather than isolating the couple's plight, the invisible man signals that their suffering is representative of a collective problem: "we're out in the snow with them" (279). Perhaps recalling the title of Chernyshevsky's novel that was so enervating to Dostoevsky's protagonist, Ellison even has his narrator ask, "*What is to be done?*" (277). The invisible man answers this question by leading the group to force their way back into the apartment and return the elderly couple's evicted possessions.

The invisible man's speech thus invokes categories that resonate with the concerns of the working-class, and he even inspires action against an instance of socio-economic injustice. A member in the leadership of the leftist organization, Brother Jack, observes the invisible man's intervention, and he offers him a position in the Brotherhood as its representative in Harlem. At first, the invisible man is hesitant because, among other reasons, he is suspicious of how Brother Jack dismisses the importance of the elderly couple's plight on an individual level. Yet, after returning to his apartment in Harlem, the invisible man decides to accept Brother Jack's offer because he would otherwise fail to pay his rent. The narrator quickly becomes prominent in the Harlem branch of the Brotherhood, even as he earns an income that far exceeds his earlier limited economic opportunities. He also has access to certain social circles—mainly among upper-class, white progressives—that he never encountered during his life in the South.

Yet the narrator also discovers the racially toned fissures in this edifice of leftist equality when he reaches the ceiling for leadership set for the organization's black members. Brother Wrestrum, a jealous gadfly in the Harlem offices, accuses the narrator of being a "petty individualist" (401), and the allegation of self-aggrandizement prompts an internal review requiring the narrator to "slow down." The racial undertones of the Brotherhood's decision dawn on the narrator after he is reinstated and returns to Harlem, where he finds that his friend and fellow member of the Brotherhood, Tod Clifton, has disappeared. The narrator eventually finds Clifton selling "Sambo" dolls on the street. A caricature of the obsequious slave, the Sambo doll serves as Clifton's symbol for how the Brotherhood uses its Harlem members—and the black masses more generally. Clifton signals as much during his "spiel" about the doll:

*He'll make you laugh, he'll make you sigh, si-igh.
He'll make you want to dance, and dance—
Here you are, ladies and gentlemen, Sambo,
The dancing doll.*

Buy one for your baby. Take him to your girl friend and she'll love you, loove you!
He'll keep you entertained. He'll make you weep sweet— (431)

In an attempt to sell the dolls, Clifton sexualizes the entertainment. Sambo will make the audience “*si-igh*,” incite “*loove*,” and even elicit a pleasurable or “*sweet*” sorrow. Alluding to the sexualization of black Americans in the white imaginary, the entertainment that Sambo provides is also a symbolic characterization of the role played by the black members of the Brotherhood. Clifton explains that Sambo “*lives upon the sunshine of [his audience’s] lordly smile*” (432). Sambo’s existence is predicated upon the entertainment and benevolence he elicits. He croons and bows for “*the brotherly two bits of a dollar*” (433). Like Sambo, whatever brotherhood Clifton had experienced is, the performance suggests, only the “*two bits*” buying his loyalty. The black members of the Brotherhood are, in other words, merely token cases for equality; their actual function is to please the organization’s wealthy supporters, to make their bleeding progressive hearts “*weep sweet*.” The presence of Harlem representatives is itself only a performance.

Clifton’s Sambo doll also recalls for the narrator an earlier moment in his life prior to emigrating north. Before he is forced into the Battle Royal, one of the rich white Southerners uses “Sambo” as a racial slur to describe the narrator (26). In this earlier instance, a white audience forces the invisible man into a dehumanizing situation for their pleasure in exchange for a college scholarship. Like the invisible man’s “Sambo” performance, Clifton’s doll suggests the dehumanizing place assigned to black members of the Brotherhood: in exchange for a livable income and admission to parties at the Chthonian Hotel, these “brothers” stage performances of racial equality and leftist action. Indeed, when the narrator is first inducted into the Brotherhood, he attends a large party where he is given a new name. Emma, a wealthy

progressive, promptly gives the invisible man three hundred dollars for his rent and clothing. Then, after a toast, Brother Jack says to the narrator, “Now for some pleasure,” and sweeps him away to be “introduced by [his] new name” (310, 311). He becomes the center of the party, eliciting support for the organization and its work in Harlem. Clifton’s performance calls this event into question, however, as the “Sambo” doll becomes a figure for the black man not only among white Southerners but also northern leftists. Indeed, these “Sambo” performances in the novel suggest that the social gulf between the two—the leftist intellectuals and racist Southerners—is not actually all that wide.

This imbrication of leftist politics and a performing racialized figure surfaces again after the invisible man is temporarily “demoted” to promoting women’s rights. One evening the narrator gives a speech explaining the party’s position on the equality of women, and afterwards a member of the organization lures him into her apartment under the pretext of discussing “my little ideological twists and turns” (412). What becomes evident about these “twists and turns,” however, is that this woman’s interest in the party’s doctrine blends with her erotic view of the narrator as its exotic representative. She explains to the narrator, “you convey that great throbbing vitality of the movement.” His presence, she exclaims, is “so powerful, so—so *primitive!*” (413). The invisible man is representative of phallic power (“throbbing vitality”) but also an exotic interest (“*primitive*”). In fact, as the narrator continues to explain his “ideas” about “the Woman Question,” the “rapid, moth-fluttering of her lids become the softness of her lips.” His dissemination of political doctrine becomes a sexual act, a form of foreplay rather than intellectual “self-expression” (414). Presentation thus becomes representation: she “sees” not the invisible man but a pleasure-producing performance, which is as much representative of her exotic fantasies as of the role that he plays in the Brotherhood.

Presaging Clifton's Sambo doll, then, the narrator makes the woman "si-igh" as he at once becomes a symbol for a marginalized group and also a source of pleasure or entertainment. The novel's presentation of this leftist organization, then, calls into question the degree to which this form of collective politics is actually concerned with the wellbeing of racial minorities. In fact, when the narrator learns from Brother Hambro of the organization's decision to withdraw its support from Harlem, his suspicions about the sincerity of the Brotherhood are confirmed. Brother Hambro explains that, although the residents of Harlem have been moved to action, the Brotherhood now believes "they must be brought along more slowly." Seeing the color line that marks Hambro's statement, the invisible man asks, "Are you sure you're not saying that they must be held back?" (504). Indeed, Hambro earlier explains that some members are "expendable," that "some must make greater sacrifices than others" (501, 503). The narrator counters that these sacrifices are, quite conveniently, always made by "my people" (503). He realizes that, at its best, his presence in the leftist organization is little more than a token nod to equality, a form of entertainment requiring him to serve as an obsequious novelty. At its worst, though, the narrator suggests that minorities become the fodder for the left's sacrificial fires. As he puts it after Clifton is killed, "their entertainment had been his death" (446).

This damning depiction of the Brotherhood represents a transitional moment in Ellison's political and intellectual life. Beginning with his migration to New York in 1936, Ellison was incorporated into a milieu rife with popular front politics and left-leaning intellectuals. He became acquainted with Richard Wright, for example, through the generosity of another leftist writer, Langston Hughes. Wright helped Ellison with his first story "Hymie's Bull" and also encouraged his younger friend to pursue a career in writing rather than music. A significant part of this patronage involved tutelage in communist politics, although neither Ellison nor Wright

felt beholden to walk the official lines of the Communist Party. According to Rampersad, Ellison “probably became, at least for a while, a dues-paying Party member. [...] Later, Ralph only hinted at close ties to the Party during these years,” undoubtedly because membership had become increasingly unpopular as Cold War tensions were escalating in the early 1950s.⁷⁹ Ellison’s exact relationship to the Communist Party USA is less important, though, than the fact that he was part of a broad spectrum of leftist politics in the 1930s and 1940s.

While some critics do not distinguish the political vision of *Invisible Man* from Ellison’s work during the 1930s and 1940s,⁸⁰ several scholars have begun to reevaluate Ellison’s early career and his relationship to the left, presenting the author’s complicated position within the fluid intellectual life of New York. In the late 1990s, Barbara Foley revived the debate about Ellison’s early political allegiances, which his publishers seemingly tried to hide when the book was published.⁸¹ Foley argues that Ellison’s stories from the 1930s and 1940s—many of which were only published in the posthumous collection, *Flying Home and Other Stories*—demonstrate not only his early affinity for leftist politics but also his more or less orthodox Party ideology. Foley argues that “A Party Down at the Square,” an early short story that went unpublished until

⁷⁹ Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 93.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Shelby Steele, “The Content of His Character,” *New Republic* (1 March 1999): 27-34. John F. Callahan, Ellison’s literary executor, also seemingly understates the influence of the left upon the novelist (perhaps as Ellison would have wanted later in life). See John F. Callahan, “Introduction,” in *Flying Home and Other Stories* by Ralph Ellison (New York: Vintage, 1996).

⁸¹ Foley’s first articles on Ellison and leftist politics generated a great deal of interest in a subject that more or less had remained dormant for three decades. See Barbara Foley, “The Rhetoric of Anticommunism in *Invisible Man*,” *College English* 59 (1997): 530-47; “Reading Redness: Politics and Audience in Ralph Ellison’s Early Short Fiction,” *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 29 (1999): 323-39; “Ralph Ellison as Proletarian Journalist,” *Science and Society* 62 (1998-99): 537-56. Foley has recently expanded her argument and responded to her critics in Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010).

Flying Home, evinces Ellison's unwavering commitment to a leftist vision that he later scorns in *Invisible Man*. "A Party Down at the Square," Foley explains, depicts a brutal lynching in which racism "inflict[s] gruesome brutality upon blacks," even as it "produces a pro-capitalist false consciousness among white workers and divides the proletariat, leaving it vulnerable to complicity with fascism."⁸² Furthermore, considering early drafts of *Invisible Man*, Foley argues that Ellison's leftism was not simply abandoned when he began the novel. Rather, in early drafts of *Invisible Man*, the narrator treats the Brotherhood with considerably less hostility. As a result, Foley argues that Ellison's novel is "a conflicted and contradictory text bearing multiple traces of his struggle to repress and then abolish the ghost of his leftist consciousness and conscience."⁸³ In other words, *Invisible Man* is a palimpsest of the left's waning influence upon Ellison's intellectual life.

Michael Denning similarly situates Ellison's career during the 1930s and 1940s within what he calls the "cultural front," or the cultural activities of popular front politics.⁸⁴ Ellison edited *The Negro Quarterly* with Angelo Herndon, a prominent communist intellectual, and he published almost exclusively in leftist magazines, such as his story "Slick Gonna Learn," published in 1939 in *Direction*, and "The Birthmark," published in 1940 in *New Masses*, which was explicitly associated with the Communist Party USA. While Denning and Foley are at variance about the leftist orthodoxy and activism of Ellison's early years, they mount a convincing argument about his pre-war commitment to a broad leftist political orientation. In

⁸² Barbara Foley, "Reading Redness: Politics and Audience in Ralph Ellison's Early Short Fiction," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 29.3 (Fall 1999), 327.

⁸³ Foley, *Wrestling with the Left*, 7.

⁸⁴ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998), 332.

particular, Ellison's association with the left was defined by his commitment to class as a fundamental impetus for racial conflict, and his intellectual labor from this period is thus oriented toward documenting the plight of the dispossessed and working-class people.

According to Rampersad, Ellison first experienced significant conflict about his commitment to Communism around 1941, when his essays begin to cast a "vision of liberal cosmopolitanism" foreclosed by the Party.⁸⁵ During the war, Ellison began to distance himself from the radicalism of "black Communists" who idealized the Soviet Union, which had ruled that racial discrimination was illegal. Yet Ellison was also disgusted with the political violence of Soviet-style communism, and so the mid-1940s fostered political ambivalence as he fashioned a role of "artist" that increasingly excluded "political activist." Nonetheless, as late as 1948 Ellison quietly preserved hope that some form of communism might "survive and become a force again," particularly given the sluggish postwar economy and scarcity of goods.⁸⁶

In contrast to the work of his early career and his mid-1940s drift from communism, *Invisible Man* signals a shift in the contours of Ellison's politics. Raymond A. Mazurek explains that, with the novel's publication, Ellison suppressed many of his early stories and essays—as well as his place on the spectrum of leftist politics—"as he became a major U.S. writer during the early years of the Cold War."⁸⁷ Mazurek implies that the novelist was shrewd about his political past, but he rejects Foley's suggestion that Ellison presents a distorted picture of the left for the sake of his own career in McCarthy-era America. While Ellison may have prevaricated about his relationship as a young intellectual to the Communist Party or the left more generally,

⁸⁵ Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 142.

⁸⁶ Qtd. in Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 243.

⁸⁷ Raymond A. Mazurek, "Writer on the Left: Class and Race in Ellison's Early Fiction," *College Literature* 29.4 (Fall 2002), 110.

Mazurek argues, *Invisible Man* is more importantly representative of a common postwar response toward the Party by African Americans. Mazurek cites, for example, Larry Neal's famous essay, "Ellison's Zoot Suit," where Neal recalls "the detrimental role that the left wing has played in our struggle for self-determination and liberation."⁸⁸ Furthermore, Mazurek argues that Ellison's commitment to the black vernacular in *Invisible Man* refutes the idea that the novelist abandoned the concerns of the African American working class through his critique of the Brotherhood (a charge levied against him by the Black Arts Movement). Instead, Mazurek claims, "class politics are part of the ideological subtext of Ellison's later work, even while his explicit position rejected the working class militancy of the popular front and became a celebration of American democracy."⁸⁹ Mazurek argues, then, that the novel's commitment to the vernacular, or the narrator's famous affirmation of black Southern working-class identity ("I yam what I yam!"), undermines a critical taxonomy dependent upon rigid binaries between communism and American democracy (266).

Invisible Man is more than a reflection of Ellison's personal relationship to leftist politics, however, for the novel's depiction of the Brotherhood is also exemplary of a common phenomenon among postwar intellectuals. As Denning explains, a prominent part of the political scene of the 1930s and 1940s, contrary to the anxieties and consensus culture enforced by Cold War-era politics, was the "radical social-democratic movement forged around anti-fascism, anti-lynching, and the industrial unionism of the CIO."⁹⁰ According to Denning, this non-liberal leftist movement did not center on either the Communist Party USA or the American Workers

⁸⁸ Larry Neal, "Ellison's Zoot Suit," in *Visions of a Liberated Future* (ed. Michael Schwartz; New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1989).

⁸⁹ Mazurek, "Writer on the Left," 116.

⁹⁰ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xviii.

Party; rather, there was a diverse spectrum of leftist politics that was primarily concerned with securing equality and fair working conditions domestically, and opposing fascism abroad in the regimes of Italy, Spain, and Germany. Rather than collapsing leftism into Soviet-style communism, then, Denning offers a more inclusive account of the left by characterizing it in the terms of “popular front” politics. In other words, while the postwar era tended to think of leftism in terms of the Communist Party, the non-liberal left of the 1930s and 1940s was comprised of a spectrum of progressives who gained a great deal of intellectual and popular traction in their opposition to fascism. Indeed, following Denning, Wendy Wall explains that the “popular front” progressives successfully billed communism as “twentieth-century Americanism” during the early years of the New Deal era.⁹¹ The “radical thirties” thus garnered intellectual and political legitimacy for the American left during a time when fascism (rather than Soviet-style communism) was seen as the primary force antithetical to American political and social values.

Thus, while the intellectual landscape was more diverse than the consensus culture of the Cold War years, the political landscape of 1930s New Deal America was also less preoccupied with anti-communist anxieties. The programs and policies of the New Deal often cooperated with segments of the non-liberal left in attempts to achieve common domestic ends, such as the maintenance of unions and strong labor laws. For example, this selective cooperation occurred within the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), one of the first projects initiated by President Roosevelt. As Aaron D. Purcell argues, many TVA employees participated in union organizing, a function of the project’s goal of fostering white-collar unions. This relationship to the unions

⁹¹ Wall, Wendy L., *Inventing the “American way”: the Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 28.

would later incite intense investigations of many TVA employees during the McCarthy era.⁹² Indeed, in 1948 Whittaker Chambers, an editor at *Time* magazine and a former member of the Communist Party, would testify before Congress that other party members had “infiltrated” several New Deal agencies. However, in contrast to the historical and political rewriting of the 1930s and 1940s that later occurred during the Cold War era, the relationship between the non-liberal left and the projects and policies of FDR’s New Deal were not a form of espionage or treason, an undermining of American democracy. The notion of “infiltration,” in other words, draws on what Marcel Cornis-Pope characterizes as the binary logic of Cold War culture (e.g. Marxism / American democracy).⁹³ Instead, the American political spectrum of the 1930s lent itself to greater fluidity as many non-liberal leftists at once supported U.S. domestic projects as well as an international progressive vision.

The legitimacy of a social democratic left also proceeded from certain institutional formations. For example, prominent New Deal legislation, such as the Wagner Act in 1935, fostered a period of ascending labor power. Seizing upon the opportunities created by this labor-friendly legislation, influential organizations such as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) successfully organized industrial workers across the United States. However, like the “New Deal era” itself, the CIO was far from homogenous: it nurtured progressives and conservatives alike, and as the Second World War intensified the internal differences of the CIO were also aggravated. Beginning in 1940, in particular, the rising tide of anti-communist

⁹² Aaron D. Purcell, *White Collar Radicals: TVA’s Knoxville Fifteen, the New Deal, and the McCarthy Era* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2009).

⁹³ Marcel Cornis-Pope, *Narrative Innovation and Cultural Rewriting in the Cold War Era and After* (New York: Palgrave, 2001). For Cornis-Pope, the postmodern texts beginning in the late 1960s, particularly works by Pynchon and Morrison, are a reaction against the Cold War era’s trademark binaries.

anxieties in America began to transform the CIO by requiring its members to denounce loyalty to “isms,” including “fascism, nazism, and communism.”⁹⁴ The conflation of the three political philosophies was a sign of things to come, a harbinger for the eroding legitimacy of non-liberal leftists who cooperated with—and were accepted within—New Deal projects for the shared goal of “domestic reform.”⁹⁵

Indeed, although organizations like the TVA and CIO provided institutional outlets for a more pluralistic progressive democracy during the 1930s, the inclusivity of leftist politics in the New Deal Coalition was never uncontested. In 1938, for example, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (later known as HUAC) was formed to investigate the alleged Communist Party ties of both private citizens and public employees. However, President Roosevelt was often censorious of the committee, which prompted HUAC’s own criticisms of the administration. Martin Dies, Jr., a congressman and Democrat from Texas who began to oppose the New Deal after the Wagner Act, led the committee’s investigations. This rising anxiety was initially stunted by the popularity of President Roosevelt and his federal programs. However, the mounting anxieties of the Second World War, along with the conflation of fascism and communism as America’s enemies within popular sentiment, created footholds for those elements in Congress and corporate America to assert a less progressive definition of American democracy. As Gilbert Gall explains, “energy of Progressive politics of the New Deal era, and along with it the vitality of the American labor movement, would be sapped by the

⁹⁴ Gilbert J. Gall, *Pursuing Justice: Lee Pressman, the New Deal, and the CIO* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), 128.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

anticommunist fears of the American people.”⁹⁶ The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, for example, severely hurt the legitimacy of union leaders and organizations like the CIO, as it required them to swear under oath that they were not communists. Many CIO leaders refused simply upon principle.

Furthermore, many of President Roosevelt’s early supporters took pains to distinguish between the New Deal “revolution” and Soviet-style communism, insisting that FDR’s liberalism could not be collapsed into communism on the grounds that the former retained the notion of private property rights and created economic opportunities for non-state capital production.⁹⁷ Yet even those efforts to parse out New Deal liberalism from the communist regime of the U.S.S.R. defined the former in terms of its heterogeneity: “In the United States, unlike Russia, Italy, and Germany, there is no party with an explicit philosophy and body of dogma to account for the policies and procedures of the Federal Administration.”⁹⁸ Indeed, the early years of the New Deal formalized a democratic consensus with fewer polarities than the ideological battles that were later waged by Senator McCarthy. However, as Wall explains, beginning in the late 1930s New Deal liberals and leftists “generally saw [the nation’s] enemy as fascism and tried to unite Americans in an anti-fascist consensus.”⁹⁹ Even during the Second World War, when the spectrum of nations collected under the idea of the “Axis powers” raised questions about the left’s relationship to the United States’ enemies, American liberals, leftist

⁹⁶ Gall, *Pursuing Justice*, 4.

⁹⁷ For one such contemporaneous account, see Ethan Colton, *Four Patterns of Revolution: Communist U.S.S.R., Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, New Deal America* (New York: Association Press, 1935), 246-47.

⁹⁸ Colton, *Four Patterns of Revolution*, 223.

⁹⁹ Wall, *Inventing the “American Way,”* 8.

intellectuals, and labor organizers had joined together in a common international agenda: support for the Popular Front coalitions that opposed fascism in France, Spain, and Germany. This American coalition promoted a common foreign policy, as Wall puts it, under the banner of “a more democratic and egalitarian social, political, and economic order.” In other words, an anti-fascist foreign policy was the nodal point for the progressives of the early New Deal Coalition. Wall shows that the alliances between liberal Democrats and leftists on pressing foreign policy issues allowed them to “extend the economic agenda of the New Deal and to promote ethnic, religious, and racial equality.”¹⁰⁰ During the 1930s and the Second World War, New Dealers and leftists opposed European fascism through economic planning—an imbrication of domestic and foreign agendas for the sake of promoting economic and social equality.

Yet the tide begins to turn in the mid-1940s with the rise of anti-communist anxieties that ballooned into animus toward progressive politics more generally. Landon R. Y. Storrs demonstrates that anti-New Deal conservatives began to incite and exploit anxieties about Soviet espionage immediately following the war in order to undermine liberals who advocated redistributive and regulatory policies.¹⁰¹ For example, in 1947 a federal employee loyalty program was formalized that either marginalized or forced to the political center many officials on the progressive wing of the New Deal Coalition. The anxiety during this so-called Second Red Scare was that members of the Communist Party were manipulating U.S. policy to the advantage of the Soviet Union. President Truman, less popular than FDR, more anxious about communism, and less able to stand up to a stronger conservative coalition, instituted the federal loyalty program. According to Storrs, these anxieties prompted a collapsed distinction between

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 105.

¹⁰¹ Landon R. Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

communism and leftism more generally during the mid-1940s, which altered specific policy fields of the New Deal agenda, “including labor and civil rights, consumer protection, national health insurance, public assistance, worker education, public works, public housing, Native American rights, and international aid.”¹⁰² Admittedly, Truman introduced his reform agenda, the “Fair Deal,” which included national health insurance and civil rights legislation. He also integrated the military by executive order in 1948. President Truman, in other words, augmented the institutional pressures put on the New Deal welfare state through his anxious reaction to the rising Red Scare.

President Truman also participated in the rolling back of the New Deal’s progressive policies through his escalation of the Cold War. President Truman institutionalized anti-communist anxieties in 1948 when he introduced the European Recovery Program (also known as the Marshall Plan) and began to develop an interventionist foreign policy aimed at “containing” communism. Many conservatives seized upon the underlying anxieties of the President’s foreign policy and depicted New Deal agencies such as the TVA and WPA as “un-American,” which became fodder for the fire of the 1950s witch-hunts. Indeed, Earl Latham claims that in 1950 the momentum shifted decisively in favor of those who associated New Deal economic planning with progressivism. That year began with Alger Hiss’s conviction of perjury about his communist past in January and Senator McCarthy asserting in February that the Department of State knowingly employed communists. Other anti-leftist spectacles then began to snowball, such as the arrest of Julius Rosenberg and the HUAC investigations into communist

¹⁰² Storrs, *The Second Red Scare*, 2.

activity in Hawaii, both of which received almost daily media attention.¹⁰³ Similarly, Purcell argues that these postwar fears were put to use during the McCarthy era as a way of undermining New Deal agencies and the economic agenda of the welfare state. “At the end of 1947,” Purcell summarizes, “many former New Dealers found themselves at odds with the national political climate. Gains by Republicans during the elections of the previous year, a tougher foreign policy against Soviet-bloc countries, and efforts to uncover domestic subversives formed the bedrock layers of a cold war culture that would last for decades.”¹⁰⁴ The point is that conservative opponents who were suspicious of FDR’s progressive policies on industrial unionism, regulatory intervention, economic planning, social security, and a welfare state more broadly, tried to disrupt the politics of the New Deal era from its beginning. This resistance gained significant ground when the left’s legitimacy and relationship to “Americanism” came into question.

Ellison’s critical depictions of both the Brotherhood and black nationalism are part of this political and cultural conversation about the role of non-liberal progressivism in American life. The invisible man rejects (and is rejected by) the black nationalist Ras the Exhorter because, as one woman in the Brotherhood puts it, “His hoodlums would attack and denounce the white meat of a roasted chicken” (365). As a member of the Brotherhood, the narrator follows the organization’s official position that such black nationalism is a “gang of racist gangsters” whose first response is to reject white Americans categorically and then resort to violent confrontation (421). The narrator never explicitly states why he continues to reject Ras and his politics after he scorns the Brotherhood, although presumably his violent tactics and absolutism justify the invisible man’s rejection of black nationalism. Yet Ras nonetheless causes both the narrator and

¹⁰³ Earl Latham, *The Communist Controversy in Washington: From the New Deal to McCarthy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

¹⁰⁴ Purcell, *White Collar Radicals*, 136.

Clifton to reconsider their assimilation within the Brotherhood. In particular, after an altercation with the Exhorter, Clifton contemplates whether there might be something significant about Ras' extremism: "I suppose sometimes a man *has* to plunge outside history," Clifton muses, lest he "kill somebody, go nuts" (377). Clifton's enigmatic *obiter dictum*, when coupled with his later Sambo performance, suggests that "history" (at least as the Brotherhood conceives it) appears to be weighted against black Americans. What he finds compelling about Ras' approach, in other words, is that living "inside" history means being determined by its racially exploitative patterns. "History" has tended to consign black Americans to the margins, and structuring one's actions according to such a general concept results in madness, frustrated violence.

While the narrator initially rejects Clifton's sympathy with Ras because of the place within "history" that the Brotherhood supposedly provides him, he later reevaluates that position after Clifton's death. A policeman accosts Clifton for not having a permit to sell the Sambo dolls. Clifton puts the policeman "on his ass" for repeatedly pushing him, and in turn he is shot (438). The narrator retreats to the Brotherhood's district office, where he broods on the situation. In an attempt to avoid any personal responsibility he might have for Clifton's death, the narrator tells himself, "The incident was political." The invisible man's understanding of "politics" at this point follows the Brotherhood's definition. He explains, "politically, individuals were without meaning. The shooting was all that was left of him now, Clifton had chosen to plunge out of history and [...] only the plunge was recorded, and that was the only important thing." Clifton's act is isolated, its "politics" are individual. Therefore, the narrator concludes, the "political equivalent" of his actions are "death" (447). Whatever larger significance Clifton might have had is cancelled out because he acted only as an individual.

The invisible man nonetheless decides to organize a funeral for Clifton and use the event to articulate a “greater” meaning to the murder (448). During the funeral, an “old man” in a “husky baritone” sings “There’s Many a Thousand Gone.” The spiritual moves the crowd, but the narrator explains,

It was not the words, for they were all the same old slave-borne words; it was as though he’d changed the emotion beneath the words while yet the old longing, resigned, transcendent emotion still sounded above, now deepened by that something for which the theory of Brotherhood had given me no name. (453)

The ideology of the Brotherhood fails to explain fully the nameless “something” provoked by the old man’s song and the crowd’s response. The organization’s analytical criteria fail in the face of an emotion or existential longing “deeper than protest, or religion” (453). This spiritual begins to unravel the narrator’s assumptions about the Brotherhood and its definitions of politics and history, for his “transcendent emotion” suggests that the most fundamental register is not the political but, perhaps, the self’s freedom: “No more peck o’ corn for me,” the famous lyrics proclaim, “No more, no more, / No more peck o’ corn for me.” Indeed, this longing becomes an affirmation of freedom while everywhere black Americans are still in systematic chains.

The invisible man’s unsettled ideology inflects his speech as he laments Clifton in mock-bureaucratic style: “Place of birth: U.S. Some southern town. [...] Address: unknown. Occupation: unemployed. Cause of death (be specific): resisting reality in the form of a .38 caliber revolver in the hands of the arresting officer [...]” (458). The bureaucratic categories of the eulogy symbolize the elision of Clifton’s individuality, and the narrator casts this impersonal framework in stark terms: “he was black and they shot him” (456). The “facts,” he argues, are simple because the laws of the state boil down to such simple “facts”: a black man may be shot with impunity. Indeed, Clifton is not an individual with a distinct past; rather, the policemen view him only as “black.” His address is now a box that is “far, far too expensive a dwelling,”

for it corresponds not only to his death but also his facelessness (458). Yet the narrator's response to Clifton's elided individuality is to turn away from impersonal analytics in his eulogy and instead cast his friend's death in subjective terms: "when he fell there was a hole in the heel of his socks" (456). What the narrator conveys is not the economic forces underwriting the white policemen's false consciousness, as perhaps the writer of "A Party Down at the Square" might have. Rather, the narrator presents an individual tragedy, the loss of self within a society rife with racially configured alienation.

The narrator's invocation of strikingly personal imagery, along with his mocking presentation of Clifton's elided individuality, dominates his eulogy. In fact, his concern with Clifton as an individual prompts him to conclude afterwards, "I had let [the eulogy] get away from me, had been unable to bring in the political issues" (459). He senses that his subjective lament and mock-bureaucratic style somehow run against the grain of the Brotherhood's expectations. The invisible man reflects that he has been unable to utilize what seems to be a critical space for denouncing structures of oppression, for identifying the "political" or "economic" meaning of Clifton's death (447). In fact, in a moment of narrative irony that the narrator himself does not recognize, his eulogy suggests that the Brotherhood shares with Clifton's murderers a racialized pattern of thought: both fashion their political visions by eliding a black individual. However, the narrator's sense of failure begins to ebb away as the significance of the old man's spiritual dawns on him after the ceremony. Looking over the crowd gathered to mourn Clifton, the funeral participants are transformed in the narrator's eyes from a conglomerate social body—a single organism with undifferentiated parts. Instead, he suddenly finds this generic body differentiated: "I saw not a crowd but the set faces of individual men and

women.” While the Brotherhood’s politics subsumes the self under impersonal forces, Clifton’s moving funeral unravels this ideological fabric.

Significantly, the invisible man’s vision of the “flesh and blood” of individuals rather than the “masses” as an abstract idea bears the imprint of Clifton’s decision to step outside “history” (459). Clifton’s enigmatic actions are, as the narrator would later describe his own withdrawal from “history” underground, “very much against the trend of the times” (576). He acts as an individual, his symbolic Sambo performance serving as a rhetorical figure that at once recalls his socially constructed subhuman status while also affirming the self that is being denied. Clifton himself becomes this rhetorical figure through his death, which defamiliarizes the invisible man’s own predicament. The funeral finally prompts the invisible man to see the elided black self at the heart of the Brotherhood’s activities because Clifton’s own actions are so unintelligible, unfamiliar. Yet even as Clifton’s decision to step outside “history” defamiliarizes the narrator’s predicament, it also becomes a model of individual exemplarity, or action that originates from the self but that speaks on the “lower” or foundational frequencies (581). “He’s in the box and we’re in there with him,” the invisible man explains, “It’s dark in this box and it’s crowded. It has a cracked ceiling and a clogged-up toilet in the hall.” Clifton’s “short bitter life,” the narrator begins to perceive, becomes a model of individual action that has collective implications. Clifton’s decision to abandon the leftist organization represents a singular individual act, but his death also allows him to represent the “box” that houses too many of his fellow black Americans. As the invisible man’s allegiances to the ideology of the Brotherhood begin to fracture, then, he perceives that Clifton has actually become “part of history” by performing as a rhetorical figure for the exemplary self (458). The narrator’s emerging

sensibility about individual exemplarity, then, inverts his former leftist ideology by placing the self, rather than the masses, at the center of “history.”

If the invisible man finds in Clifton’s Sambo performance and sudden death a condemnation of the self’s elision, his final rejection of the Brotherhood signals a related suspicion of collective action. The narrator harbors this suspicion throughout his affiliation with the Brotherhood, but he suppresses it until after Clifton’s death. When Brother Jack and the narrator first meet, for example, the former is impressed with how the invisible man “aroused” the group of onlookers “so quickly to action” (289). Brother Jack thinks of the narrator’s “effective piece of eloquence” as a way to motivate a collective, to get the masses involved. The invisible man demurs at the way Brother Jack subsumes the Provos under a larger “type” that is “ground up by industrial conditions” (290). Following this socio-economic analysis, Brother Jack even instructs the invisible man, “But you mustn’t waste your emotions on individuals, they don’t count.” The invisible man is confounded, but Brother Jack argues that any *individual* concern for the elderly couple is a consequence of an “old agrarian self,” which the narrator ought to “throw off” and “emerge [as] something new” (291). Registering one’s concerns on the level of individual burdens and injustices is, Brother Jack suggests, the fallout of a pre-capitalist, pre-industrial mindset. Individualism is a function of a bygone era when problems were local, not structural. What’s more, he explains, “sometimes the difference between individual and organized indignation is the difference between criminal and political action” (293). To think of the burden of action in personal terms is, according to Brother Jack, at once futile and misguided.

Brother Hambro later confirms the invisible man’s suspicions about the elision of the self from the Brotherhood’s philosophy. As Hambro explains the Brotherhood’s withdrawal from Harlem, he asserts, “All of us must sacrifice for the good of the whole” (502). Rather than base

political value or agency on an individual register, then, the characterization of leftist politics in *Invisible Man* insists that the narrator must “have confidence in those who lead you—in the collective wisdom of Brotherhood.” Put more baldly, Hambro advises, “we as individuals must sympathetically debunk ourselves” (505). The invisible man discerns, however, that this self-negation is far from neutral. He instead recognizes that black Americans occupy a double bind within the terms of the political left: “Outside the Brotherhood we were outside history; but inside of it they didn’t see us” (499). In other words, outside of a leftist political vision, the plight of African Americans is mistakenly isolated from the political and economic conditions that contribute to their alienation. Yet, as a part of that organization, black Americans retain their invisibility because of the Brotherhood’s own racially stratified hierarchy and its abstract, dehumanizing categories, such as “class” or “industrial conditions,” which obviate the significance of the individual (290). Thus, despite his persistent suspicions, the narrator longs to find a home in this leftist organization, but he finds himself alienated within its collectivist terms. The Brotherhood only sees “figments of their imagination”—not human beings but instances of a category or class (3). Apart from affirming what is distinctively *individual* about the self, he concludes, black Americans find themselves doubly damned.

In a sense, then, the invisible man’s final eulogy is as much for the ideas of “class” and “economic conditions” as it is for Tod Clifton. Progressive configurations of society in terms of political groups and economic oppression become, for the narrator in his underground space, worse than the disease they are meant to cure. Admittedly, the invisible man never abandons the notion of collective problems, but he still casts suspicion upon collective political agency and affiliation. As he puts it in another moment of unrecognized irony, “I’m a cog in a machine. We here in the Brotherhood work as a unit” (396-97). When agency is inflected through such

organizational terms, the self becomes negligible, nondescript, merely a movable part. Therefore, even if *Invisible Man* is concerned for working-class politics through its presentation of the black vernacular, as Mazurek argues, the narrator nonetheless finds himself alienated from leftist collective politics and suspicious of its dehumanizing logic. He becomes increasingly distrustful of anything but the self as the provenance for action and social responsibility.

Richard Wright Goes to Europe

Ellison's suspicions about leftist politics are not new to twentieth-century African American fiction. Chester Himes's *Lonely Crusade* (1947), for example, narrates the failures of a black union organizer during the Second World War. The protagonist, Lee Gordon, organizes other workers at a wartime aircraft factory in Los Angeles, and he soon becomes the darling symbol of the leftist organization that employs him. Yet Gordon is eventually divested of his dignity or "manhood" through party strife and, it becomes apparent, is merely grist for the leftist mill in its wrangling with conservative business groups. Thus, much like Ellison's imbrication of the Brotherhood and mainstream white society, Himes undermines the sincerity of the left's concern for black Americans.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Richard Wright's work from the 1940s and 1950s documents his growing antagonism with the Communist Party USA. Wright joined the Party in 1933 through the John Reed Club. He also found employment in the Federal Writers' Project and the Federal Theatre Project from 1935-1936, working mostly in publicity offices. During the war, Wright discovered that the Communist Party would not take legal action against the

¹⁰⁵ In fact, Himes's novel offers in the place of leftist politics what Justus Nieland describes as "universalizing" noir humanism, which is a close cousin of the existential humanism that I attribute to Ellison later in this chapter. See Justus Nieland, "Everybody's Noir Humanism: Chester Himes, *Lonely Crusade*, and the Quality of Hurt," *African American Review* 43.2-3 (Summer/Fall 2009): 277-93.

government for its support of Jim Crow laws, and this refusal precipitated his official break from the Party in 1942.¹⁰⁶ Wright and his wife, Ellen, who was an important Party organizer in Brooklyn, came to believe that “the Party was using the Negro for its own ends,” and so they effectively cut all ties with it.¹⁰⁷

Wright elaborates upon his souring relationship with the Party in his autobiography *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1993). Explaining his mounting suspicions, Wright describes the Party’s “Negro Communists” as impenetrable silos filled with uncompromising ideology:

An hour’s listening [to their speeches] disclosed the fanatical intolerance of minds sealed against new ideas, new facts, new feelings, new attitudes, new hints at ways to live. They denounced books they had never read, people they had never known, ideas they could never understand, and doctrines whose names they could not pronounce. Communism, instead of making them leap forward with fire in their hearts to become masters of ideas and life, had frozen them at an even lower level of ignorance than had been theirs before they met Communism.¹⁰⁸

According to Wright, toeing the Party line is more than an expectation; it is a blind obsession.

Indeed, Wright inverts the critiques of other novels from the late 1940s and 1950s, such as Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), which questions the conformism at the heart of “mainstream” America. Rather than questioning the generic pattern of the so-called American Way, Wright questions the compulsory conformity of the radicalism that challenges that mainstream existence. Wright’s “Negro” with the red armband is as much a symbol as Sloan’s businessman of self-possession undermined by conformity.

¹⁰⁶ Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 229.

¹⁰⁷ Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 263.

¹⁰⁸ Wright’s *American Hunger* was significantly edited by his publisher, Harper, before being published as *Black Boy* in 1945. The unredacted version was not published until 1993. For the restored version, see Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Story of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Buccaneer, 1993), 295-96.

Wright also justifies his migration away from communism in his famous essay, “I Tried to Be a Communist” (1944). After Wright reads magazines given to him at a meeting of the John Reed Club, he “was amazed to find that there did exist in this world an organized search for the truth of the lives of the oppressed and the isolated.” In communism, Wright finds a compelling account of “the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole,” and this political vision first attracts him to the Party.¹⁰⁹ However, this time Wright provides two general reasons for his disillusionment with the Party: first, because of the ease with which its revolutionary fervor melds into madness;¹¹⁰ second, due to the anti-intellectualism rampant throughout the membership. As a “quiet black Communist” gently explains to him, “We’ve kept records of the trouble [the Party has] had with intellectuals in the past. It’s estimated that only 13 per cent of them remain in the party.” Wright asks why they leave, and the man responds, “Most of them drop out of their own accord.”¹¹¹ Wright takes this response as symbolic of the Party’s animosity toward critical reflection, new ideas, and even different cultural traditions. However, Wright also explains that, while finally “failing” to be a Communist, he nonetheless remains committed to a vision of “uniting” groups into a “whole.” The difference between this vision of unity and the conformism that sours Wright’s view of the Party is that the former is delineated in terms of collective identification or

¹⁰⁹ Wright first published the essay in *Atlantic Monthly* 174.1 (1944). Reprinted in *The God That Failed* [1950] (ed. Richard Crossman; New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 118.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

solidarity. Rather than conformity, which insists, “Be like us,” Wright searches for ways of identifying “kinship” among suffering people.¹¹²

Thus, Wright’s distrust of the Communist Party did not translate into a rejection of the left as such. In fact, his immigration to France in 1946 allowed Wright to explore other forms of Marxism beyond the increasingly narrow scope of postwar leftism. Wright’s exploration becomes colored in the hue of existentialism when he strikes up a correspondence with Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in the early 1940s, eventually joining them in Paris. Sartre’s postwar project of reconciling Marxism and existentialism appealed to Wright, and in 1948 he began to read deeply in existentialist philosophy and literature. In that same year he participated with Sartre and Camus in the leadership of the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (RDR). The RDR at once opposed Soviet-style communism and the United States, advancing instead the political solidarity imagined in Sartre’s later existentialism. In fact, Wright eventually writes an existential novel, *The Outsider* (1953), which received its greatest acclaim among French intellectuals. *The Outsider* marks a decisive break with Communism as Cross Damon, the novel’s protagonist, murders a Communist for his anti-humanist denial of individual “life” and “consciousness.” *The Outsider* thus decries violations of the self in a way not unlike Sartre’s existential humanism, and it solidified Wright’s commitment to the non-Communist left. He would later support Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir as they opposed the rise of General de Gaulle in 1958.

Thus, while Wright’s misgivings about Communism in America deepen in the 1940s and prompt a turn toward other forms of Marxist leftism in the 1950s, he differs from Ellison in that he does not collapse the Party with the left as such. Even as the broad strokes of their trajectories

¹¹² Ibid., 118, 131.

are similar—early affiliations with communism, growing discontentment and wartime rejection of the Party, and an intellectual affinity for existentialism—Wright and Ellison differ in their responses to the racial inequities of New Deal America in important ways. Indeed, the differences between Wright and Ellison illuminate the latter’s construal of agency and responsibility in the narrative frames of *Invisible Man*. For example, Wright’s early novel *Native Son* (1940) charts the structural social conditions that produce Bigger Thomas, a black twenty-year-old who grows up in an impoverished area of Chicago.¹¹³ Bigger comes of age in an urban jungle of newspapers, magazines, movies, radios, and towering buildings. His environment preaches a gospel of success and material wealth, even as it forecloses those opportunities to black Americans. Bigger’s environment is even so limited that it does not afford him the opportunity to imagine alternatives. “But what could he do?” he reflects early in the novel. “Each time he asked himself that question his mind hit a blank wall and stopped thinking.” Instead, he only looks out his window and sees the “miserable” opportunities of workers in “overalls” (12). As he explains in the essay “How Bigger Was Born” (1940), Wright’s protagonist “is a product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man.”¹¹⁴

The environmental forces that produce Bigger’s alienation continue in the tradition of earlier American novels such as Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900). Rather than establishing a simplistic, one-way causality in which environments always determine individuals, these novels of urban naturalism represent the structural conditions that preclude self-determination. As Ellison perceptively

¹¹³ Richard Wright, *Native Son* [1940] (New York: Harper, 2005). Hereafter cited parenthetically.

¹¹⁴ Richard Wright, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” [1940] In *Native Son* (New York: Harper, 2005), 446.

explains in his review of Wright's autobiography, the question of individual humanity "had as little chance of prevailing against the overwhelming weight of [his environment] as Beethoven's Quartets would have of destroying the stench of a Nazi prison."¹¹⁵ Following this assertion, Ellison observes that the combination of forces before which the individual feels powerless is itself an assertion of individuality, or at least a "groping" for it.¹¹⁶ In other words, if the environment swallows up the individual in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, these narratives suggest a form of social protest that wants to reform that environment, to make structural space for the individuality of the black man whose humanity those forces deny. Wright's urban naturalism, then, directs his readers' attention to the adverse and tumultuous conditions of capitalist society that shape modern consciousness, and he thereby places the burden of reform at an institutional and structural level.¹¹⁷ Indeed, as part of Wright's complicated support for the New Deal's relief and public works programs, Susan Louise Edmunds reads *Native Son* as revising the tradition of domestic and sentimental literature in order to reform the reformer, so to speak. Bigger, as another "problem boy" who works in the home of a white, sentimental couple, racial inequalities of the US welfare state.

Perhaps even more than *Native Son*, Wright's novella "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1942) sketches this view of the self subject to the alienating and inequitable

¹¹⁵ Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," *Antioch Review* 3.2 (1945). Reprinted in *Shadow and Act* [1964] (New York: Vintage, 1995), 82.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹¹⁷ In contrast to my reading, in which Wright shares in the social thinking about structural and institutional reform that gave rise to the New Deal, Susan Louise Edmunds argues that *Native Son* uncovers an "invisible" order of violence instituted by the welfare state and, thus, sketches a critique of the structures of racial and bureaucratic power underpinning the New Deal. See Susan Louise Edmunds, "'Just Like Home': Richard Wright, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the New Deal," *American Literature* 86.1 (March 2014): 61-86.

structures of capitalist society.¹¹⁸ Indeed, the narrative frame of *Invisible Man* alludes to Wright's novella, which follows the "underground" life of Fred Daniels, whose name is only once mentioned in the narrative. The namelessness of Ellison and Wright's protagonists suggests that they are both in some sense alienated from their individuality. During an interview with the police, for example, Daniels is asked, "What's your name?" He "opened his lips to answer and no words came. He had forgotten. But what did it matter if he had? It was not important" (1442). Although Daniels has just emerged from underground with a revelatory "statement" for his society (1441), he experiences a loss of self: the marker or sign of his individuality is "not important" to the truth of the surface world he has reentered to announce. As a matter of fact, while walking to the police station to "clear up everything, make a statement," Daniels asks himself, "What statement? He did not know. He was the statement" (1441). Wright's protagonist babbles incoherently during his interview with the police, becoming something of an unheeded prophet whose words fall on indifferent ears. Thus, since he himself is the "statement," Daniels' lost individuality is the "truth" of his modern world. The policemen, who fail to hear his prophetic message, have in fact produced Daniels by forcing him to make a false confession to a crime and thus driving him underground. Daniels' dehumanized self is the fallout of a racially inequitable legal system, an individuality suppressed, pathologized, and criminalized by corrupt law enforcement.

Like Ellison, Wright also patterns his marginalized narrator on Dostoevsky's estranged Underground Man. Fred Daniels' flight into the sewers to escape hostile policemen affords him a position in which all the subterranean aspects of his society are on view. As in Dostoevsky's

¹¹⁸ Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground" [1942], in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: Norton, 1997), 1414-50. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Notes, the subterranean space of Wright's story is at once a metaphor for the foundations of society as well as those people, truths, and activities that are hidden from view. The "underground," in other words, is society's ideological base as well as its omissions, its elided margins. For Wright, in fact, the two are one and the same. His narrative demarcates the connecting lines between socio-economic structures (the base of society) and the idea of racial alienation (the part of the world consigned from view). From his "underground" perspective, Daniels is able to perceive that the "various currents of life swirling aboveground" are in fact polluted with violence and emptiness (1432). For example, he steals money from a guarded safe, lining the walls of his cave with the currency and trampling on other purloined diamonds. Daniels' act of mocking and deprecating these objects that are attributed such significant value in "the world aboveground" become a form of triumph. His "discovery," he insists, is that currency and precious stones are empty objects, arbitrary symbols constructed by a world "filled with death" (1433). Yet that constructed society is nonetheless the cause of his alienation—a double bind that seemingly drives Daniels to madness.

Fred Daniels and the invisible man both experience some degree of enlightenment through the alienation forced upon them by the racially inequitable social structures of their "aboveground" worlds. Yet, unlike Ellison's protagonist with his world of "infinite possibilities," Wright suggests that the social structures of Daniels' environment will inevitably reject him. "The Man Who Lived Underground" concludes with one of the policemen shooting Daniels in the chest because, as the officer claims, "You've got to shoot his kind. They'd wreck things" (1450). Daniels falls back underground into the currents of his city's sewers. When he lands, he becomes "a whirling object rushing alone in the darkness, veering, tossing, lost in the heart of the earth" (1450). In this ignoble ending, Daniels becomes devoid of humanity and

agency: like the excreta of the sewers, he is not only subject to forces beyond his control—“veering, tossing” in the currents—but also he is inhuman, a mere “whirling object” that does not belong in human society. The structures of Fred Daniels’ world have no place for him as a political agent, much less as an individual.

Ellison shares Wright’s anxieties about the racial norms embedded within institutional and societal structures, particularly in those moments when the invisible man is confronted with the “white” logic of citizenship within the American welfare state. For example, when the invisible man chauffeurs Mr. Norton, an important white donor to the local college for African American students, he feels a deep commitment to the college’s vision of the respectable citizen. The protagonist accidentally exposes Norton to Jim Trueblood, a lower-class man who relays the story of his incestuous relationship with his daughter. As Norton and the narrator return back to the college after his unsettling encounter, the invisible man reflects, “I wanted to stop the car and talk with Mr. Norton, to beg his pardon for what he had seen; [...] to assure him that far from being like any of the people we had seen, I *hated* them” (99). The invisible man longs to demonstrate his difference from Trueblood because, among other reasons, he nurtures hopes of one day becoming an assistant to Dr. Bledsoe, the school’s president. Therefore, the narrator initially feels that he must convince Norton of his respectability: the invisible man must embody a set of social and, as it turns out, racial mores that differentiate him from others.

These norms soon become clear as the narrator inadvertently delineates the “self” implicit in the vision underlying his college by describing what is *not* characteristic of such an individual.

The affirmation takes on a creedal structure:

I believed in the principles of the Founder with all my heart and soul, and that I believed in his own goodness and kindness in extending the hand of his benevolence to helping us poor, ignorant people out of the mire and darkness. I

would do his bidding and teach others to rise up as he wished them to, teach them to be thrifty, decent, upright citizens, contributing to the welfare of all [...]. (99)

In yet another moment of unrecognized irony, the invisible man does not perceive the racial norms underlying his confession. He instead suggests that being an “upright citizen” is antithetical to “the mire and darkness” that characterizes “us poor, ignorant people.” The association of “darkness” with “us” is surely suggestive, recalling the blanket racial norms that contribute to his invisibility. Furthermore, given the fact that the narrator includes himself in this “us,” not just Trueblood or the rowdy customers at the Golden Day, such ideals of betterment and welfare refer to black Americans in general. The principles of the college thus have a raced incapacity for autonomy that subjects the black to the white, intimated by the narrator when he says, “I would do his bidding.” The invisible man becomes primitive—almost subhuman—apart from the status he could (though never seems to) achieve as a “decent” citizen. The marginalized narrator thus finds that his social status is a node of power, the point at which he is either cast into the “darkness” or subjected to racial norms. Indeed, his subjugation is particularly pernicious because it is cloaked in the discourse of benevolent “welfare.”

More pointedly, the norms of being “decent” in the Jim Crow South (where the narrator’s college is located) actually mean that black “citizens” are segregated from full social inclusion. The logic of the black “decent, upright citizen,” in other words, not only presents whiteness as normative but also entails, despite its surface rhetoric of national belonging, the paradoxical exclusion of black citizens. To be a citizen of the Jim Crow South, New Deal or not, equates to being juridically marginalized. While this logic of exclusion-by-inclusion is evident in the servile attitude and false consciousness about “darkness” that the narrator’s college promulgates, the invisible man later encounters other instances that demonstrate his alienation within American “welfare” discourse. After being expelled from the college, he moves to New York but

finds it difficult to be a “thrifty” citizen in the city. Dr. Bledsoe blocks several of the narrator’s opportunities for employment by maligning him to the college’s New York donors, although he eventually finds work at a paint plant. But the invisible man is manipulated as a laborer, too, for he is fired after being hurt in an accident at the plant. He is therefore repeatedly cast out from avenues of capitalist belonging. Indeed, finally perceiving the exclusionary logic of postwar “welfare” discourse, the invisible man describes the policeman who murders Tod Clifton as a “good citizen”: by shooting Clifton, the officer does not violate the law but fulfills it (457).

Such suspicions about national belonging give articulate form to the growing animus among minority groups toward the New Deal. Black Americans traditionally voted for the Party of President Lincoln until the 1936 election, when nearly 75% of black voters switched to the Democrats in order to support President Roosevelt’s reelection bid. At that point, black Americans supported the administration’s New Deal because of the economic relief it provided during the throes of the Depression. The WPA and the National Youth Administration (NYA) provided economic support to black and white Americans equally. Indeed, Richard Wright worked for the Federal Writer’s Project during the 1930s, and many critics have noted his vocal support for the relief and public works programs of the New Deal.¹¹⁹ Similarly, Ralph Ellison praised a central New Deal program, the WPA, which he said had “allowed many Negroes to achieve their identities as artists.”¹²⁰

On the other hand, these authors were keenly aware that the relationship between racial equality and New Deal economic relief was a vexed one, at best. New Deal programs such as the

¹¹⁹ Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 121-39, 165-68. See also Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 215-17.

¹²⁰ Ralph Ellison, “Remembering Richard Wright” [1971], in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage, [1986] 1995), 204, 205.

Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) and the Fair Housing Administration (FHA) systematically weighted their interventions in favor of white Americans. The FHA, for example, supported de facto segregation by refusing to guarantee mortgages to black homeowners, whether in the North or the South, when they applied to live in white neighborhoods. Many historians are wont to claim that, if it were not for the Southern Democrats, the New Deal legislation would have resolutely passed civil rights legislation long before the 1960s. And there is some legitimacy to this view. During the 1948 Democratic National Convention, for example, the so-called Dixiecrats dissented from the introduction of a civil-rights plank in the Party platform. Threatening to fracture the coalition, the Dixiecrats offered Strom Thurmond as their candidate and nearly cost Truman his reelection campaign. However, when viewed solely in terms of congressional votes, northern New Deal Democrats during the 1930s-1950s voted more conservatively regarding civil rights legislation than Republicans.¹²¹ The portrait of this voting record suggests that, while there were certainly exceptions in the Democratic Party, the New Dealers were deeply divided regarding racial inequality and civil rights—and the Mason Dixon line by no means cleanly marked such divisions. The point, then, is that Ellison’s exposition of the exclusionary logic of “welfare” citizenship marks this discontentment with the unresponsiveness of New Deal legislation toward the “invisible” status of black Americans.

While *Invisible Man* documents the growing disillusionment with New Deal America, the fact that Ellison’s novel wins the 1953 National Book Award also signals the rising demand within the cultural and intellectual marketplace for the United States to provide social “visibility” to the plight of black Americans. Indeed, Schickler, Pearson, and Feinstein argue that the New Dealers’ perspective on civil rights began to shift in the late-1940s. Certain segments of the New

¹²¹ See Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 109-11, 230.

Deal voting bloc, particularly CIO unionists, liberal intellectuals, and the burgeoning Civil Rights movement, began to demand changes from congressional Democrats with growing support among the Party's northern base.¹²² The unanimous Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 provided further institutional support for this faction of the New Deal Coalition. As the rising tide of civil rights eventually forced the hand of New Democrats, electing President Kennedy under the banner of moderate reform, the diversity the Democratic Coalition's bloc led to its own internal fracturing. While the CIO and the Civil Rights movement demanded equality, Carmines and Stimson show that southern farmers and white landowners shifted their support during 1963-64, precipitated by the aggressive administration of Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign. President Johnson's landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 alienated much of the South from the Democratic Party, and consequently there were irreparable fissures in the edifice of the New Deal Coalition.

Ellison would later register his support for the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, leveraging his cultural position for the Democratic Party in his influential essay "The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner."¹²³ By the time of Ellison's rhetorically savvy essay, however, he had moved away from the response to American racial inequality that he offers in *Invisible Man*. Because Ellison's narrator is repelled by the violence of Ras the Exhorter, manipulated by the Brotherhood with its elision of the individual, excluded by the benevolence of the New York philanthropist and his welfare citizenship, he finds himself outside all collectives. All other

¹²² Eric Schickler, Kathryn Pearson, and Brian D. Feinstein, "Congressional Parties and Civil Rights Politics from 1933 to 1972," *The Journal of Politics* 72.3 (July 2010): 672-89.

¹²³ Ralph Ellison, "The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner" [1968], in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage, [1986] 1995), 76-87.

options being foreclosed to him, the invisible man retreats into the self. Ellison's narrator is alienated from collectives both social and political, so he consequently enters a state of "hibernation" (580). Yet what is significant about this retreat into the self, as the invisible man characterizes it, is that it casts the burden of action, responsibility, and freedom upon the individual. Rather than a disruption of the binary politics of Cold War anxieties, the narrator's ambivalence and paradoxical affirmation of a world of "infinite possibilities" is, I argue, a construal of his alienation in existentialist terms (576). Indeed, in a way quite distinct from Wright's *Bigger* or Fred Daniels, the invisible man's response to his alienation becomes an affirmation of choice and individual expression as the irreducible terms of freedom. In fact, the existential attitude characterizing the bookends of *Invisible Man* underwrites the novel's flight from collectivist politics, while its existential construal of freedom also anchors the novel's location of political agency and possibility within the self.

Existentialism Comes to America

The type of individualism that frames *Invisible Man* is clearest when Ellison rewrites Fred Daniels' alienation and dehumanizing death. Like Daniels, Ellison's narrator momentarily accepts his "underground" position—the invisibility of his humanity—in order to take possession of his self and prepare for action. As the invisible man puts it, his "hibernation" is "a covert preparation for a more overt action" (13). The narrator's marginalization from all collectives does not translate into despair; instead, he transforms that alienated status into an opportunity for self-creation: "I was pulled this way and that for longer than I can remember. And my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So

after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled” (573). While Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground” culminates in Fred Daniels forgetting his own name, the novel’s end is the beginning of the invisible man’s opportunity to discover “what I called myself.” By choosing to stay underground, he explains, he chooses a form of freedom (571). Whereas Wright’s protagonist becomes a passive “object rushing alone in the darkness, veering, tossing, lost in the heart of the earth” (1450), Ellison’s narrator retreats from those social forces that try to pull him “this way and that.” If Fred Daniels is the detritus of a socio-political system that denies agency and individuality to black Americans, the invisible man asserts the contingent or malleable nature of that system by calling attention to the fact that society is not “solid” but illusory, a construction (576). What’s more, Ellison’s narrator responds to those forces that pull him “this way and that” by rebelling, affirming instead his capacity for radical self-creation and individual self-determination.

The invisible man discovers the possibility of self-production through a series of chance encounters in which he is mistaken for a man named Rinehart, who it turns out is a protean figure, a shifting signifier of freedom. While fleeing Ras and his gang, the narrator puts on a disguise of dark green sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat and is quickly misidentified by one of Rinehart’s lovers. The narrator decides to assume the guise of Rinehart, and this new identity transforms his vision: “the world took on a dark-green intensity” (484). It is not, the narrator suggests, that the clothes makes the man; rather, it is the glasses, his way of viewing the world. After a half-dozen cases of being mistaken as Rinehart by various people, including hipsters and policemen, churchgoers and “zoot-suiters,” the invisible man realizes that Rinehart is a sign of a larger truth:

Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the brider and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real

anyway? But how could I doubt it? He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. (498)

With Rinehart, the invisible man discovers that his self, much like his society, is not “solid.” He can make the rounds, become at once a Reverend and a runner for the police. Rinehart plays the system that tries to exploit him. Thus, the invisible man discovers, as he would later put it, that his “world has become one of infinite possibilities” (576). Ellison’s narrator senses that Rinehart is “years ahead of me” simply because this protean figure intuits that the “world in which we lived was without boundaries” (498). Rinehart therefore becomes the narrator’s exemplar for self-production within a “vast seething, hot world of fluidity” (498).

The invisible man tries to follow Rinehart’s model after he decides to undermine the Brotherhood, yet he admittedly “bungled it from the beginning” (516). Indeed, he later states, “But what do *I* really want, I’ve asked myself.” The narrator vacillates, “I can’t figure it out; it escapes me,” even asserting that he does not want “the freedom of a Rinehart or the power of a Jack, nor simply the freedom not to run” (575). For one, the invisible man’s assertion represents a kind of ambivalence akin to Dostoevsky’s underground man, who claims “any consciousness at all is a sickness” (8). Even as the underground man insists that “the chiefest and dearest thing” is “our personality and our individuality” (28), he soon dismisses this very notion as “fancy” and explains, “I’m grinding my teeth as I joke.” Speaking to interlocutors, he confesses simply, “Gentlemen, I am tormented by questions” (30). Freedom, for Dostoevsky’s narrator, becomes a difficult burden to assume—a choice that itself prompts vacillation. Similarly, after Ellison’s narrator rejects Rinehart, the invisible man almost immediately returns to him as a “master” of “imagination,” of stepping “outside the narrow borders of what men call reality” (576). He

presents Rinehart as an exemplar to emulate, even as he is plagued by questions about the freedom that such a figure sketches.

Beyond his vacillations and ambivalence, the invisible man also suggests that Rinehart's free self-creation is somehow lacking. Despite the world of possibilities that he illuminates, the invisible man also views Rinehart's self-invention as socially irresponsible or egoistic.

Rinehart's protean self lacks a public vision, the narrator claims, denying the "possibility" that "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (581). Indeed, Rinehart is only one of several figures that the invisible man finds exemplary. He seems to balance Rinehart's world of possibilities with Mary, a Harlem resident who takes in the narrator after his accident at the paint plant. The invisible man says he "found living with [Mary] pleasant except for her constant talk about leadership and responsibility." He pays rent with his severance money from the plant, but otherwise the narrator is without work or, as he puts it, he has "lost [his] sense of direction." Mary's beliefs, rather than obscuring the narrator's difficulties, actually serve as "a force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face." That is to say, in the midst of a hostile society and unjust social structures, Mary is a stable point for the invisible man—a center that actually does hold. As the narrator puts it, "Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement; and I was torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive" (258).

Yet the narrator also suggests that irresponsibility—a retreat from society—is a necessary precondition for the kind of action and social commitment that he endorses. "But to whom can I be responsible," he asks, "and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?" (14). The kind of individual responsibility that Mary preaches is seemingly swallowed up by systemic inequality,

and instead the narrator searches for ways to short-circuit the system. Indeed, he finally realizes that he cannot return to Mary's after his retreat underground because that would not be "mov[ing] ahead" (571). Mary's ideals about community leadership, he implies, are stuck in the past. While admirable, responsibility to the black community does not change the fact of their invisibility. Thus, like the negative of a photograph, the figures of Rinehart and Mary allow the invisible man to imagine positive prints of the selfhood that he longs to develop. While finding them exemplary, he nonetheless concludes, "I must come out, I must emerge" (581). The invisible man's status as an "I," as a conscious and acting subject, resides at the heart of his response. As he searches both for social responsibility *and* self-production, the narrator's "hibernation" leads him to locate the provenance of this search within the self.

Ellison's framing of the invisible man's search is far from idiosyncratic. As the narrator suggests, he *does* "speak" on "the lower frequencies," striking a register that extends beyond his individual voice (581). While Foley rightly notes that the narrator's enigmatic final statement marks a "paradigm shift" in the left's eroding authority,¹²⁴ the invisible man also speaks for his implied audience in the sense that his response resonates within a wider postwar phenomenon: the growing public interest in and intellectual legitimacy of existentialism. Ellison was first exposed to French existentialism during the summer of 1945, when American magazines began to disseminate the intellectual life and struggles of postwar France. The immigration of existentialism to America inspired a variety of reactions to the movement. Different spheres of postwar American life engaged with European existentialism in various and uneven ways. In fact, as a part of its attempts to create and trade on the faddism of American consumers, the American popular press first circulated existentialism during the immediate postwar years as

¹²⁴ Foley, *Wrestling with the Left*, 8.

cultural symbol of French life and fashion. As George Cotkin explains, among its avenues for arriving on the postwar American scene, existentialism first became popular cultural “fad”:

American audiences were introduced to French existentialism in the pages of *Life*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. These popular discussions stressed Simone de Beauvoir’s lifestyle and Jean-Paul Sartre’s attachment to the bohemian café scene more than their ideas. A cult of personality developed whereby the general renown of existentialism became intimately connected to the personal life of the philosopher and even to the circumstances of the nation he or she represented.¹²⁵

American media outlets often presented this “cult of personality” with ironic distance. “Fun is being poked at the pretentiousness of both the French and their American acolytes,” Cotkin explains, even as these popular media outlets traded on the pervasive fascination among Americans with French life and thought.¹²⁶

Stanley Donen’s comedic film *Funny Face* (1957), starring Audrey Hepburn and Fred Astaire, signals the apex of the popular circulation of existentialism. At once capitalizing on the allure of French life while also satirizing its philosophical life, *Funny Face* tells the story of Jo Stockton (Audrey Hepburn), who is a shy book clerk at a recondite bookshop in Greenwich Village called Embryo Concepts. Stockton, who “thinks as well as she looks,” as Dick Avery (Fred Astaire) puts it, is a dilettante philosopher enamored with French thought. The narrative arc of *Funny Face* charts Stockton’s eventual drift away from her philosophical preoccupation with anxiety and alienation toward her romance with Avery, an upright fashion photographer. Avery convinces Stockton to visit Paris for a fashion shoot, although the latter is reticent because a French philosopher she admires “doesn’t approve of fashion magazines. It’s chichi and it’s an unrealistic approach to self-impressions, as well as economics.” After arriving in Paris, Stockton

¹²⁵ George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 92.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

tours the city and sings with pleasure, “I want to see the den of thinking men, like Jean-Paul Sartre / I must philosophize with all the guys around Monmartre.” The film tempers Stockton’s overtly philosophical ambitions, for she explains, “My philosophic search, has left me in the lurch.” Rather than choosing isolation, at the end of the film Stockton dons a fashionable wedding dress and meets Avery at a small French church, signaling the film’s preference for comedic resolution and love above Stockton’s earlier *angst*. Yet if *Funny Face* signals such a preference, it also marks the widespread intelligibility of Sartre and existentialism within the terrain of popular culture. Indeed, Stockton’s choice of Avery over “the den of thinking men, like Jean-Paul Sartre” is presented as an existential dilemma. Avery’s fashion world is, as his magazine’s editor Joan Prescott explains, “a cold lot—artificial and totally lacking in sentiment. So how can you possibly be in love?” Indeed, when the French philosopher that Stockton admires makes a pass at her, she repudiates the “den of thinking men” as a veil for sexual interests rather than “pure” philosophical inquiry. As both the world of fashion and French philosophy are cast in disrepute in the film, *Funny Face* subtly inflects existentialist sensibilities about authenticity and free choice, while emptying those sensibilities of the *angst* and alienation that underwrite Sartre’s argument. That is to say, Stockton and Avery are faced with a choice between authenticity—the life they *will*—and “artificial” forms of bad faith or social conformity. While *Funny Face* inflects that existential dilemma through a middle-class American domesticity that is at odds with French thought, they nonetheless share complementing positions on a cultural spectrum regarding the self and its authentic mode of being. By the mid-1950s, then, existentialism had been repurposed in Hollywood as a widely marketable—if not foreign and fraught—cultural signifier.

While one route for the arrival of existentialism comes through the popular press and the culture industry, there were also a handful of intellectuals and cultural figures based mainly in New York who adapted the thought of Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir during the 1940s.¹²⁷ This relatively small group was so successful in their advocacy that existentialist sensibilities began to flower among intellectuals and writers in the late 1940s. As Cotkin notes, Ellison and Wright were among these initial advocates who insisted upon the applicability of existentialism to the exigencies of the postwar moment in America.¹²⁸ During the summer months of 1945, Ellison discovered synopses and then translated works by Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir, although he had previously encountered the writers that the existentialists considered their predecessors: Søren Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche. In 1945, Ellison wrote to Wright that the contemporary French existentialists “view the role of the individual in relation to society so sharply that the leftwing boys, with the possible exception of Malraux, seemed to have looked at it through the reverse end of a telescope.”¹²⁹ Ellison suggests, in other words, that the political left presents the individual as diminutive and distorted, while the new group of French philosophers provides an account of actual existing beings. Society comprises the lived conditions for the self, according to this new philosophy of existence, rather than being a determining structure.

Ellison’s enthusiasm for the new French philosophy was a growing intellectual trend in the postwar years. One of existentialism’s early advocates was an editor of *Partisan Review*, William Barrett, who wrote frequent apologies for the legitimacy of Sartre and his compatriots.

¹²⁷ Cotkin, *Existential America*, 105-33.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 161-83.

¹²⁹ Letter to Wright quoted in Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 190-91.

The French philosopher-poet, Jean Wahl, likewise disseminated the intellectual outline of existentialism in the *New Republic* in 1945.¹³⁰ Wahl continued to promote existentialism through dozens of articles as well as in university courses at the University of Chicago. Existentialism was widely discussed in the immediate postwar years through a variety of popular media and well-circulated magazines.¹³¹ Many renowned theologians, such as Karl Barth and Paul Tillich also began to grapple with the writings of Heidegger and Sartre,¹³² while academic philosophers such as Jacques Barzun began to evaluate Sartre's work, although with much less enthusiasm and fewer dialogue partners.¹³³ Indeed, Ann Fulton argues that American academic philosophers were initially even hesitant to consider, much less embrace, Sartrean existentialism.¹³⁴ Part of the reason, Fulton shows, was the slow translation of Sartre's more technical works. Fulton also suggests that influential academics, such as Sidney Hook, disparaged Sartre's work because of his blending of existentialism and Marxism—a period in Sartre's career that was only later

¹³⁰ Jean Wahl, "Existentialism: A Preface," *New Republic* (30 September 1945): 442-44.

¹³¹ "Existentialism," *Time* (28 January 1946): 28-29; John Lackey Brown, "Paris, 1946: Its Three War Philosophies," *New York Times* (1 September 1946); Simone de Beauvoir, "Strictly Personal: Jean-Paul Sartre," *Harper's Bazaar* (trans. Malcolm Cowley; January 1946): 113. Admittedly, many early essays disseminating existentialism were far from enthusiastic about the movement. See Albert Guerard, "French and American Pessimism," *Harper's Magazine* (September 1945): 276; Bernard Fitzell, "Existentialism: Postwar Paris Enthrones a Bleak Philosophy of Pessimism," *Life* (7 June 1946): 59; Oliver Barres, "In the Deeps of Despair," *Saturday Review of Literature* (31 May 1947): 14.

¹³² See Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism* [1967-68] (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972).

¹³³ Jacques Barzun, "Ça Existe: A Note on the New Ism," *American Scholar* 15.4 (October 1946): 449-54. For another scholarly evaluation, see Brand Blanshard, "From the Commissioner's Mailbag," *Philosophical Review* 54 (May 1945): 210-16.

¹³⁴ Ann Fulton, *Apostles of Sartre: Existentialism in America, 1945-1963* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999).

translated for American readers.¹³⁵ More importantly, though, the rising tide of existentialism in Europe was coterminous with the emerging hegemony of the analytic tradition within American philosophy departments: the two modes of philosophy were thought to be at odds because of their disparate methodologies and concerns. According to American academics, Sartre's work lacked "a solid philosophical structure," a lack of rigor that undermines the appealing facets of his strand of existentialism. Nonetheless, Fulton shows that by 1952, Sartre's "emphasis on individual freedom, personal responsibility, and authenticity" garnered significant intellectual traction.¹³⁶ Thus, a wide swath of public figures and academics, as well as popular magazines for business people such as *Time*, discussed Sartre's "radical liberty," in which "authenticity was the result of awareness of individual freedom to create values."¹³⁷

The popular circulation of existentialism thus provided intellectual and cultural legitimacy to a radical form of individualism that emphasized authenticity and choice, with the self as their center of gravity. Of course, summarizing or debating existentialism does not amount to embracing it. Yet, as the critic Stark Young says after the 1946 American premiere of Sartre's play *No Exit*, "It should be seen whether you like it or not."¹³⁸ The postwar circulation of existentialism, in other words, is a marker of an emerging felt sensibility, the legitimization of a structure of feeling among other competing intellectual tastes. The idea of the self as a center of gravity for authenticity, freedom, and politics became a fact of the intellectual and cultural marketplace in postwar America. Ellison, responding to and adapting this sensibility for his own

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

¹³⁸ Stark Young, "Weaknesses," *The New Republic* (9 December 1946): 764.

purposes, helps bring definition to the rising demand for a vision of social and personal life that embeds freedom within individual choices and experiences. As Rampersad suggests, the variety of existentialism that surfaces in *Invisible Man* “did not lend itself easily to building social institutions that could form a reliable bulwark against chaos.”¹³⁹ That is, not unlike most strains of existentialism, *Invisible Man* presents an anti-institutional air that leaves Ellison’s protagonist atomized, cut off from institutional reform, and instead assuming private responsibility for “action” (579). Ellison’s novel, as it positions itself in dialogue with the rising legitimacy of existential individualism, offers a counterweight to the waning influence of the non-liberal left, with its socio-economic analysis and privileging of collective conditions for life. Thus, while the invisible man leaves the “old skin” of past sensibilities behind, what emerges with him is a new figure of the self for the postwar era (581).

¹³⁹ Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 246.

CHAPTER 2: THE AGE OF ANXIETY: PATRICIA HIGHSMITH, EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY, AND THE “DECLINE” OF NATURALISM

Theodore Schiebelhut, the young and independently wealthy painter in Patricia Highsmith’s *A Game for the Living* (1958), has difficulty explaining why “all his conscious ideas were those of a pessimist.”¹⁴⁰ Theodore insists that his moods and bleak outlook have “no causes that he or anybody else could discover.” Conventional psychological explanations—such as his family history or general sexual repression—do not apply in his case. Rather, Theodore at first believes his pessimism to be a function of his abstract commitment to a philosophy maintaining that “the world had no meaning, no end but nothingness, and that man’s achievements were all finally perishable—cosmic jokes, like man himself” (5). When Theodore discovers that his “mistress,” Lelia Ballesteros, has been raped, murdered, and mutilated, his abstract pessimism is confronted with the violent realities of a senseless world. Her death is a pointless tragedy perpetuated by Carlos Hidalgo, an alcoholic friend who becomes infatuated with Lelia. Indeed, the meaninglessness of the trauma confirms Theodore’s pessimism, albeit not without ambiguity—why, for example, is such violence requisite for his enlightenment? Still, Theodore is forced to piece together an existence that is otherwise absurdly irrational. He finds himself driven to make sense of a senseless world by what his friend Ramón characterizes as the former’s “Existentialist’s conscience” (76). Theodore’s search for the murderer of his lover is driven less by a demand for moral order than by the vicissitudes and private exigencies of his psyche. Detective fiction becomes the stage for existentialist angst.

¹⁴⁰ Patricia Highsmith, *A Game for the Living* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, [1958] 1988), 5. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Much like Theodore's attempts to navigate an often-hostile world by drawing on the philosophical resources of existentialism, Patricia Highsmith's novels from the 1950s bear the imprint of the flourishing of American existentialist thought during the postwar era. However, in a way quite distinct from Ellison, Wright, and Mailer, Highsmith's fiction blends existentialist sensibilities about choice, angst, and authenticity with another prominent postwar development: what Nathan Hale characterizes as psychoanalysis's "golden age of popularization" in the United States (276). Highsmith's novels from the decade—particularly her widely read *Strangers on a Train* (1950) and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1956)—explore these entwined intellectual threads, which I argue helped to redefine the political sensibilities of the postwar moment. In particular, this chapter charts the nascent development of the existential psychology movement and, more broadly, the normalization of therapeutic psychology following the Second World War. The growing public purchase of these developments had significant consequences for American intellectual life: in effect, the ego and its vicissitudes—rather than socio-economic or environmental conditions—became the normative template in the 1950s for understanding society and the self. Highsmith's novels helped to shape this intellectual terrain by representing public phenomena such as violence, class envy, and social alienation as existential crises of an embattled private realm.

In her construal of the darker phenomena of human experience, Highsmith is at pains to distinguish her work from the literary naturalists who dominated the American cultural scene of the 1930s and early 1940s. I argue that Highsmith frequently adapts and revises certain tropes of the naturalists in order to repudiate a narrative world governed principally by structural, socio-economic, and environmental conditions. Highsmith's revisionist project reinforces a prevalent assertion of the "decline" of naturalism by postwar intellectuals, who hail instead a new cultural

order focused upon the interior life of the self. Indeed, the temporary deflation in literary naturalism's cultural authority—a phenomenon I trace through the work of intellectuals such as Philip Rahv and the influential *Partisan Review*—is a marker of the growing public currency of psychological templates for understanding society. I demonstrate that this trend was itself a central feature of a wider crisis in the intellectual legitimacy of the New Deal welfare state during the 1950s. As the cultural fortunes of naturalism declined, existentialism and a spectrum of therapeutic psychologies flourished in the United States, and one consequence of these shifts is that violence and class conflict were increasingly construed as phenomena of the largely autonomous arena of the psyche. Such trends in American cultural history, I argue, helped to erode the intellectual grounds for a progressive managerial state, which was predicated upon intervening in structural conditions for the welfare of its citizens.

Professional Psychology, Psychoanalysis, and Their Discontents

The “age of anxiety”—a phrase whose wider circulation begins with W.H. Auden's book-length poem, *The Age of Anxiety* (1947)—is the child of converging historical phenomena and intellectual sensibilities.¹⁴¹ Beyond the emerging nuclear threats and existentialist angst of the immediate postwar years, the anxious *zeitgeist* of the early Cold War is entangled with both

¹⁴¹ Whether or not anyone actually read Auden's labyrinthine poem—surprisingly, it was reprinted four times within two years of its appearance and won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1948—at least its titular notion became the centerpiece of American intellectual life for several years. Jacques Barzun praised *The Age of Anxiety* in the pages of *Harper's Magazine*, noting that “the very title [...] roots it in our generation.” (See Jacques Barzun, “Workers in Monumental Brass,” *Harper's Magazine* 195 (September 1947).) The influence of *The Age of Anxiety* quickly spread beyond its appreciative critics. It inspired Leonard Bernstein's Symphony no. 2 for Piano and Orchestra, *The Age of Anxiety* (1949). Jerome Robbins also choreographed a spinoff ballet in 1950, and there were several attempts at stage versions of the poem. Such resonances lead Alan Jacobs, one of Auden's editors, to proclaim that *The Age of Anxiety* provided a “terse and widely applicable diagnostic phrase.” See Alan Jacobs, “Introduction” to *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* by W. H. Auden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), xli.

the popularization and professionalization of psychological discourse in postwar America. Psychology took its first steps toward becoming a formalized discipline in the United States through the work of William James, whose two-volume *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and popular undergraduate courses at Harvard institutionalized the field in America. Admittedly, “psychology” as an object of inquiry existed in less formalized ways long before the late nineteenth century. The roots of American “psychological” fiction, for example, stretch at least as far back as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). (What might be called “psychological” fiction has an even longer history in Europe.) Yet, unlike these earlier varieties of psychological experience, the postwar years saw an unprecedented expansion in the use of personal trauma and formal mental categories as explanatory mechanisms for everyday experience. The psychological mapping of ordinary life, in other words, became not just common but also normative for behavior.

One strain of this expansion began when Sigmund Freud visited the United States in 1909. American writers and intellectuals were familiar with Freud not long after the turn of the century, yet his lectures at Clark University were the first time the American media reported on his theories.¹⁴² The year before his visit, Freud’s followers met in Salzburg, Austria, to convene the first International Psychoanalytic Congress. Among the small group were a New York-based clinician, Abraham Brill, and Ernest Jones, a neurologist and clinician in London. After the Congress, Brill and Jones began to spread Freud’s work throughout the English-speaking world. Jones, in partnership with another early Freudian, the Harvard neurologist and psychologist James Jackson Putnam, eventually founded the American Psychoanalytic Association in 1911. In

¹⁴² Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Norton, 2006), 211.

that same year Brill would also found the New York Psychoanalytic Society.¹⁴³ Before these organizations came together, however, Jones led efforts to disseminate Freud's work among academics and members of the American medical establishment, playing an important part in the decision of G. Stanley Hall, a psychologist and president of Clark University, to invite Freud to give five lectures in September 1909. Freud called this event "the first official recognition of our endeavors," particularly because he was met with an audience much more open to his theories than he had yet experienced in Europe.¹⁴⁴ The usually staid local press reported accurately, albeit succinctly, Freud's controversial theories about sexuality. The coverage was undoubtedly a result of the fact that the event itself was a who's who of intellectuals on the subject.¹⁴⁵ Even a suspicious William James attended the lectures.

Freud's visit became the germ for what would later cause psychological questions to come to the forefront of the American cultural imagination. Admittedly, that spread was quite slow at first. "In the 1920s and 1930s," John Burnham explains, "psychoanalysis spread among special parts of the population, frequently in forms that Freud and other purists disdained."¹⁴⁶ As a comprehensive psychological theory of everyday life—tics and slips, dreams and private wishes—psychoanalysis was confined to a relatively small group of intellectuals and authors. Dorothy Ross argues that the members of this group were, first and foremost, advocates of modernism. This dual interest in modernism and Freud makes sense, according to Ross, because

¹⁴³ Ibid., 186.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 213.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 211.

¹⁴⁶ John Burnham, "A Shift in Perspective," in *After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America* (ed. John Burnham; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 157.

modernism itself is “a set of ideas and works of art [...] that revolved around the exploration of subjectivity.”¹⁴⁷ Even as Freud was one of the first to chart our interior lives, modernism, at least according to its initial reception in the United States, is a romantic artistic movement concerned with exploring the tortured beauty, ambivalence, and isolation of modern consciousness. Also, beyond its anxieties, modernists like Mann, Joyce and Kafka garnered such currency in the postwar moment because, as Irving Howe puts it, their sensibilities gravitate toward “the one uniquely modern style of salvation: a salvation by, of, and for the self.”¹⁴⁸ Other advocates of Freud by-way-of-modernism included Lionel Trilling and Herbert Marcuse, Betty Friedan and Daniel Bell, Erik Erikson and Philip Rahv. This motley congregation insisted upon Freud’s importance not only to their academic counterparts but also to an educated middle-class public. Furthermore, these advocates had a political motive for their interest in a science and literature of subjectivity because, according to Ross, they had “turned inward, away from their destroyed Marxist hopes of the 1930s to wartime nationalism and a chastened Cold War liberalism.”¹⁴⁹ Thus, as modernism became staple fare for critics and public intellectuals and was entrenched in American universities, so were the broad strokes of psychoanalysis. While these strokes were variously presented and unevenly received, the impulse to analyze common behavior for its psychological import garnered popular currency in unprecedented ways.

From the germ of Freud’s visit, to the legitimacy cultured by intellectuals, psychoanalysis grew into a mature and widespread intellectual movement during the 1950s and early 1960s. As

¹⁴⁷ Dorothy Ross, “Freud and the Vicissitudes of Modernism in the United States, 1940-1980,” in *After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America* (ed. John Burnham; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 164.

¹⁴⁸ Irving Howe, “The Idea of the Modern,” in *Literary Modernism* (ed. Irving Howe; Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1967), 14.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

Burnham explains, it was during this moment “that Freud’s ideas exerted the greatest influence on American culture.”¹⁵⁰ Some of the key terms of psychoanalysis became common—albeit often disputed—among the middle- and upper classes. Seizing upon this new currency, Frank Wheeler declares in Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road* (1961),

This country’s probably the psychiatric, psychoanalytical capital of the world. Old Freud himself could never’ve dreamed up a more devoted bunch of disciples than the population of the United States—isn’t that right? Our whole damn culture is geared to it; it’s the new religion; it’s everybody’s intellectual and spiritual sugar-tit.¹⁵¹

This hyperbolic condemnation of the intellectual consensus given to psychoanalysis in the United States is ironically a way for Frank to shore himself up against his rage at his own suburban existence. Frank’s discontentment with having ended up in suburbia rather than a wider and ostensibly more important world prompts him to turn against this middle-class form of life. Yet his disavowal is deeply ironic in the sense that, even in the private motivations of his war against Freud’s theories of the ego, Frank confirms its status as an explanatory template for his own life. When Frank finishes his diatribe, his wife and friends “looked mildly relieved, like pupils at the end of a lecture.”¹⁵² Not finding their customary assent to his outbursts, Frank is nonplussed and withdraws to the kitchen. It becomes apparent that his anti-mainstream rebellion is itself a function of his ego, and the sad irony of the episode is that even dissent against the privileged status of psychoanalysis is rooted within an internal, private arena. There is even a psychological explanation, Yates suggests, for the rejection of psychoanalysis.

¹⁵⁰ Burnham, “A Shift in Perspective,” 159.

¹⁵¹ Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (New York: Vintage, [1961] 2007), 65.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 66.

The early years of American television, while not necessarily affirming the scale of Frank's assertion, nonetheless confirms his sentiments about the mass appeal of psychology. In an age when the American television industry enjoyed rapid expansion and largely consolidated audiences, programming often drew heavily upon psychological discourse when featuring violence or socially aberrant behavior.¹⁵³ This fact is clearest in one of the most popular shows of the 1950s, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-1965). The series was created to ride the coattails of Hitchcock's successful films, such as *Rope* (1948) and *Dial M for Murder* (1954), as well as his adaptation of Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* (1951). Whatever Hitchcock's inheritance from psychoanalysis—his film *Spellbound* (1945) features a character who undergoes treatment by a psychoanalyst, but Freud's influence is otherwise an open question—his work pushed questions of individual psychology and the irregular, if not aberrant, dimensions of the human psyche to the forefront of American cultural attention.¹⁵⁴

Almost every episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* explores some form of violence, framing such trauma through a psychological lens. For example, the first episode of the series, "Revenge," is as Hitchcock puts it a story about "ordinary folk": a middle-class husband, Carl Span, who is an engineer at an aircraft plant, and his wife, Elsa, a former ballerina who has recently suffered from a "small breakdown." Carl, a figure of the working professional, has taken Elsa to a new town for "fresh air" and to recover from her breakdown. After settling into a small trailer park, Carl leaves for his first day of work. Not long after he departs, Elsa is attacked by a

¹⁵³ On the proliferation of televisions among American households in the 1950s, see Sue Bowden and Avner Offer, "Household Appliances and the Use of Time: The United States and Britain Since the 1920s," *Economic Historical Review* 47 (1994): 729, table 1. Bowden and Offer estimate that by 1955 black and white televisions had "penetrated" approximately 75% of households. On the issue of the consolidation of audiences, see Brier, *A Novel Marketplace*, 1-3.

¹⁵⁴ See Constantine Sandis, "Hitchcock's Conscious Use of Freud's Unconscious," *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 3 (2009): 56-81.

man in a “grey suit” who, she enigmatically explains, “killed me.” Elsa experiences something like a fugue after the trauma—a loss of personality in which her self (“me”) is for all practical purposes destroyed. She becomes nonresponsive, her blank face staring aimlessly at the ceiling. A doctor visits Elsa, and he explains to Carl: “I don’t think her condition is too serious, physically that is, Mr. Span. Otherwise, well, she’s been through a very emotional shock. And coming so soon after the breakdown—well, I can’t tell you anything for certain.” Questioning Elsa about the episode, the doctor explains, could even result in “permanent damage.” After Carl moves her to yet another town, Elsa identifies an ordinary-looking man in a grey suit as her attacker. Carl follows the man into a hotel room and murders him with a pipe. Afterwards, Elsa repeatedly identifies other men in grey suits as her attacker, and Carl slowly realizes that he has killed an innocent person.

This first episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* locates Elsa’s trauma within the world of “ordinary folk”—a democratization of psychological experience that would become the norm for the series. Carl and Elsa are not members of the intelligentsia or upper classes; they are not cloistered from the working or professional world. Rather, the nuances of psychological analysis map onto their middle-class experience. Beyond the actual settings of the episodes, this democratization of individual psychology is also evident in Hitchcock’s distinctive filmic technique of using the camera’s point of view to create a voyeuristic relationship between the viewer and a character. The technique allows the viewer to imagine herself as the character within the episode, as if the individual viewing the trauma were also its experiential subject. Hitchcock’s nearly obsessive close-up of faces similarly places an emphasis on the individual emotional responses of characters. The audience thus *becomes* Elsa, or *feels* Carl’s nauseous recognition at murdering an innocent businessman. The viewer is invited to employ Elsa’s

“emotional shock,” her psychological trauma, when riding along Main Street at the end of the episode. Furthermore, putting one’s self in Elsa’s place, any man wearing a gray business suit becomes the attacker. His attire, as Sloan Wilson’s 1955 novel employs it when describing the world of Tom Rath, is the hallmark of the organized business community.¹⁵⁵ In Hitchcock’s turn on this professional signifier, sociopaths are not confined to the fringes of society; instead, violence is latent within the American Everyman. Hitchcock’s techniques, in other words, construe the violence that causes Elsa’s loss of personality as darker manifestations of human consciousness. Although *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* is occasionally attentive to economic markers—e.g., the attacker’s professional status, or the fact that Carl and Elsa live in a trailer park—the television series nonetheless invites the viewers to understand the trauma as psychological phenomena.

Indeed, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* shows the extent to which psychological experience and the symptoms of internalized trauma had become not only relevant for cultural representation but also widely marketable. Recognizing the mass appeal of Hitchcock’s films, the television series was conceived by an advertising agency and pitched to Hitchcock.¹⁵⁶ The agency’s intuition paid off, as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* began as one of the most consistently popular programs during a time when the audience size for television was growing despite the fact that the options for channels and programming were relatively consolidated.¹⁵⁷ Admittedly, psychological programs were never as successful as, say, *The \$64,000 Question*, which aired on

¹⁵⁵ Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (New York: Da Capo Press, [1955] 2002).

¹⁵⁶ James L. Baughman, *Same Time, Same Station: Creating American Television, 1948-1961* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 149.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

CBS in 1955 and was the top-viewed program on U.S. television. However, given its longevity and relative popularity in the growing television marketplace, the program became a touchstone for subsequent film and television.¹⁵⁸

While *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* marks the democratization and mass market appeal of psychological templates of the everyday, Highsmith's relationship to these cultural developments signals the heterogeneous threads being braided in the changing fabric of postwar American intellectual life. Highsmith's fascination with modern psychology began when she was eight years old. In a 1989 interview, Highsmith says that as a precocious child she studied Karl Menninger's *The Human Mind*: "They're case histories of crackpots, sadists, murderers, and other nuts," she explained, "but it's like reading Edgar Allan Poe."¹⁵⁹ This inaugurated Highsmith's lifelong interest in the grotesque and psychologically "abnormal."¹⁶⁰ She began studying Freud as an eighteen-year-old not long after discovering Karl Marx's writings. Yet Highsmith quickly became suspicious of both Marxism and American psychoanalysis, eventually resigning from the Youth Communist League in 1941 after two years of membership. Her suspicions of psychoanalysis, though, were slow to calcify and never led to such a radical break. In 1943 she wrote in her diary, "The highest good is the use of the subconscious mind entirely, almost to the exclusion of the conscious mind, which is patterned after those around us.

¹⁵⁸ Similarly, Davis Thomson argues that Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) established a pattern for representing violence, sex, and desire, creating expectations that would comprise one of the most influential templates for subsequent filmic representations of these phenomena. See David Thomson, *The Moment of Psycho: How Alfred Hitchcock Taught America to Love Murder* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

¹⁵⁹ Alexander Lobrano, "Patricia Highsmith: Serial Thriller," *The Lively Arts* 20 (20 October 1989).

¹⁶⁰ Andrew Wilson, *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 40-41.

Within the subconscious lies all one's oil, one's fire, one's flavor, and the measure of divinity allotted to all of us."¹⁶¹ Although Highsmith would question certain dimensions of her youthful enthusiasms in later works such as *Edith's Diary* (1977), she never broke with Freud's notion of the unconscious, which he insists is autonomous from and prior to the rational mental states and conformist impulses of everyday life. The unconscious similarly becomes something like an authentic self in Highsmith's fiction, uninhibited by the strictures and compulsory behaviors of socialized existence.

Yet Highsmith was anything but an orthodox Freudian. Part of her discontentment with psychoanalysis developed when she underwent therapy in 1948 with the New York psychoanalyst Eva Klein Lipshutz. Highsmith decided to attend this course of therapy to "cure" her from the disgust she felt during sexual experiences with her fiancé, Marc Brandel. In effect, she wanted to become heterosexual, despite her numerous same-sex affairs. American psychoanalysts, to a degree perhaps foreign to Freud, tended to pathologize same-sex desire. However, while Americans had become accustomed to visiting a therapist about such "abnormal" behavior, psychoanalysis for the "non-aberrant" had also become equally as commonplace in urban centers. Anatole Broyard recounts that there was in New York "an inevitability about psychoanalysis. It was like having to take the subway to get anywhere. Psychoanalysis was in the air, like humidity, or smoke." Among the reasons for this seemingly pervasive experience, Broyard explains, "The war had been a bad dream that we wanted to analyze now. [...] There was a feeling that we had forgotten how to live."¹⁶² Highsmith's decision to visit a psychoanalyst was therefore part of the ethic of the moment; private therapy

¹⁶¹ Qtd. in Wilson, *Beautiful Shadow*, 70.

¹⁶² Anatole Broyard, *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir* (New York: Carol Southern Books, 1993), 45. Qtd. in Wilson, *Beautiful Shadow*, 147.

had become integral to the behavior of postwar Americans. Yet her therapist's view of lesbianism as a mental illness was never fully convincing to Highsmith. Eva Klein Lipshutz's diagnosis, in effect, was that Highsmith's same-sex desires derived from her strained relationship with her mother: paradoxically, her sexuality proved that she actually hated women. This formulaic cause-and-effect explanation failed to convince Highsmith that her familial past explained her desires, and in fact she began writing what has become known as her "lesbian novel with a happy ending," *The Price of Salt* (1953), during her sessions with the psychoanalyst.¹⁶³ In May 1949 after forty-seven therapy sessions, Highsmith determined that her sexual aversion to men was unchanging and, leaving on a European tour, she never again trusted conventional psychoanalytic therapy.

Highsmith wrote *Strangers on a Train* before these abortive attempts to find a "cure" for her same-sex desires. She learned a few days before her last session of therapy that Harper & Brothers had agreed to publish the book. Despite the uncertainties that marked her life during the years preceding her first novel's publication, Highsmith found a philosophical anchor for *Strangers on a Train* in European existentialism. Not unlike psychoanalysis, Highsmith was attracted to the nuanced accounts of human angst and the subversion of a rational construal of life that preoccupies this body of philosophy and literature. Highsmith began reading Dostoevsky as a thirteen-year-old. As a young adult, she read several works by Franz Kafka in 1943 and Albert Camus's *L'Étranger* (1942) in 1946. Highsmith found that Kafka's work traced the lines of her pessimism regarding the rationality of "God, government or self," while the alienated existence of Camus's narrator Meursault became a doorway for her into work by Sartre's

¹⁶³ Wilson, *Beautiful Shadow*, 149-53.

existentialism.¹⁶⁴ She read *Crime and Punishment* again in 1947, declaring that Dostoevsky was her “master” (as she would also later say about Kierkegaard).¹⁶⁵ Indeed, *Strangers on a Train* borrows Dostoevsky’s technique in *Crime and Punishment* of depicting the murder perpetrated by Raskolnikov as a psychological phenomenon as much as a physical act. Murder and its attendant guilt similarly becomes an *idée fixe* for Guy: at first, he is only beleaguered with guilt for the murder of his first wife, Miriam, by the wealthy sociopath Charles Bruno. By chance Guy meets Bruno on a train as they each are travelling to their respective homes. Both men disclose their frustration with a specific person who inhibits their ambitions: Miriam is pregnant with another man’s child and wants a divorce in order to marry her lover, Owen Markham, which seemingly injures Guy’s professional prestige; while Bruno’s father has numerous affairs—some Oedipal relationship is conspicuous between the son and mother—even as the elder Bruno also refuses to release his share of the inheritance from his mother’s wealthy family. In response to these disclosures, Bruno proposes a “perfect murder” in which he and Guy commit the crime on the other’s behalf. While Guy is disgusted by the proposition, he nonetheless finds Bruno strangely appealing.

Mistaking Guy’s reticence for the unconscious consent of a virtuous man, Bruno strangles Miriam and later compels Guy to fulfill his end of the agreement. As Bruno’s pressure becomes more forceful and disturbing, the murder of Bruno’s father becomes the governing center of Guy’s psychological life. Based on Bruno’s repeated letters detailing how the elder Bruno might be murdered, Guy develops a clear mental image of the act. Much like Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov, Guy first enacts the murder in his imagination:

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 118.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 126, 158.

It would be so simple, as Bruno said, when the house was empty except for his father and the butler, and Guy knew the house more exactly than his home in Metcalf. [...] He must not let his mind go there again. That was exactly what Bruno wanted his mind to do. [...] But having been there once, it was easy for his mind to go there again. In the nights when he could not sleep, he enacted the murder, and it soothed him like a drug.¹⁶⁶

Much like Raskolnikov's paradoxical disgust and fascination with Svidrigailov, a wealthy profligate, Guy is at once repelled by and finally feels bound to Bruno. After the latter drunkenly (but perhaps intentionally) falls off Guy's boat, Guy risks his life by jumping into a tumultuous sea to save him. "Where was his friend," Guy asks himself, "his brother?" (263).

Guy's ambiguous identification with Bruno is the first instance of a doubling technique that Highsmith would rely upon throughout her career. Whereas Nabokov's technique of doubling is a function of his subjective idealism, as if his characters only discover iterations of themselves in the world, this technique for Highsmith signals the Gothic sensibilities that underwrite her psychological realism: even ostensibly upright and socially responsible human beings have not only the capacity for evil but also a desire for it. Thus, in a moment of dire reflection, Guy frames the doubling like this: "But love and hate, he thought now, good and evil, lived side by side in the human heart, and not merely in differing proportions in one man and the next, but all good and all evil." He construes evil as a product of the self, as an internal proclivity that is distinct from materialist explanations or external influences. Guy perceives that this internal provenance for evil—its borderless relationship to the good and its origins within the "heart," the psyche or soul—explains his contradictory emotional responses to Bruno: "And Bruno, he and Bruno. Each was what the other had not chosen to be, the cast-off self, what he thought he hated but perhaps in reality loved" (180). Bruno is a "double" of Guy not because

¹⁶⁶ Patricia Highsmith, *Strangers on a Train* (New York: Norton, [1950] 2001), 140. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

they are seemingly trapped within their own subjectivities but because the human capacity for violence and evil is, according to Highsmith, a universal fact of the human condition. Indeed, distinct from this doubling technique, Guy explains his refusal to discard the revolver after the murder: “it was *his*, a part of himself, the third hand that had done the murder. It was himself at fifteen when he had bought it, himself when he had loved Miriam and had kept it in their room in Chicago, looking at it now and then in his most contented, most inward moments.” During these “inward moments”—pauses from his life as a promising architect when Guy turns toward his psyche—the value of the weapon becomes most apparent. It is “[t]he best of himself,” he explains, the apogee of his psychological life (178).

Guy’s insistence that what passes for “evil” is *within* himself positions *Strangers on a Train* as the heir of a tradition of fiction that includes Poe and Horace Walpole. Yet, perhaps more tellingly, these sensibilities about evil also differ from the Judeo-Christian notion of humanity’s total depravity. Guy’s belief that the human heart is “all good and all evil” is related to, but differs from that religious tradition in a way that recalls the existentialist proclamation of the death of God. The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah says that humanity’s heart is “deceitful and desperately wicked” (17:9), while one psalmist bemoans the fact that “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God” (Psalm 14:3). Seizing upon such claims in Hebrew scripture, early Christians insisted that all human beings “are under sin” and “no one does good, not even one” because “[a]ll have turned aside” from God’s laws (Romans 3:9, 12). Within this strain of the Judeo-Christian tradition, evil takes root within the soul after humanity fails to meet the dictates of a divine order. Evil, in this sense, is a function of God’s laws and humanity’s fallible will. The fifth-century theologian Augustine would develop the idea further, arguing that humanity inherited “original sin” from the first human beings who violated God’s

will in the garden of Eden. Within the Augustinian modification, then, total depravity is synonymous with human nature; it is now an inevitable fact of the soul, which by nature is alienated from God.¹⁶⁷

In contrast to this tradition, Highsmith's early work is indebted to Nietzsche's moral philosophy, which dismantles the concepts of "good and evil" by identifying them as vestiges of a failed religio-philosophical system. According to Nietzsche, these ideas are moored in the Judeo-Christian tradition but have persisted in the modern world after the "death of God," or the collapse of transcendental explanations for human existence and behavior.¹⁶⁸ Highsmith first encountered this line of argumentation in 1939 when she read Nietzsche's autobiography *Ecce Homo* as an undergraduate at Barnard.¹⁶⁹ Highsmith was fascinated with the subversive quality of Nietzsche's philosophy: "I am not a man," he proclaims, "I am dynamite."¹⁷⁰ The destructive thrust of Nietzsche's moral philosophy resides in his claim that the weak of society perpetuate the lies of "good" and "evil" in order to rein in the strong, despite the "death" of the transcendental and metaphysical explanations that gave rise to those concepts. What passes for "evil," Nietzsche insists instead, is actually the impulses and proclivities of worldly human life. In contrast to such authentic expressions of the will, Christians and humanists are in fact nihilists

¹⁶⁷ See Augustine's treatise "On the Grace of Christ, and on Original Sin" (circa 418), written against Pelagius, one of his contemporaries. This document is freely available online at <http://ccel.org>. Accessed 12 May 2014. See *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, volume 5.

¹⁶⁸ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (trans. R. J. Hollingdale; New York: Penguin, [1886] 2003). Nietzsche's subsequent volume, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), is more cohesive and compelling account of the religious heritage of "good" and "evil" in the modern humanistic tradition.

¹⁶⁹ Wilson, *Beautiful Shadow*, 211.

¹⁷⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (trans. Anthony M. Ludovici; New York: Macmillan, 1911), 131.

because they deny the importance of *this* life: as they grope for spiritual things, they eschew their wills and thus their moral concepts are little more than vapors.

Impressed by Nietzsche's argument, Highsmith at first embraced this position by rejecting transcendental or metaphysical grounds for our conceptions of good and evil, and eventually she would adapt Nietzsche moral philosophy for her own novelistic purposes. The so-called amorality that characterizes many of her most intriguing characters—especially Bruno, Tom Ripley, and David Kelsey in *This Sweet Sickness* (1961)—displaces the conventional concern for moral order that underwrites much of crime fiction, searching instead for what Julian Symons, the novelist and former president of the Detection Club, characterizes as “a different and wholly personal code of morality.”¹⁷¹ For Highsmith, evil is only a construct produced by her characters' guilt, while the figure of the criminal is a symbol for the self that asserts its will. Thus, when Guy perceives that the revolver is “[t]he best of himself,” the weapon becomes a symbol of what, though society has deemed it “evil,” is actually an assertion of Guy's will (178). Guy's moment of perception about the “evil” within himself is, in other words, a window into the life that he wants, bringing into full view the amorality required to realize those desires. Following Nietzsche's sentiment, Highsmith's seemingly Gothic sensibilities about humanity's universal penchant for “evil” become an avenue for replacing a discourse about crime and morality with concerns about authentic existence. She presents a narrative world beyond good and evil, identifying instead the authentic willing of a self as the narrative center of gravity.

Highsmith's shift away from moral categories toward these sensibilities about authenticity created confusion and discomfort among many early reviewers of the novel. For example, one critic with the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* lamented that *Strangers on*

¹⁷¹ Julian Symons, *The Modern Crime Story* (Edinburgh: Tragara Press, 1980), 14.

a Train “is not always credible, and the characters are not entirely convincing” because it is difficult to see how a respectable architect would fail to inform the police once he is convinced of Bruno’s guilt, much less commit such a murder.¹⁷² Indeed, Hitchcock seems to have similar reservations, for Guy does not actually go through with the murder in the film version of *Strangers on a Train*. Rather than viewing the novel as the story of a corrupted “good” man who longs only to live happily with his new fiancé, Anne, Highsmith stages Guy’s crime and attendant guilt as a struggle between two selves—one that knows the power and prestige he wants and another plagued by fear, compulsions, and socially constructed prohibitions. This struggle surfaces most clearly in the tension he feels between his ambitions as an architect and his former life with Miriam. On the train Guy shares his frustrations about Miriam with Bruno, situating his disdain for her within the context of his own tentative commission to design the Palmyra Club in Palm Beach. As Bruno puerilely says about the commission, “You’re gonna be famous, hum?” and, in fact, there is significant professional prestige if Guy’s design is successful (32). As Bruno rambles about his own artistic dalliances in the past, Guy reflects about the social capital that his modern design would acquire for him:

He sipped his drink absently, and thought of the commissions that would come after Palm Beach. Soon, perhaps, an office building in New York. He had an idea for an office building in New York, and he longed to see it come into being. Guy Daniel Hanes. *A name*. No longer the irksome, never quite banished awareness that he had less money than Anne. (32)

While Guy earlier says that he has no interest in “making money” (20), the Palmyra affords him the opportunity to gain enough social capital that he can pursue his architectural and artistic interests unencumbered by financial concerns. He would become a “*name*,” a public figure with social clout. Furthermore, the Palmyra commission would obviate Guy’s concerns about his

¹⁷² *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* (16 April 1950): 26.

inferior socio-economic position with Anne, whose wealthy family is among the upper classes of New England. Miriam, however, threatens to “lose him the commission” by spoiling his social capital, either by demanding a divorce because of her love for Owen Markham or ruining his social clout with Clarence Brillhart, the manager of the Palmyra Club (33). In either case, he fears, Miriam will prompt Brillhart to deny or withdraw the commission.

When Guy learns that Miriam wants to go to Palm Beach with him for “protection” during her pregnancy (her lover is currently married and first needs to get a divorce), Guy is distraught. He imagines Miriam moving to Palm Beach with him while carrying another man’s child, anticipating that a scandal would surface. He also imagines an equally disastrous scenario in which the small-town, unsophisticated Miriam meets Brillhart, ruining Guy’s image as a member of the cultural elite. Guy thus becomes convinced that Miriam cannot accompany him to Palm Beach. “Yet,” Guy suddenly realizes, “it was not the vision of Brillhart’s shock beneath his calm, unvarying courtesy [...] but simply his own revulsion that made it impossible. It was just that he couldn’t bear having Miriam anywhere near him when he worked on a project like this one” (43). Even if she does not pollute his social circle, Miriam would pollute his imagination—his ability to work on such an important project. In almost any scenario, then, Miriam obstructs or devalues the social capital that Guy gains by the Palmyra commission. Her unrefined presence would sully his slow climb from his home in Metcalf, Texas into the upper echelons of New York society. Given his revulsion and anxieties, Bruno’s proposal to murder Miriam is in fact a manifestation of Guy’s will.

However, such a Nietzschean reading of *Strangers on a Train* is not without its problems. What, for example, makes the life that Guy *wills*—his desire to be a “name”—any less a social construct than the morality that inhibits the realization of his goal? And, in terms of Nietzsche’s

argument, what makes the will-to-power any more “natural” than the meanings and values that human beings produce? Are not the “natural,” the “vital,” and even “*this life*” concepts with their own contingent histories? This set of tensions often prompts readers to argue that social-historical critiques underwrite Highsmith’s novels. Joshua Lukin, for example, argues that Guy’s desire to climb the social ladder through his profession is the object of Highsmith’s criticism of a constellation of pressures on the postwar professional-managerial class. Through his ostensible commitment to aesthetic purity—to the art of architecture rather than “making money”—Guy thinks of himself as “classless” when in fact this professional fantasy is a product of the “psychic pressures” of a booming market for mass consumption and the demands of social mobility.¹⁷³ These two streams of “psychic pressure” lead Guy to embrace a pair of paradoxical desires: social mobility and the “classlessness” of an aesthetic life apart from mass consumer culture. Recalling Andrew Hoberek’s *Twilight of the Middle Class*, Lukin argues that Guy understands himself as something like the dispossessed bourgeoisie, forced into vulgar labor and longing for lost social autonomy.¹⁷⁴ Lukin thus glosses Guy’s acquiescence to Bruno as the former’s paradoxical desire for social mobility and classlessness—a function, that is, of his professional status.

Yet Highsmith presents Guy’s violence and Bruno’s obsession with murder as much more than outcomes of their professional and socio-economic status. Indeed, Bruno and Anne share the same economic status, even if the latter is more adept culturally and socially. Rather than capitulating to socio-economic forces of their class, Highsmith presents Bruno’s

¹⁷³ Joshua Lukin, “Identity-Shopping and Postwar Self-Improvement in Patricia Highsmith’s *Strangers on a Train*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 33.4 (Summer 2010): 21-40.

¹⁷⁴ Andrew Hoberek, *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White Collar Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

motivations and violence as manifestations of a psychological realm. For example, after Miriam's murder, Bruno imagines that he has finally achieved something important, as if the murder were an accomplishment that bolsters his ego. As Guy puts it, Bruno takes "personal pride in his, Guy's, freedom" (102). More importantly, after Guy has murdered Bruno's father, Bruno later muses that their freedom enables them to have intimacy with one another: "Guy and himself! Who else was like them? Who else was their equal? He longed for Guy to be with him now. He would clasp Guy's hand, and to hell with the rest of the world!" (167). The two murders are in fact different forms of pleasure: Bruno's murder of Miriam is violently intimate, as he chokes her to death, while Guy murders the elder Bruno as he lies in his bed.

Bruno fantasizes that these two intimately construed murders become something like a consummation of his and Guy's relationship. They are wedded to one another, Bruno believes, through the freedom of a prior lover's death and the murder of an oppressive father. Indeed, Bruno even fantasizes about removing Anne as a competitor for Guy's affections: "If he could strangle Anne, too, then Guy and he could really be together" (250). Bruno's Oedipal desire for his mother, which he wears on his grey flannel sleeve while talking with Guy on the train, transfers to the surrogate murderer of his father. The crime becomes something like a form of narcissism: Bruno loves the man that has done what he could never do, the self that he wishes he could be.¹⁷⁵ Indeed, Guy has enabled them both to become "supermen," as Bruno drunkenly

¹⁷⁵ To be fair, Lukin does situate Guy's motivations and Bruno's actions as variations on narcissistic neuroses. In Lukin's reading, Guy wants to destroy everything resistant to his aesthetic vision of himself (39). Bruno, on the other hand, identifies with Guy because his own ego is seemingly crumbling around its narcissistic impulses. He quotes the psychoanalyst Léon Wurmser, who explains that many narcissistic patients try to unite with a partner "to incorporate the other person's strength and value." See Léon Wurmser, "Shame: The Veiled Companion of Narcissism," in *The Many Faces of Shame* (ed. Donald Nathanson; New York: Guilford, 1987), 81. Qtd. in Lukin, "Identity-Shopping and Postwar Self-Improvement," 34. Lukin tries to situate such psychological categories within the social forces of the postwar moment, rather than

proclaims: Nietzschean *übermenschen* who *will* the life they want (261). Thus, the explanations for Bruno's murder of Miriam, his subsequent pressure on Guy, and his homoerotic fantasies about a union through violence are rooted within the realm of the ego and his desire for an authentic expression of the self. The arena of psychology therefore serves as the bedrock of the narrative: Highsmith presents her characters' violence and guilt as performances within a theater of the will and the self.

Existential Psychology and the "Decline" of Literary Naturalism

Highsmith often signals her interventions in literary history by alluding to or adapting a previous novelistic forebear. In *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Herbert Greenleaf notes that his proposition to Tom Ripley is not unlike the one that Lambert Strether receives in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*. In contrast, Highsmith's reworking of a literary forebear in *Strangers on a Train* is much subtler and more suggestive: much like Highsmith's novel, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) begins on a train with a chance meeting between two seemingly antithetical characters, Carrie Meeber and Charles Drouet.¹⁷⁶ Highsmith's small-town waif desires to be upwardly mobile even as Carrie, like Guy, is at first suspicious of the man on the train who seems to be observing her with peculiar and ambiguous interest. The narrator informs the reader that Drouet is a "masher," or "one whose dress or manners are calculated to elicit the admiration

reading such those socio-economic conditions as fodder for idiosyncratic egos, as I am arguing Highsmith does. However, by characterizing such social forces as "psychic pressures," Lukin's gloss on Guy's motivations still pathologizes those socio-economic conditions. Highsmith thus seems to force her readers to interpret the political within the categories of a private arena.

¹⁷⁶ Lukin likewise observes Highsmith's adaptation of the narrative frame of *Sister Carrie*, yet he explains the resemblance between the two novels as the anchor for Highsmith's critique of Guy's social mobility and its "precipitously" escalating "stakes." See Lukin, "Identity-Shopping and Postwar Self-Improvement," 24.

of susceptible young women.”¹⁷⁷ Carrie, on the other hand, is a “waif amid forces,” an ostensibly innocent young woman who leaves her childhood home in order to “reconnoitre the mysterious city [of Chicago] and dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy” (2, 3). Carrie, as a “fair example of the middle American class,” allows her naïve ambitions to lead her into situations that are far from her original intentions (2). Indeed, both Highsmith’s aspiring architect and Dreiser’s middle-class waif seemingly destroy their lives even as they achieve semblances of their desires. For Carrie, her “wild dreams” are seized and manipulated by the city’s “large forces which allure with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human” (2). Carrie eventually becomes Drouet’s mistress after she experiences the difficulties of life in Chicago—her sister’s stifling home, work in a factory, poverty. Rather than returning to her small town or finding other lower-class employment, Carrie’s desire for “some vague, far-off supremacy” prompts her to search for an avenue of escape from her difficulties.

Indeed, Carrie’s “vague” desires are defined for her as she is exposed to the alluring promises realities of urban life. For example, after losing her job, Drouet takes Carrie to dinner and orders an expensive sirloin. His charm and liberal spending “captivated Carrie completely” (67). Furthermore, Drouet’s interactions with “noted or rich individuals” also cast a spell over Carrie (51). His munificence and social standing prepare Carrie to assume “the cosmopolitan standard of virtue,” as the narrator puts it, by justifying the decision to become his mistress for the sake of the material opportunity that the relationship affords (2). “Ah, money, money, money,” she muses before agreeing to become Drouet’s mistress, “What a thing it was to have. How plenty of it would clear away all these troubles” (74-75). Carrie has absorbed this fantasy about money through her fleeting exposure to upper-middle-class life, and thus when Drouet

¹⁷⁷ Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (New York: Modern Library, [1900] 1917), 4. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

proposes to “take care” of her, Carrie hears the proposition “passively,” as if it were “the welcome breath of an open door” (77). The “waif,” as Dreiser calls her, is slowly carried away by the currents of Chicago’s larger forces.

Having become intimate with this stranger she meets on a train, Carrie allows Drouet to buy her expensive clothes, secure a spacious apartment, and he even enables her to play the heroine in a theatrical performance. In short, Drouet helps define and fulfill Carrie’s desires. However, although this waif appears to be a passive subject to Drouet’s charm, forces beyond this “masher” also influence Carrie. She is “the victim of the city’s hypnotic charm,” the narrator explains before her older sister, Minnie, has a nightmare of Carrie being swallowed up by dark waters (89). Minnie’s dream presumably serves as an occluded sign of the “something” that is “lost” with Carrie—that is, her virginity and, in Dreiser’s view, her innocence along with it (90). But also Minnie’s dream recalls the larger forces swirling around Carrie’s life. Environmental imagery pervades the dream, much like the way it recurs throughout the novel, particularly when representing Carrie’s “mental state.” The early implications of this imagery is that Drouet is only one among many forces, a fact confirmed when Carrie begins an affair with George Hurstwood, the manager of an upscale bar. Hurstwood, Carrie tells herself, is “more clever than Drouet in a hundred ways” and also more attentive to her (106). Yet even these shifting desires, Dreiser suggests, are products of institutional and socio-economic conditions. The psychological is little more than an aftereffect: “A blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human hives,” the narrator explains, “appeal to the astonished senses in equivocal terms” (2).

Through her vacillating affections, Dreiser presents Carrie as a reed in the wind: her desires are largely unknown to herself and, given the recurring prominence that the narrator attributes to the city, those desires are most often constituted by impersonal “forces.” The

narrator provides such an explanatory template for Carrie's behavior not long after her decision to become Drouet's mistress. Dreiser's narrator, seemingly in an attempt to create empathy for Carrie's situation, reflects on her "mental state" in relation to "the true answer to what is right." The narrator remarks that much of modern society's standards for moral judgment are "infantile," merely applying principles as an uncritical recitation of popular conventions (101). Indeed, Carrie's "average little conscience" similarly replicates "the world, her past environment, habit, convention, in a confused way" (103). The narrator's point, however, is not that morality is merely a conventional construct. Rather, even Carrie, whose "mind [is] rudimentary in its power of observation and analysis," finds that her conventional conscience is "never wholly convincing" (2, 104). The unsophisticated Carrie is able to criticize the received standards for social behavior. She is more than a product of her social world. Instead, the narrator suggests that the more forceful determinants exist on a larger register: "There was always an answer [to her conscience], always the December days threatened. She was alone; she was desirous; she was fearful of the whistling wind. The voice of want made answer for her" (104). Carrie's "morality"—her ethic, the underpinnings of her behavior—is driven by the threat of poverty and being cast out into an indifferent world. By framing Carrie's behavior in relation to the cold "December days" and the risk of exposure to natural elements, the narrator connects such supra-human forces and structural conditions—e.g., the city—to the earlier question about "the true answer to what is right" (101). Carrie's "mental state," in other words, is a creature struggling against the material conditions and structural realities that are its creator.

The history of the reception of *Sister Carrie* is—not unlike the novel's publication history—a contentious problem. The editors at Harper and Brothers rejected the first version of the novel on the grounds of the "illicit relations of the heroine" and the possibility that it might

offend readers.¹⁷⁸ Dreiser eventually took the book to Doubleday Page, where the naturalist author Frank Norris served as the book's reader. Norris's enthusiasm for *Sister Carrie* led the publisher to sign a contract with Dreiser and print the book.¹⁷⁹ After this signed contract, Dreiser and later scholars alike dispute Doubleday's publication of *Sister Carrie* as well as the novel's critical reception. According to Dreiser, before the novel was actually circulated, "Mrs. Frank Doubleday read the manuscript and was horrified by its frankness."¹⁸⁰ The publisher therefore refused to circulate *Sister Carrie*, and the enthusiastic Norris was able to send only a handful of copies to book reviewers. In 1901, William Heinemann published *Sister Carrie* in London, where the novel was a success. In the United States, on the other hand, Dreiser maintained until 1931 that the novel elicited "outraged protests [that] far outnumbered the plaudits."¹⁸¹ However, Jack Salzman contests Dreiser's account because, in fact, Doubleday sent three reports of sales to the author during 1901-1902. Rather than refusing to circulate *Sister Carrie*, as Dreiser's insisted, Doubleday simply did not sell very many copies of the novel—less than 500 in fact.¹⁸² Furthermore, as Christopher P. Wilson argues, Doubleday's contentious relationship with Dreiser was, given the reorientation of the publishing industry toward long-term promotion costs, driven "not [by] the novel's 'immorality' but whether Dreiser would submit to the firm's

¹⁷⁸ Robert H. Elias, ed., *Letters of Theodore Dreiser*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), 210. Qtd. in Florence Dore, *The Novel and the Obscene: Sexual Subjects in American Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 19-20.

¹⁷⁹ Theodore Dreiser, Preface to *Sister Carrie* (New York: Modern Library, [1900] 1917), v.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, vi.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁸² Jack Salzman, "The Critical Recognition of *Sister Carrie*, 1900-1907," *Journal of American Studies* 3.1 (July 1969): 123-33.

management of his literary career.”¹⁸³ Doubleday simply wanted to republish *Sister Carrie* after Dreiser wrote other more marketable books, while Dreiser simply refused to have a publishing house determine his career.

The critical reception of *Sister Carrie* did not meet as much resistance as Dreiser and many early scholars maintain, either. Surveying the early reviews of the novel, Salzman shows that the majority of critics responded favorably to the novel in 1900-1901. The Chicago-based *Times Herald* even remarks Dreiser appears to be Zola’s equal.¹⁸⁴ Admittedly, no major magazine or American journal published early reviews of *Sister Carrie*, but several large and prestigious journals in England published enthusiastic reviews, which in turn “made a marked impression on the American reviewers and was instrumental in the revival of interest in *Sister Carrie* in the United States.”¹⁸⁵ While Salzman perhaps overstates the influence of English tastes on Dreiser’s reception in the United States, he demonstrates that the cultural marketplace had become extremely amenable to Dreiser’s urban “realism,” as most early reviewers characterized it, by 1907. Indeed, by 1918 the editors of the Modern Library were eager to include *Sister Carrie* in the series, although Dreiser delayed its inclusion for economic reasons.¹⁸⁶ Following its provocative but largely enthusiastic critical reception in the decades following its publication, Dreiser’s novel had become a prominent part of the American cultural arena by the 1920s. Through the support of influential intellectuals such as H. L. Mencken and the aggregating

¹⁸³ Christopher P. Wilson, “*Sister Carrie* Again,” *American Literature* 53.2 (May 1981): 289.

¹⁸⁴ Salzman, “The Critical Recognition of *Sister Carrie*,” 126.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁸⁶ Dreiser, Preface to *Sister Carrie*, vii.

financial value of the original manuscript, Kevin J. Hayes demonstrates that *Sister Carrie* underwent a canonization process among the cultural elite during the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁸⁷

The reception history of *Sister Carrie* maps onto the wider literary history and cultural legitimacy of American naturalism. The early critical reception of naturalism—restricted at first to Norris, Jack London, and Stephen Crane—was largely skeptical: the first naturalist novels were often dismissed as muckraking fiction that appealed to a mass audience on sensational grounds. Among the first postwar critics to look back at American naturalism, Malcolm Cowley explains the early skeptical reception as a function of the challenge naturalism posed to conventional literature. During the 1890s, Cowley argues, the movement developed as a literary rebellion against the “genteel tradition” of American letters. While putatively “genteel” novels, such as William Dean Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), document the moral struggles that accompany the desire for wealth, Cowley says that such late-nineteenth-century novels obscure the turpitude and plight of American urban life and the working class. These difficulties begged for representation, Cowley explains, and the naturalists rebelled against “genteel” literary conventions to document such sordid aspects of human experience.¹⁸⁸ Similarly, Philip Rahv, the New York intellectual and influential founding editor of *Partisan Review*, argues that naturalism is a product of a nineteenth-century world of industry and science, protesting the conditions of the former through the resources of the latter. He even connects naturalist sensibilities to the

¹⁸⁷ Kevin J. Hayes, “Editing Naturalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism* (ed. Keith Newlin; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 397, 399-400.

¹⁸⁸ Malcolm Cowley, “Naturalism in American Literature,” in *Evolutionary Thought in America* (ed. Stow Persons; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950). Reprinted in *American Naturalism* (ed. Harold Bloom; Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004), 49-79.

proletarian novels of the 1930s.¹⁸⁹ Naturalism, Rahv explains, “revolutionized writing by liquidating the last assets of ‘romance’ in fiction and by purging it once and for all of the idealism of the ‘beautiful lie’—of the longstanding inhibitions against dealing with the underside of life.”¹⁹⁰ For Cowley and Rahv, then, naturalism began on the margins of the literary marketplace as a rebellion against the socio-economic of industrial, urbanized existence.

In fact, much like the Dreiser’s overstatement that “outraged protests far outnumbered the plaudits” of *Sister Carrie*, the style of naturalism had a significant critical following at the turn of the century. In part, this was due to the perception that American naturalists drew heavily from Émile Zola’s novels, and this perceived European debt gave “naturalist realism” significant cultural and intellectual capital. Lars Ahnebrink, for example, records and perpetuates this early perception of naturalism as an Americanized version of Zola’s European school.¹⁹¹ Charles C. Walcutt, however, expands the origins of American naturalism beyond its status as European imitation or a young, rebellious literary movement. Walcutt argues that two streams of political and philosophical discourse characterize American naturalism: an optimistic school underwritten by “progressivism and social radicalism,” and a pessimistic stream governed by deterministic theories of behavior, such as social Darwinism.¹⁹² For Walcutt, American naturalism is a response to philosophical, scientific, and political trends rather than literary tastes.

¹⁸⁹ Philip Rahv, “Notes on the Decline of Naturalism,” *Partisan Review* IX (November-December 1942). Reprinted in Philip Rahv, *Literature and the Sixth Sense* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 76-87.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁹¹ Lars Ahnebrink, *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction: A Study of the Works of Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris, with Special Reference to Some European Influences, 1891-1903* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961).

¹⁹² Charles C. Walcutt, *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

Walcott's characterization of the intellectual sources of American naturalism thus restricts the movement to the decades of 1890-1930, when the relevant forms of social and biological sciences had achieved ascendancy. Donald Pizer, on the other hand, argues that the movement is "characterized by similarities in material and method, not by philosophical coherence."¹⁹³ For Pizer, naturalism became institutionalized in the 1920s and 1930s, and its reception has become so significant that later writers such as William Styron and Norman Mailer replicate naturalist literary mechanisms. However, Pizer's readings of naturalist methods among postwar writers, though perceptive in documenting the *influence* of the movement, fails to distinguish these later literary methods from the wider stream of realism.

Still, even if later writers employ naturalist methods of representation, by the mid-1940s the intellectual conversation surrounding naturalism had changed. As early as 1942, Philip Rahv argues that the "endless book-keeping of existence" that characterized literary naturalism was in decline. While the genre had come to the front of cultural attention in the 1930s with publications such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930, 1932, 1936), Rahv observes that a newer generation of writers had begun to "want to break the novel of its objective habits."¹⁹⁴ Rather than offering historically objective narratives that explore the structural or environmental conditions of human life, Rahv suggests that new intellectual currents were prompting American writers to become introspective about art, the

¹⁹³ Donald Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, (rev. ed.; Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 110.

¹⁹⁴ Rahv, "Notes on the Decline of Naturalism," 76. Rahv admits that there are few—if any—"pure" naturalists in the way that he characterizes. He instead seems to characterize the sensibilities of the movement, rather than a continuous ideology. Likewise, his explanation of the "newer" writers tends toward the abstract. The importance of his essay is that it marks the intellectual shifts regarding naturalism and its perceived sensibilities about the structural or environmental conditions of subjectivity.

artist, and the individual. Rahv perceptively explains that the growing intellectual discontentment with the naturalist style has its impetus in the political animus toward progressive politics, with its (perceived) view of the individual. In opposition to “the political movement in the literature of the past decade [1930s],” Rahv contends, there has been “a revival of religio-esthetic attitudes.”¹⁹⁵ Rahv formulates an objection against naturalism that would be reiterated among many intellectuals for the next two decades: naturalist novels envision a “closed world,” one in which “the environment displaces its inhabitants in the role of the hero.”¹⁹⁶ In contrast, Rahv argues, larger intellectual trends have deposed that ordering of the narrative world. Among the most important of these forces, Rahv cites “the growth of the psychological sciences and, particularly, of psychoanalysis.”¹⁹⁷ Such trends (predating the influence of existentialism upon American intellectual life) have prompted literature to turn inward, creating a crisis in interpreting human experience. The literary devices and intellectual resources of the naturalist style, in other words, could not adequately interpret a newly disassembled world.

By the late 1950s, so many scholars were convinced of the “decline” of the naturalist style that Edward Stone collected an anthology, *What Was Naturalism?* (1959).¹⁹⁸ The title’s past tense suggests an expired phenomenon, and indeed Stone explains that the purpose of the anthology is to introduce “the mind of a buried generation” to young scholars.¹⁹⁹ The “materials”

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 76-77.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 81.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 86.

¹⁹⁸ Edward Stone, ed., *What Was Naturalism?: Materials for an Answer* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959).

¹⁹⁹ Edward Stone, Preface to *What Was Naturalism?: Materials for an Answer* (ed. Edward Stone; New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), ix.

that Stone associates with the movement suggest why he feels that the intellectual era of the naturalists had passed—in particular, selections from Thomas R. Malthus’s *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Marx’s *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and *Capital*, and Herbert Spencer’s *The Principles of Sociology*. These selections represent the “gist” of “a mind,” or the intellectual milieu that inspired Hamlin Garland, Crane, London, Norris, and Dreiser.²⁰⁰ The critical and intellectual shifts of the postwar cultural marketplace mitigated—if not “buried,” as Stone suggests—the sociological accounts of society and individuals that had influenced naturalist writers. Also, American attitudes toward progressive accounts of politics and economics, particularly toward Marxism and its perceived relationship with fascism, led many postwar critics and readers to distrust the narrative worlds that naturalism represented. Stone’s anthology, then, suggests how postwar intellectuals not only associated naturalism with environmental determinism and progressive sociology, but also with radical politics. Indeed, novels such as Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1892) and Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901) document the squalor created on the margins of urban capitalist society in ways that appealed to the aesthetic tastes of many critics even as it helped to disseminate a sociological and economic explanatory template for the phenomena of violence and the psychological consequences of indigence.

In reality, the felt cultural “decline” of the naturalist style was a temporary symptom of the intellectual trends of the 1940s and 1950s. A decade later, critics began to evaluate Charles Walcott’s taxonomy of the movement, leading to renewed scholarly interest in naturalism and its intellectual sources. Mass-market presses such as Penguin would also reprint many naturalist texts during the 1980s, discovering through the mechanism of canonization that naturalism had a

²⁰⁰ Ibid., viii.

marketable afterlife. Thus, when the “decline” of naturalism appeared as an ostensible fact of the cultural arena in the 1940s and 1950s, it signals important shifts in intellectual history as much as the changing literary tastes of American critics. Picking up on Rahv’s proclamation in 1942, James Burkhart Gilbert traces the dwindling cultural fortunes of naturalism in relation to a revolution in the editorial policies of the *Partisan Review*. In 1934, Rahv and William Phillips founded the magazine to “defend the Soviet Union, to combat fascism and war, and to promote a literature which would express the viewpoint of the working class.” The magazine soon folded, however, and its new editorial board in 1937 replaced “proletarian literature” with “intellectual literature.”²⁰¹ Thus, during the late 1930s the editors abandoned their ambitions of leading a political vanguard—most often through publishing naturalist fiction and political essays—and transferred those aspirations to the arena of cultural tastes. On the one hand, this was an economic decision: the masses don’t buy proletarian fiction. On the other, it also signals the changing intellectual winds of wartime America, in which intellectual vanguardism shifted from a set of political dogmas to cultural values. By the early 1940s, then, the *Partisan Review* generally refused to publish work that was either naturalist in style or Pro-Soviet in its politics.²⁰² These shifts, Gilbert argues, involved growing anti-communist sensibilities in the 1940s, but, more to the point, the editors had decided to turn “back to the era of the symbolists, the surrealists, and the exiles.” The standards for publication established the avant-garde as its gold standard, privileging literary style above political vision. Consequently, the poetry and prose of the *Partisan* “was less likely to belong to the genre of American writing exemplified by Frost,

²⁰¹ Andrew J. Dvosin, Preface to *Essays on Literature and Politics, 1932-1972* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), xiii.

²⁰² James Burkhart Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 193.

Steinbeck, or Sandburg. [...] Marxist realism, even the naturalism so evident in the early magazine, was banished and replaced by writing that corresponded more to that printed in the *Dial* during the 1920s.” As the cultural stock of avant-garde modernism soared, the editors of *Partisan Review* tended to devalue realism and naturalism. Admittedly, the differences between American naturalism and the literary avant-garde is, as Gilbert admits, an “exaggeration” perpetuated by the *Partisan* editors. Nonetheless, literary naturalism fell out of favor with the leading American editors and critics of the 1940s, even as writers like Kafka, Joyce, and Eliot began to dominate aesthetic tastes.²⁰³

While naturalist fiction emerges from the 1930s as a cultural icon, its “decline” in the 1940s is not only due, as Rahv suggests, to the “growth of psychological sciences” but also to the immigration of European existentialism into American cultural life.²⁰⁴ In fact, many therapists and intellectuals soon assimilated these twin phenomena into the existential psychology movement. Existential psychology was a forerunner of the humanistic psychology movement of the 1960s, and both theories of therapy had profound effects upon popular sensibilities about the self and its route to authenticity.²⁰⁵ Rollo May’s edited anthology, *Existence* (1958), disseminated existential psychoanalysis to the wider psychiatric profession.²⁰⁶ May had first wed

²⁰³ Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans*, 192. In fact, Rahv is largely responsible for introducing Kafka to American readers (Dvosin, Preface, xii).

²⁰⁴ See William McBride, “Existentialism as a Cultural Movement,” in *The Cambridge Introduction to Existentialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 50-69. McBride marks the widespread dissemination of existentialism as a “cultural force” by the mid-1950s.

²⁰⁵ See Jessica Grogan, *Encountering America: Humanistic Psychology, Sixties Culture, and the Shaping of the Modern Self* (New York: Harper, 2013), 75-79.

²⁰⁶ Rollo May, ed., *Existence* (New York: Basic, 1958). See the short book review of *Existence*, which explains that May simply presents European trends for general psychiatrists and other psychological professionals, in *Psychiatric Quarterly* 32.4 (1958): 870.

existentialist sensibilities about authenticity with psychological analysis and therapeutic practice in *Man's Search for Himself* (1953), which was a *New York Times* bestseller. This wedding was not unique to May, for his work drew heavily upon European existential psychology, particularly Ludwig Binswanger and Viktor Frankl. May used the salient terms of existentialism to revise elements from the early humanistic psychology movement developing in the writings of Carl R. Rogers and Abraham Maslow.²⁰⁷ In effect, this permutation of professional psychology casts therapeutic work as an avenue for unearthing and expressing an authentic self: psychological analysis becomes the pathway to existential self-realization.

Even as May, Rogers, and Maslow were inspiring the popularization of psychologized authenticity, other therapists began to employ psychological templates when analyzing social and political events. Most notably, in *Escape from Freedom* (1941) Erich Fromm accounts for the advent of fascism through “the character structure of modern man and the problems of the interaction between psychological and sociological factors.”²⁰⁸ For Fromm, fascism is a temptation born out of the psychological state of the modern individual: while “modern man” has been freed from the strictures of “pre-individualistic society,” modern selves have also become anxious and isolated in their individualized freedom. The temptation confronting the modern self, Fromm argues, is to abandon the burden of freedom for political dependencies. Fromm thus construes fascism as a form of neurosis—an individual psychological template applied to collective behavior. Therefore, in a way distinct from the humanistic psychology movement’s emphasis upon the individual, Fromm’s version of existential psychology frames *society* and *politics* after a psychological pattern. This turn is not a retreat from politics, then, but

²⁰⁷ Grogan, *Encountering America*, 79.

²⁰⁸ Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Avon, [1941] 1969).

a reframing of it. Indeed, the mechanisms of Fromm’s “psychosocial” analysis would become widely representative, if not directly influential, upon the early literature on totalitarianism, which tended to psychologize the loss of personality that seemingly characterized its supporters.²⁰⁹ Inverting the accounts of violence in both Malthusian sociology and Marxist political economy, the existential psychology movement embedded social and political behaviors within the explanatory resources of a diverse and growing body of psychological knowledge.

The so-called age of anxiety therefore saw the proliferation of a spectrum of psychological templates for understanding the modern self and society. While existentialism and a heterogeneous body of popular psychotherapies were situating social phenomena within an arena of private authenticity in the 1950s, corporate interests also contributed to this shifting intellectual terrain. As Louis Menand explains, the popularization of psychology “had to do with what might be called the Cold War discourse of anxiety.”²¹⁰ This discourse about anxiety—or “anxiety about anxiety,” as Menand puts it, not only wedded European existentialism and psychoanalytic theory, but also depended in large part upon the new discipline of

²⁰⁹ Rollo May, for example, asserts that “people grasp at political authoritarianism in their desperate need for relief from anxiety.” See Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety* 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, [1950] 1977), 12. See also Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1979); Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949). Indeed, during Guy’s confession to Owen Markham, he asserts, “And listen, I believe any man can be broke down. [...] It might take different methods from the ones Bruno used on me, but it could be done. What else do you think keeps the totalitarian states going?” (276). While it is uncertain whether Highsmith had yet read Fromm and thus if Guy’s psychologizing of totalitarianism is indebted to his work, Highsmith was later drawn to Fromm’s psychoanalytical readings of love and sadism. See Wilson, *Beautiful Shadow*, 346-47, 427.

²¹⁰ Louis Menand, “Freud, Anxiety, and the Cold War,” in *After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America* (ed. John Burnham; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 200-02.

psychopharmacology and the promotional practices of the pharmaceutical industry.²¹¹ While psychoanalysis had influenced medical discourse about neuroses, a burgeoning postwar pharmaceutical industry promoted its own commercial interests through aggressive advertising campaigns that normalized pharmaceutical drugs. In short, anxieties from the trauma of the war, nuclear threats, and even ordinary feelings of existential insignificance, all became widely understood as medical disorders treatable by forms of psychological or psychopharmaceutical therapy. The consequences of this “discourse of anxiety” in the early Cold War years, Menand argues, was that “questions of psychology, and mental states generally, [were put] at the center of cultural attention.”²¹²

The complicated cultural fabric of the postwar moment thus includes the intellectual declaration of the “decline” of naturalism, the rising normalcy of psychoanalysis, and the wedding of existential psychology—phenomena that meet not only in Rahv’s explanation for changing literary tastes but also in Highsmith’s allusion to *Sister Carrie* in the opening of *Strangers on a Train*. While Carrie’s desires are caught within a web of structural conditions and a cold urban environment, Highsmith frames Guy’s ambitions and contradictory desires through the vicissitudes of an irrational psychological arena. Indeed, much like Dostoevsky in *Notes from Underground*, Highsmith documents the irrational undercurrents of the human psyche as a way of confronting deterministic accounts of human behavior. For example, when Guy and Bruno first meet, Guy is reading a volume of Plato’s philosophy. However, his mind consistently drifts from the book to Bruno, who has just sat across from him: “his mind wandered after half a page. He [...] let his eyes wander to the unlighted cigar that still gyrated conversationally in a bony

²¹¹ Ibid., 202.

²¹² Ibid., 206.

hand behind one of the seat backs, and to the monogram that trembled on a thin gold chain across the tie of the young man opposite him.” The monogram, CAB, attracts Guy’s attention more fully than the book of philosophy. No matter how much he concentrates, Guy finds himself “reading” Bruno rather than Plato: “It was an interesting face, though Guy did not know why” (11). Dreiser’s Carrie also tries yet fails to read a novel, but what Florence Dore calls her “guilty reading” is a marker of the sexual norms and class-based cultural capital that preclude her from the “highbrow” world she desires to enter.²¹³ Plato similarly represents Guy’s desire to enter a world of knowledge and order, yet what frustrates Highsmith’s protagonist is not the proscriptions of normative behavior but the psychological appeal of the violent and the irrational.

After Guy does a thorough close reading of Bruno rather than Plato, he feels momentarily satisfied and is able to return to his book. “The words made sense to him and began to lift his anxiety,” the narrator explains. Yet the consolation of philosophy is short-lived: “But what good will Plato do you with Miriam, an inner voice asked him” (11). Bruno the sociopath soon provides a solution that Guy’s desire for order, virtue, and reason cannot. Indeed, Highsmith’s selection of *Plato* as the author of the volume Guy reads is telling. In Mary McCabe’s apt phrase, Plato’s dialogues constitute a “dramatization of reason”: his philosophy searches for the best ordering for society and an individual’s life according to wisdom.²¹⁴ Not unlike Guy the architect, Plato weds rational order with the artistic. While Plato has interesting things to say about the irrational, E. R. Dodds summarizes the intellectual consensus of Highsmith’s day when he explains that scholars read Plato as a “rationalist” in at least two senses: Plato “believes that reason and not the senses provides [...] the first principles on which scientific knowledge is

²¹³ Dore, *The Novel and the Obscene*, 38.

²¹⁴ Mary Margaret McCabe, *Plato and His Predecessors: The Dramatization of Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

built,” and he maintains that “the life of man and the life of the universe are governed by, or are manifestations of, a rational plan.”²¹⁵ Guy’s interest in Plato, then, serves as a retreat from the distractions of Miriam into planning, wisdom, and the resources of the Western cultural tradition. Yet, before Bruno even mentions his plan, Guy already has doubts about the efficacy of the rational order that Plato represents. An “inner voice”—one among many that will speak to Guy throughout the novel—questions whether such thought is sufficient for the situation he faces with Miriam. Could there be other consolations for Guy’s anxieties not bound up with reason and planning? Bruno’s proposition for a double murder seems to realize the irrational that repeatedly draws Guy toward the man “interesting face” (11).

Later, Guy learns through a note from Brillhart that he has been awarded the Palmyra commission. In despair at the situation with Miriam, Guy tears up the letter and decides to turn down the offer (47). Along with Brillhart’s note, though, Guy also receives a letter from Bruno, who explains that Guy left his volume of Plato’s philosophy in Bruno’s room on the train. Almost as an incidental aside, Bruno says, “I keep thinking about that idea we had for a couple of murders. It could be done, I am sure” (47). When Guy finishes the letter, rather than tearing it up like Brillhart’s note, Guy finds that it “pleased him somehow. It was pleasant to think of Bruno’s freedom” (48). The juxtaposition between Brillhart’s note (an opportunity to draw up a blueprint and build a rational plan) and Bruno’s suggestion (an opportunity for violence with vague motivations) poses a choice between a world of order and one of irrational destructiveness. Guy’s pleasure in Bruno’s letter suggests yet again that his desire for order is interrupted by the appeal of the irrational. Indeed, Guy’s decision to preserve Bruno’s letter and tear up Brillhart’s—much like his refusal to turn Bruno into the police after Miriam’s murder—is

²¹⁵ E. R. Dodds, “Plato and the Irrational,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 65 (1945): 16.

explicable only as an unconscious attraction to the “freedom” of Bruno’s proposition. Guy’s ambitions provide an inlet for an unconscious sea of irrationality to sweep across the ordered existence he has tried to design. Highsmith therefore presents Guy the architect as a tragic figure for the age of anxiety: he is the victim of psychological undercurrents and the hubris induced by rationality.

While both *Sister Carrie* and *Strangers on a Train* are concerned with the mental states of their characters, the recurrence of the irrational in Highsmith’s novel presents a narrative world governed primarily by the disordered and contradictory psychological life of its characters. Highsmith’s allusion to Dreiser’s novel, then, reframes the conditions of possibility for the mental states of her characters, removing them from the largely deterministic structures that concern the naturalist novel. Dreiser presents Carrie’s desires as either a product of structural conditions—e.g., the allure of consumerism in her urban environment—or as a weak haven from the whims of larger forces.²¹⁶ Highsmith, on other hand, presents her characters’ behavior within a different nexus of forces. Bruno describes this nexus while having dinner with Anne one evening when Guy is working on a project. During a telling inversion of intimacies where the sociopath informs the lover, Bruno quotes Guy to Anne: “Every man is his own law court and punishes himself enough. In fact, every man is just about everything to Guy!” (252). Bruno, who seemingly knows Guy’s mind better than his wife does, adapts one of Guy’s ruminations to explain that “good and evil” are phenomena of an internal arena (251). What’s more, Bruno’s enigmatic assertion that “every man is just about everything to Guy” suggests that moral

²¹⁶ Thus, as Walter Benn Michaels puts it, Carrie becomes “the body of desire in capitalism,” a character whose sexuality and mental life are coded with the logic of urban capitalist society. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 56.

judgments, like the criminal acts themselves, are *almost* entirely circumscribed by the individual and the chaotic court of the psyche. Sure, social norms and inhibitions influence human beings, Bruno suggests, but criminal acts are principally phenomena of existential conditions rather than structural or environmental ones. When, for example, Guy neglects to inform the police or even tell his fiancé that Bruno has obliquely confessed to Miriam's murder in three letters, Guy justifies the decision because of "some sense of personal guilt that he himself could not bear" (95). On the one hand, Guy fears exposure if he were to go to the police. Yet this feeling is also irrational because, although Guy is strangely interested in Bruno on the train, he nonetheless rebuffs his proposal. Indeed, Bruno admits that Guy has rejected the idea of an exchanged murder, but he strangles Miriam anyway. Thus, Guy's "personal guilt" is, as Russell Harrison glosses it, "an existential guilt, rather than guilt for a specific act."²¹⁷ The hesitations plaguing Guy are a product of his own conflicted ego—they derive from the uncertainties about which self he desires to *will*.

Tom Ripley, Kierkegaard's *Sickness*, and the Devaluation of Structural Reform

When Hitchcock bought the rights to Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train*, he ran into difficulties with adapting its plot for the screen. He soon hired Raymond Chandler to turn the novel into a script. Chandler plodded through the job, but after submitting the manuscript he was promptly fired and Hitchcock hired another screenwriter for the film. In a pleading explanation that Chandler wrote (but never sent) to Hitchcock, he explains, "The great difficulty of the story always was to make it credible to an audience that Guy should behave in the damn-fool way in

²¹⁷ Russell Harrison, *Patricia Highsmith* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 14.

which he did behave.”²¹⁸ Indeed, Guy’s irrationality, as I have argued, makes his behavior inexplicable as the product of anything other than the crisis of his own tumultuous psyche; conditions external to that arena—Anne and her wealth, even Bruno’s pressure—do not cause him to behave in predictable or socially determined ways. Rather, Highsmith subordinates the socio-economic elements of her characters’ lives to the arena of psychology, which itself is underwritten by existentialist sensibilities regarding alienation and authenticity. Much like Chandler’s complaint to Hitchcock, these finely drawn nuances in the psychological lives of Highsmith’s characters lead many critics and readers to lament that her plots are “too subtle,” as one of her editors put it when explaining the poor sales of her books in the United States.²¹⁹ Reading her fiction for its subtleties rather than its surface tensions and evasions often proves to be difficult and tends to invite misunderstanding about her work.

The Talented Mr. Ripley, perhaps more than any of her other novels, disorients the reader with its amoral presentation of Tom Ripley and the subtleties of his behavior. For example, explaining Tom’s obsession with Dickie Greenleaf’s affluent lifestyle, Edward A. Shannon says that Highsmith “focuses the reader’s attention on the political and economic contexts that define Tom Ripley, who is first and foremost an American bent on ascending the ladder of class and privilege.”²²⁰ *The Talented Mr. Ripley* thus is underwritten by Highsmith’s “critique of American ideas of class,” Shannon argues.²²¹ However, while Tom *is* keenly attuned to the markers of

²¹⁸ Qtd. in Wilson, *Beautiful Shadow*, 169.

²¹⁹ Qtd. in Joan Schenkar, *The Talented Miss Highsmith: The Secret Life and Serious Art of Patricia Highsmith* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009), 24.

²²⁰ Edward A. Shannon, “Where Was the Sex?: Fetishism and Dirty Minds in Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley*,” *Modern Language Studies* 34 (Spring-Autumn 2004): 17.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

Dickie's affluence, the deceptive subtleties of Highsmith's novel frustrate the idea that a "critique" of American narratives of social mobility is underpinning the narrative. The innovation of Highsmith's fiction is the way that she differentiates *The Talented Mr. Ripley* from earlier American novels, such as James's *The Ambassadors* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which present the ambiguities of class-based self-invention. Highsmith refashions these earlier iterations through her sensibilities about free choice and authenticity: the ambiguities of Tom's self-invention are rooted not in his class but his own oddly comic failure to assume his freedom. Tom is a figure for an almost Nietzschean individual willing to become the self that he chooses at any cost, yet paradoxically that self abandons his free choice when confronted with the burden of freedom. Tom, in other words, does not want to escape his class or social position so much as his self.

The philosophical contours of Tom's existential crisis become more pronounced in relation to Highsmith's intellectual debts from the 1940s and early 1950s. Highsmith recounts that the idea for the character Tom Ripley came to her one morning in 1952 when she and her lover, the sociologist Ellen Hill, were visiting Positano, a small fishing village on the Amalfi coast. One morning Highsmith walked onto their balcony and then "noticed a solitary young man in shorts and sandals with a towel flung over his shoulder, making his way along the beach from right to left. [...] There was an air of pensiveness about him, maybe unease. And why was he alone? [...] Had he quarrelled [*sic*] with someone?"²²² Andrew Wilson, however, suggests that the seed for Ripley came three years earlier, when in 1949 she read an anthology of Søren Kierkegaard's work. Highsmith describes the Danish philosopher as her "master," a title she earlier gave to Dostoevsky. Kierkegaard's investigation of despair in *The Sickness Unto Death*

²²² Patricia Highsmith, "Scene of the Crime," *Granta* 29 (Winter 1989).

(1849), which Highsmith quoted frequently in her journals, helps explain the paradoxes of Tom's behavior.²²³ In the anthologized selections from *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard writes about a person who experiences three types of despair: he or she is "in despair at not willing to be onself; or still lower, in despair at not willing to be a self; or lowest of all, in despair at willing to be another than himself."²²⁴ The despairing person is driven to great lengths by their desire to become someone other than who they are, and thus, for Kierkegaard, the self in despair becomes a kind of ouroboros that destroys itself. The person in Kierkegaard's lowest form of despair is "infinitely comic" because "this self gets the notion of asking whether it might not let itself become or be made into another than itself."²²⁵ The comedy of such despair, Kierkegaard explains, is that the despairing self is so trapped within the immediacy of her crisis that she cannot see the "eternal" quality of the self. She wishes to change something that is unchanging, Kierkegaard maintains. However, Kierkegaard also identifies a paradox at the heart of this form of despair:

such a despairer, whose only wish is this most crazy of all transformations, loves to think that this change might be accomplished as easily as changing a coat. For the immediate man does not recognize his self, he recognizes himself only by his dress, he recognizes (and here again appears the infinitely comic trait)—he recognizes that he has a self only by externals.²²⁶

The despairing self wishes to be other than itself, and thus is caught within the immediacy of that crisis. This "comic" notion leads to the disintegration of the self—that is to say, the perception

²²³ See Wilson, *Beautiful Shadow*, 158.

²²⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (ed. Robert Bretall; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1946), 353.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

that the self is only “dress,” the externals that may be exchanged. This kind of inauthentic self-invention, Kierkegaard maintains, is in fact an especially pernicious form of despair.

The “sickness” of despair within Kierkegaard’s framework construes the experiences of envy and social mobility as phenomena of an existential crisis. For this proto-existentialist, whatever social markers characterize the self-that-one-is-not, which is also the self that the despairer desires to become—those markers are peripheral to the crisis of the lowest form of despair. Following the pattern of Kierkegaard’s thought, then, when Tom Ripley murders Dickie Greenleaf and temporarily assumes his wealth and identity, his desires for mobility are moored principally in an ambition to change his self. When Tom’s forgeries of Dickie’s signature on three remittances from his trust fund have been discovered, it becomes clear that Tom’s self-invention is principally an avenue of escape from his self rather than a desire for class status in itself. The Greenleaf trust and Dickie’s bank in Naples become suspicious of the forgeries, requesting that he appear in person to continue the remittances of the funds. Tom then realizes that he cannot continue impersonating Dickie, and so he laments,

This was the end of Dickie Greenleaf, he knew. He hated becoming Thomas Ripley again, hated being nobody, hated putting on his old set of habits again, and feeling that people looked down on him and were bored with him unless he put on an act for them like a clown, feeling incompetent and incapable of doing anything with himself except entertaining people for minutes at a time. He hated going back to himself as he would have hated putting on a shabby suit of clothes, a grease-spotted, unpressed suit of clothes that had not been very good even when it was new. (181)

Tom hopes to switch between being Dickie and himself, but, in Kierkegaardian fashion, his desire for self-invention suggests his self-hate and despair rather than his freedom. While becoming the wealthy Dickie allows Tom to become “somebody” rather than “nobody,” this has less to do with Dickie’s class as Tom’s self-appraisal: the persona of “Thomas Ripley” is a “nobody,” akin to a “shabby suit of clothes.” Thus, taking on Dickie’s persona is, for Tom, only

a more sustained performance of impersonating a clown. In both cases, Tom escapes being a “nobody”—a *boring* self—through performativity.

In fact, Tom’s lament at having to return to the “unpressed suite of clothes” that is his identity as “Thomas Ripley” recalls the moment when he first decides to become “Dickie Greenleaf.” Not long after assuming this new identity Tom visits Paris. Enjoying a slow walk through the city’s streets, Tom “rather liked the idea of going to bed hungry” but resolves instead to go to a restaurant. Despite his preferences, Tom has decided to gain weight so that his murdered friend’s clothes would be a better fit. In order to *become* Dickie—“He was Dickie, good-natured, naïve Dickie”—he must fit exactly the new externals of that persona (124). Yet Tom is unaware that such minor choices construe the self of another—and indeed his own self—as incidental and easily removable as the clothes on his back. To gain the necessary five pounds, then, Tom goes to a *bar-tabac* and orders “a ham sandwich on long crusty bread and a glass of hot milk, because a man next to him at the counter was drinking hot milk.” The causality of Tom’s order—*because* another man ordered the milk—suggests that, even in the first moments of his newly chosen identity, Tom abdicates the burden of his decisions by opting for the preferences of others. “The milk,” he reflects, “was almost tasteless, pure and chastening, as Tom imagined a wafer tasted in church” (124). Instead of using the opportunities and freedom enabled by his murder of Dickie, Tom repeatedly looks to external sources to authenticate his decisions.²²⁷ Thus, like the wafer in the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, his choice of milk seemingly imparts something “pure and chastening,” the significant and the sacred. However, rather than a sign of a blessed state, Tom’s mysticism signals the repudiation of the freedom that confronts him. Much like the existentialist critique of Christianity, in which Christians abandon

²²⁷ On Highsmith’s amoral view of Ripley’s murders, see Andrew Wilson’s interview with Otto Penzler on 21 May 1999. Qtd. in Wilson, *Beautiful Shadow*, 223.

the burden of *this* life for the promises of heaven, even in such an ordinary decision Tom abandons his freedom and relinquishes his choice to another. Immediately following this alienating sacrament, Tom travels to Arles to discover the spots where van Gogh had stood to paint. His attempts are frustrated by poor weather, which keeps Tom from bringing his guidebook on his expeditions. As a result, when he searches for the “real” spots where van Gogh stood, Tom is forced “to make a dozen trips back to his hotel to verify the scenes” (124). This closely connected rosary of scenes is emblematic of the despair that actually underwrites Tom’s self-invention: in the face of freedom he repeatedly turns toward external sources of verification: “Is this authentic?” his hesitations seem to beg.

Therefore, while social markers matter to Tom, Highsmith construes these desires as symptoms of his existential crisis, his oscillation between freedom and inauthentic self-invention. Highsmith’s ironic framing of Tom’s freedom recalls the paradox that Kierkegaard diagnoses: having achieved the transformation into a self-that-one-is-not suggests, for Kierkegaard, that one’s self has, in turn, become merely a set of externals. Much like Kierkegaard’s paradox of self-invention, Tom is similarly displaced within endless performativity—an eternal loop of becoming a self-that-one-is-not—and thus he suffers the deprivation of personality rather than its “authentic” expression. Tom’s version of self-invention in fact amounts to a loss of self, as if he is now only capable of putting on the mask of a persona. For example, after becoming reconciled to the death of the “Dickie Greenleaf” persona, Tom again adjusts to “his dreary role as Thomas Ripley” (183). That Tom describes his return to “Thomas Ripley” as a “role” suggests the extent to which his form of self-invention distances him from the authenticity that self-invention would putatively acquire for him. In other words, by wanting to become someone else—“Dickie Greenleaf”—Tom fails to become a self at all.

What's more, the subtle paradox of Tom's self-invention is that even his self has become a "role," an external as Kierkegaard would put it. Highsmith therefore does not frame Tom's desire for Dickie's *flâneur* lifestyle as a function of his class-consciousness; rather, for Highsmith, Tom's form of self-invention and persistent dread signal his refusal to assume the burden of the self. This ironic framing of Tom's "talents" suggests that the evaluative center of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is, for Highsmith, not the murder of Dickie Greenleaf or its socio-economic implications but rather Tom's inauthenticity and the dread he experiences as the fact of freedom confronts him.

Highsmith's presentation of the complex psychological and existential crises facing Tom is, significantly, dependent upon a narrative world of largely unrestricted performativity, as if Tom's mobility across personae were almost entirely free and open. Class, history, Dickie's social and cultural capital, and even Tom's own biological traits—his weight, his hair color—are largely trivial or unobstructive. Ripley has little trouble impersonating whomever he wants to become, and his persona is thus governed almost entirely by his will. In fact, Highsmith provides only minimal detail about Tom's personal history, frustrating socio-economic readings that try to interpret his behavior as functions of the material conditions of his life. As Harrison explains, such a decision suggests Highsmith's "denial of history, of a material analysis of character." Whenever Highsmith does present the rare detail about Tom's past, those facts are only "psychoanalytic clichés" and "the vaguest of biographical data."²²⁸ Highsmith thus registers Tom's angst and motivations under the auspices of an existential crisis regarding his self; as such, Tom is a creature of the present moment, for Highsmith subordinates the desire for socio-economic mobility to the vicissitudes of Ripley's existentially hued psychology. So, for example,

²²⁸ Harrison, *Patricia Highsmith*, 20.

despite the fact that Tom is strapped for money at the beginning of the novel, the absence of information about his upbringing or education makes it impossible to read the novel as principally a critique of an ambitious individual climbing the class ladder because—again, unlike Dreiser’s *Carrie* or, similarly, Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy* (1925)—the reader simply does not know what rungs on that ladder Tom has occupied in past.

The absence of a significant narrative of Tom’s history thus disrupts the historicizing tendencies that naturalism and even Jamesian psychological realism require for explorations of American ideas of class and gender. The seemingly compulsive aggregation of biographical data is, as Jennifer Fleissner suggests, symptomatic of the “historical knowledge” that characterizes naturalist fiction.²²⁹ The omissions in Tom’s biography, in contrast, not only frustrate interpretations of the novel as a critique of American class consciousness, but also they present Tom as an undefined or undetermined character. Ripley is a person lacking a personality, and the reader’s exposure to him proceeds through successive impersonations, not personal revelations. First of all, Tom pretends to be a close friend to Dickie when Herbert Greenleaf proposes the trip to Mongibello. When Greenleaf offers to pay his way to retrieve his son, Tom ponders expressively, “as if he were even now going over the thousands of little ties that could prevent him” (15). He affects hesitation and intimates an untrue history in order to lead Greenleaf further into the proposition. While the reader learns very little about his employment or economic past, Highsmith soon delineates Tom’s skills as a performer after he arrives in Mongibello. When he attempts to ingratiate himself to Dickie, Tom explains his impressive range of talents: “I can forge a signature, fly a helicopter, handle dice, impersonate practically anybody, cook—and do a one-man show in a nightclub in case the regular entertainer’s sick” (59). He also has “an

²²⁹ Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004).

unfortunate talent for figures,” and is adept at “valeting, baby-sitting, accounting” (58). To prove the point, he performs his “one-man show” for Dickie in pantomime, eliciting laughter and impressed praise. Performativity trumps the hand-to-mouth conditions that Tom leaves behind in the United States, and even his failure to graduate high school (among the few facts we are given) does not inhibit him from the cultural capital generally associated with the elite classes—discerning tastes for high art, reading Malraux in French, a thorough understanding of European history and geography. He is, rather than bound to a rung on the ladder of social mobility, able to scale its length at will. Therefore, while Tom is not always able to determine the choices or options before him, he is the sole arbiter of his self when confronting those choices. As Sartre puts this existentialist sensibility, “Whatever our being may be, it is a choice.”²³⁰ Tom’s *will* freely determines his self, despite the fact that everywhere his freedom is constrained by “*people*,” as he exasperatedly laments (172).

The paradox that plagues Tom Ripley’s self-invention certainly makes him an anti-hero, for once he has been cleared of all suspicion and has even inherited Dickie’s trust fund, Tom is still haunted by the specter of being caught. The novel begins with Tom’s fear that his scam collecting back taxes as an IRS agent has been uncovered by an investigator, who actually turns out to be Herbert Greenleaf. Even as Highsmith begins the narrative with Tom’s dread of being discovered, the novel ends with Ripley obsessed with the possibility that all of his successful plans will collapse around him while fleeing to Greece. “He tried to imagine landing in Crete,” Highsmith’s narrator explains, but then he envisions “four motionless figures standing on the imaginary pier, the figures of Cretan policemen waiting for him, patiently waiting with folded arms.” Recognizing that the vision is not grounded in reality, Tom wonders, “Was he going to

²³⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (trans. Hazel Barnes; New York: Washington Square Press, 1953), 607.

see policemen waiting for him on every pier that he ever approached?" (273). The prospect of his guilt plagues every horizon, and on each prospective opportunity for freedom Tom's guilt patiently awaits him. Much like the way Highsmith begins and ends the narrative, Tom's life is bookended by the consequences of his despair. While despair can certainly be productive, as Kierkegaard admits and Camus and Sartre were later wont to remind their readers, for Tom it becomes the sickness that infects his self.

After *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *A Game for the Living*, Highsmith's work begins to turn away from the existential concerns and subtleties of her 1950s novels. In particular, as Harrison explains, Highsmith's work becomes more explicitly political beginning with *The Cry of the Owl* (1962): "the programmatic existentialism of her protagonists diminished," Harrison says, while her criticism of American culture and politics becomes more pronounced.

Americanism and its discontents begin to take center stage, although her subtle exploration of existential psychology never fades completely. In fact, she explicitly employs the work of the existential psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm, in *Edith's Diary* (1977). Nonetheless, Highsmith's novels from the 1950s, not unlike Ellison's *Invisible Man*, help circulate existentialist sensibilities about authenticity and choice within the American cultural arena. Indeed, the differences between Ellison's and Highsmith's novels from the period represent the fact that the existentialist moment in postwar America was woven together by seemingly disparate cultural threads. Highsmith's novels share in the circulation of existentialist sensibilities about the self and authenticity, but she also inflects them through sensibilities regarding amorality, criminal behavior, psychology, and her belief that social phenomena are subordinate to the drama of existential uncertainty. Highsmith also poses her novels in more direct opposition to literary traditions—particularly naturalism—that present the psychological lives of characters within

rationalistic or deterministic frames. Instead, she accounts for her characters' behavior through the irrational vicissitudes of a psychological arena underwritten by existential crisis. Therefore, her inflection of several converging social and intellectual trends at once marks and helps define a felt sensibility that political and socio-economic conditions are insufficient explanatory templates for the complexities of a world more widely aware of the psychological phenomena surging throughout the tics, dreams, and desires of everyday life.

Even as the emergence of existentialist sensibilities was a complicated and often-contradictory moment in the United States, I have also tried to show that the prominent place of Americanized existentialism competed with other phenomena and sensibilities, such as the normalization of the therapeutic disciplines, the intellectual legitimacy of Americanized psychoanalysis, a burgeoning television industry, and larger shifts in literary tastes away from the naturalist style. None of these threads dominated the rich texture of the postwar moment, and certainly no single author or intellectual presided over its warp and weft. Nonetheless, this heterogeneous intellectual fabric helped to erode the legitimacy of New Deal liberalism on several accounts. For one, the wide and diverse circulation of psychological templates for everyday life began to reframe how Americans understood the conditions of their everyday possibilities. The emerging intellectual fabric of the 1950s also helped to legitimate public animus toward the New Deal consensus regarding the plausibility of structural and historical analyses. Among the many later permutations of these shifting explanatory frames is the report by Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Moynihan, entitled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965).²³¹ The Moynihan report attempts to account for the roots of poverty

²³¹ *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* may be found freely online at <http://www.dol.gov/dol/aboutdol/history/moynchapter2.htm>. References to the Report refer to the un-paginated chapter divisions.

among black Americans at mid-century. Conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor, the report concludes that psychologized social conditions—rather than structural ones, such as a paucity of jobs—explain the pervasiveness of poverty among black Americans. In particular, the Moynihan report attributes blame to a “tangle of pathology,” the center of which is the “weak family structure.”²³² Slavery and decades of the Jim Crow laws precipitated the deterioration of the nuclear family among black Americans, the Moynihan report asserts, yet that “tangle of pathology” is now self-perpetuating. Among its significant ideological elements, the Moynihan report presents the social and economic dimensions of its study within the terms of normative psychology. The supposed “weak family structure” of African American communities becomes a form of pathology, a psychosocial phenomenon that perpetuates itself within shared psychological experiences rather than material or structural arrangements. The Report even invokes the “tangle of pathology” in the African American community to explain the increased need for welfare programs.²³³ Indeed, the Moynihan report signals the institutionalization of psychological accounts for political and socio-economic circumstances.

Beyond her modest part in legitimating psychological explanatory templates for understanding common behavior, Highsmith also helped bring definition to the felt crises of the so-called “age of anxiety” through inflecting the genre of “crime fiction” through her own flavor of existential psychology. In fact, the *political* resonances of this genre cannot be understated: Sean McCann, for example, uses the “hard-boiled” crime fiction that thrived from the 1930s until

²³² Chapter IV, “The Tangle of Pathology,” n. page.

²³³ Chapter II, “The Negro American Family,” n. page. Specifically, the Report maintains, “The steady expansion of [the Aid to Dependent Children] welfare program, as of public assistance programs in general, can be taken as a measure of the steady disintegration of the Negro family structure over the past generation in the United States.” The expansion of welfare measures a psychosocial phenomenon rather than, for example, the systemic opportunity gap between white and black Americans.

the 1960s to understand the rise and fall of New Deal liberalism. For McCann, authors such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Chester Himes revise the classic detective story of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle, and this evolution of crime fiction “became a symbolic theater where the dilemmas of New Deal liberalism could be staged.”²³⁴ According to McCann, the conventional detective story functions as a “parable” of classical liberal political theory, in which evil can be abolished and the integrity of an imagined community restored through the governing order of law and rational self-interest. As one permutation of this political tradition, New Deal liberalism attempted to ensure public welfare through federal regulatory power. The vicissitudes of economic crisis are, according to McCann’s gloss on New Deal liberals, an anomaly that can be avoided by ferreting out errors and through reasonable intervention. Yet the history of hard-boiled crime fiction charts the rise and fall of Roosevelt’s interventionist liberalism by offering increasingly dissonant images of the public arena. For example, Raymond Chandler’s crime novels, such as *The Long Goodbye* (1953), are underwritten by nostalgia for a “fraternally unified culture” that has “fall[en] victim to a society robbed of its cultural integrity and falsely joined by the market, mass media, and bureaucratic government.”²³⁵ In other words, while the political philosophy of New Deal liberalism depended upon the notion of an integrated public that manifested in a consensus culture, Chandler’s fiction documents the impossibility of such unity during the postwar moment. Phenomena such as suburbanization, mass consumerism, and a bureaucratic state had, for Chandler, undermined the fraternity that formed the basis for a liberal society.

²³⁴ Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 5.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

The sensibilities about individual existential crisis underwriting *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, in contrast to Chandler's nostalgia, signal a fervent rejection of an integrated, liberal view of the public arena. Through Highsmith's framing of the isolation and free choice that persistently confronts the individual, the progressive liberal view of a society based upon fraternity and shared responsibility becomes intellectually and experientially dubious. Could society really be an integrated body capable of collective welfare if alienation is such a pervasive diagnosis? And why does an individual's psyche explain the manifestations of that anxiety in more compelling ways than the impersonal accounts of socio-economic analysis? Highsmith's existentialist sensibilities pose such a dialogue with the growing animus toward the social thinking that comprised the ideological underpinnings of an interventionist welfare state. Yet that is not to say that Highsmith's fiction is analogous to the "paperback noirs" that, according to McCann, signal a turn toward the individualistic values of the Eisenhower era. The individual in her work is fraught, embattled, and obsessed with its own self-contradictions. But the very terms of that embattled selfhood nonetheless affirm and depend upon Highsmith's sensibilities about authenticity and free choice. In contrast to Mickey Spillane's rugged individualism, then, Highsmith investigates the felt crises of an anxious, ambivalent, and isolated age. Positioning her novels in relation to those felt crises, Highsmith offers something like a Pyrrhic victory over the sensibilities of postwar liberalism: she not only affirms the burden of choice that confronts the individual, but she also insists that the darker possibilities of the self cast a long shadow over that burden.

CHAPTER 3: SOUTHERN COMFORT: AUTHENTICITY, ALIENATION, AND WALKER PERCY'S WAYFARING SEARCH

Binx Bolling, the mock-hero of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961), maintains that on his thirtieth birthday he has so far "learned only to recognize merde when I see it." Bolling asserts that this skill—"a good nose for merde, for every species of shit that flies"—is in fact his "only talent." The sardonic assertion of his olfactory abilities prompts Bolling to cast a wide net of societal *angst*, for he professes to live in "the very century of merde."²³⁶ For Binx, this derisive characterization of the twentieth century grows out of the anxious, existential soil of his search for authenticity, for the real that is apparently mired in excreta. For example, at an earlier moment in the novel, Binx explains that while traveling for business he often confronts this existential bog while searching out the latest movie. His moviegoing habit is to speak with either the ticket attendant or the owner of the theater because, he insists, he would otherwise "be lost, cut loose metaphysically speaking. I should be seeing one copy of a film which might be shown anywhere and at any time" (75). The possibility of becoming a mere iteration of some generic experience prompts Binx to "touch base" (74), to identify the particularities of a situation. Binx's attempts to find the particular *beneath* the generic even cause him to make "a mark on my seat arm with my thumbnail" during an "absurd scene" in a John Wayne film. He searches for authenticity—he wants to touch "this particular piece of wood"—under generic conditions that could otherwise occur "anywhere and at any time" (75). In other words, underlying Binx's

²³⁶ Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Vintage, [1961] 1998), 228. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

search for the authentic is his *angst* that all he has access to are nonspecific copies of reality, that his efforts to “touch base” with reality occur under vast alienating conditions.

Many critics situate Binx’s anxious search for authenticity within religious *angst*, mass consumer culture, or the suburbanization of the South. For example, Lewis A. Lawson argues that Bolling’s search for “genuine salvation from alienation” is motivated by Percy’s theological vision that offers the chance to be “saved from history.”²³⁷ Philip E. Simmons situates Percy’s novel within what he calls the “historical imagination of late modernism” and its “double” view of mass culture.²³⁸ In Simmons’ reading, Percy affirms a “more ‘authentic’ past” and laments the loss of “master historical narratives” that account for Binx’s malaise, yet he confines that late modernist imagination to a commodified cultural arena. Robert Lacy similarly describes Binx’s search as an effect of the “is-this-all-there-is? disenchantment with the fruits of affluence.”²³⁹ Martyn Bone, following the critical taxonomy established by Lewis Simpson,²⁴⁰ contends that

²³⁷ Lewis A. Lawson, “From Tolstoy to Dostoyevsky in *The Moviegoer*,” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 56.3 (Summer 2003), 412.

²³⁸ Philip E. Simmons, “Toward the Postmodern Historical Imagination: Mass Culture in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* and Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine*,” *Contemporary Literature* 33.4 (Winter 1992): 601-24. Simmons juxtaposes Percy’s “late modernist” novel with Baker’s “postmodern historical imagination,” drawing a line between each writer’s stance toward the loss of an organic and authentic past. For Simmons, Baker’s fiction “celebrates the pleasures of the mass cultural surface” in a way that is impossible for Percy, who recognizes the “progress” of mass culture but finally laments its destruction of “absolutes” (604).

²³⁹ Robert Lacy, “*The Moviegoer*, Fifty Years After,” *The Southern Review* 47.1 (Winter 2011): 49-54.

²⁴⁰ Simpson coins the term “postsouthern” in his chapter entitled “The Closure of History in a Postsouthern America,” in *The Brazen Face of History: Studies in the Literary Consciousness of America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), as well as his essay “*The Southern Review* and a Post-Southern American Letters,” *Triquarterly* 43 (1978): 278-99.

Percy evinces a “postsouthern” skepticism regarding his protagonist’s “sense of place,” particularly as Bolling is troubled by the encroaching suburbanization of the South.²⁴¹

While such readings gloss the novel’s *angst* as a problem of religion, mass culture, or regionalism, Binx’s alienation also marks the emergence and legitimation of a particular kind of consciousness in the postwar era. If impersonal forces of mediation are the cause of Binx’s alienation, it is because *The Moviegoer* promotes an account of selfhood that valorizes what Percy elsewhere calls the “sovereignty” of the individual knower.²⁴² Indeed, Binx’s alienation and search for authenticity is a function of being divorced from this “sovereignty” over his experience. Modifying Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism, Binx’s search in *The Moviegoer* grounds authenticity in individual consciousness exerting control over the use of language and the meaning given to experience. Furthermore, Binx’s anxiety that vast impersonal forces mediate his experience of the world prompts him to turn a critical eye toward the state as an alienating external authority not unlike mass consumer culture. The state figures in *The Moviegoer* as an abstract institution that produces bureaucratic superfluities and generic configurations of the self. I argue that Binx’s view of the state, as a function of his search for a “sovereign” form of selfhood, brings definition to the felt crises of the New Deal era. In particular, Percy’s National Book Award-winning novel provides clarity and legitimacy to growing antagonisms toward the New Deal common sense about the self and the state within the postwar cultural marketplace. By retooling existentialist sensibilities about authenticity alongside anxieties about a bureaucratic state as an alienating institution, Percy helps give definition to the

²⁴¹ Martyn Bone, “The Postsouthern ‘Sense of Place’ in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* and Richard Ford’s *The Sportswriter*,” *Critical Survey* 12.1 (2000): 64-81.

²⁴² Walker Percy, “The Loss of the Creature,” in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Picador, [1975] 2000), 50. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

social *angst* that New Deal progressive politics warps and genericizes the self for the sake of social welfare. The political domain of the state fosters the “abstraction of the self from itself,” as Percy puts it, a kind of divorce of one’s authentic existence for the sake of an “abstract notion.”²⁴³

Percy’s fiction after *The Moviegoer* teases out the ambiguities of Binx’s search for sovereignty, yet the idea of authentic existence centering upon the conscious life of the individual nonetheless comprises the central thread in the novelist’s corpus. As Percy argues in his essay, “Notes for a Novel about the End of the World,” published as the novelist was completing *Love in the Ruins* (1971), “The wrong questions are being asked. The proper question is not whether God has died or been superseded by the urban-political complex.” Rather, Percy explains, the right question is “whether it is possible that man is presently undergoing a tempestuous restructuring of his consciousness....”²⁴⁴ Even the religious concerns of Percy’s novels are underwritten by his philosophical inquiry into the nature of subjectivity and its capacity for an authentic experience of the real. This thread of sovereignty in Percy’s work marks one prominent way in which European existentialism—both in Sartre’s secular form and in religious inflections such as Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel—is transmuted in the United States. Much like Hester in *Love in the Ruins* (1971), this permutation of existentialism takes root in an American context that is “post-Protestant, post-rebellion, post-ideology” (49). That is to say, despite the radical or Marxist turn that European existentialism takes in the 1940s,

²⁴³ Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World* (New York: Picador, 1971), 236, 328. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

²⁴⁴ Walker Percy, “Notes for a Novel about the End of the World,” *Katallagete* 3 (Fall 1970): 5-12. Rpt. in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Picador, [1975] 2000), 113. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Percy's work at once recuperates earlier existentialist sensibilities about individual authenticity while also contributing to the myriad ways those sensibilities are preserved and adapted during the postwar era. Percy's exploration of the sovereign knower, I argue, divests existentialism of its radical politics in a way that validates intellectual animus toward an interventionist state while also challenging, on the grounds of the authentic life of the self, the notion of social welfare underwriting New Deal liberalism.

Citizenship, the State, and Sartrean Authenticity

In the opening pages of the novel, Binx describes his "very peaceful" suburban existence in Gentilly (6). Having settled into a job selling stocks at his uncle's brokerage firm, Binx asserts that he is "a model tenant and a model citizen," that he takes "pleasure in doing all that is expected of me" (6). Binx explains that an American consumerist economy rewards him for his behavior with a surplus of commodities, exemplified in "an all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant" (7). Having found that such a "model" life entails a glut of credentials, Binx observes, "My wallet is full of identity cards, library cards, credit cards." Indeed, he has collected a spate of documents that serve various legitimizing functions: "my birth certificate, college diploma, honorable discharge, G.I. insurance, a few stock certificates, and my inheritance: a deed to ten acres of a defunct duck club down in St Bernard Parish" (6). This superfluity of papers that sanction and license his "model" life populate Binx's daily habits, configuring his existence according to the surfeit markers of institutions and consumerist activities. His "model" life, he sardonically concludes, seems to be crowded and structured by external and impersonal forces.

For Binx, these institutional markers—the birth certificate, the college diploma, even the deed to state-sanctioned private property—induce both irony and anxiety as he continues to reflect on his suburban existence. He asserts, “It is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen, and to receive in return a receipt or a neat styrene card with one’s name on it certifying, so to speak, one’s right to exist” (7). Binx’s statement alludes, on the one hand, to his recent military service—“honorable discharge, G.I. insurance” (6)—which the United States has recognized through the mass-produced document of a “styrene card.” In fact, Binx views the marker of his service and near-death in the Korean War as an object of generic representation: his tenure of service culminates in a bureaucratic document of discharge, as though it were another of the receipts “certifying” the terms of his relationship with the military. That Percy couches this exchange in terms of the “receipt”—i.e., that he lumps the discharge papers in with credit cards—suggests that the state configures its relationship with the soldier according to a specific consumerist logic: certain goods are provided in exchange for the soldier’s stint in the military. Binx likewise includes his “honorable discharge” among the “stock certificates” in his desk. His habit of lumping together the national and the consumeristic suggests that Binx construes his national identity—or, at least the way the state frames its relation to the citizen—in mass-produced terms. That is to say, the “honorable discharge” becomes an artifact of a bureaucratic institution, as if military service could be neatly understood within the programmatic categories of “honorable” or “dishonorable,” much like the price of a stock can be clearly valued. His association of the national with the mass-produced leads Binx to wonder if his “pleasure” in being a model citizen has been manufactured as well. This suspicion haunts Binx, and he begins to wonder whether these tokens of “certification” divorce him from an authentic experience of the Korean War while also commercializing national life.

Even as Binx expresses ambiguous “pleasure” at “carry[ing] out the duties of a citizen,” he becomes skeptical of generic configurations of any form of experience, national or otherwise (7). For example, when Binx describes his daily routines as a stock and bond broker, he admits that he had “dreamed of doing something great. But there is much to be said for giving up such grand ambitions and living the most ordinary life imaginable, a life without the old longings” (9). As Binx’s later encounter with the “romantic” college graduate on a train ride from Chicago clarifies, the “old longings” that are now divested from Binx’s “most ordinary life” refer to the aspiration to live a singular existence. The young romantic’s “longings” prompt him to leave his Midwestern home in hopes of “find[ing] himself a girl, the rarest of rare pieces, and live the life of Rudolfo [*sic*] on the balcony, sitting around on the floor and experiencing soul-communion” (215-16). For this romantic, who is perhaps some version of the Kerouacian beatnik, life becomes meaningful precisely by avoiding an ordinary midwestern life and—through the allusion to the romantic iconoclast Rodolfo in *Angelo, the Tyrant of Padua* (1876)—thwarting social conventions. Binx, in contrast, does “all that is expected of me” (6). Indeed, when he learns of the romantic’s grand aspirations, he says simply, “I have my doubts” (216). At the beginning of the novel, then, Binx rejects romantic individuality—the search for something singular—and settles instead into the ordinary existence of a bourgeois businessman.

In keeping with his earlier descriptions of receipts and identity cards, Binx initially describes his “life without the old longings” as embedded within institutional spaces. Describing the buildings in his neighborhood, for example, he says, “I stroll around the schoolyard in the last golden light of day and admire the building. Everything is so spick-and-span: the aluminum sashes fitted into the brick wall and gilded in the sunset, the pretty terrazzo floors and the desks molded like wings” (10). The parish school—one of the many institutions that crowd his

neighborhood—is at once orderly and constructed from mass-produced materials (aluminum, brick, concrete). This particular institutional space gives Binx the “pleasant sense of the goodness of creation,” for he explains that “the brick and the glass and the aluminum [have been] extracted from common dirt” (10). The “creation” that elicits Binx’s pleasure is a constructed institution built through manufactured materials that transform organic matter. That is to say, Binx’s “pleasant sense” centers not on the natural (dirt) but on its synthetic derivation (concrete terrazzo). Thus, Binx intuits the “goodness of creation”—an allusion to God’s pronouncement in the book of Genesis (1:31)—only as it is refashioned in an artificial edifice. His meditations on this institutional structure suggest that he is at least once removed from—if not entirely out of touch with—a non-manufactured world. Binx inhabits a space that configures “creation” and the everyday human habitus within the terms of industrial production.

That Binx begins to have misgivings regarding his “ordinary life” and the institutional forces that mediate it becomes evident when his “peaceful existence in Gentilly” is disrupted (10). Binx turns from describing the institution of the Gentilly school to insist, “But things have suddenly changed. This morning, for the first time in years, there occurred to me the possibility of a search” (10). In a subtle turn on Binx’s preceding commentary regarding the generic items that “certify” his involvement in the military, Binx recalls that the origins of the “search” were a traumatic experience in the Korean War:

I dreamed of the war, no, not quite dreamed but woke with the taste of it in my mouth, the queasy-quince taste of 1951 and the Orient. I remember the first time the search occurred to me. I came to myself under a chindolea bush. Everything is upside-down for me, as I shall explain later. [...] My shoulder didn’t hurt but it was pressed hard against the ground as if somebody sat on me. Six inches from my nose a dung beetle was scratching around under the leaves. As I watched, there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search. (10-11)

Introducing the trope of the “search” through this experience in the Korean War contrasts with the earlier generic documents that putatively certify Binx’s military service. Whereas a “neat styrene card” might identify Binx as a veteran, his memory is instead specific and experiential: the juxtaposition of the two calls into question the efficacy of the bureaucratic document.

Binx’s awakening is also significant because it recalls the centerpiece of Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism. Sartre claims in his 1946 lecture-cum-essay, “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” that the origins of truth are grounded in “consciousness confronting itself.”²⁴⁵ In Sartre’s brand of existentialism, awareness of one’s self as a thinking being *generates* consciousness, or wills individual subjectivity as an object. Consciousness is thus at once the foundation for authentic knowledge and (paradoxically) the product of one’s awareness of being conscious. Redolent of this Sartrean arrangement between consciousness and the real, Binx explains, “I came to myself,” and he subsequently confesses for the first time to be “onto something” (10, 11). In this juxtaposition between the synthetic “styrene card” and the particular experience in Korea, Binx, like Sartre, establishes a connection between consciousness and authentic reality. That is to say, the contrast between the bureaucratic document of the “honorable discharge” and the experiential confrontation of “coming to one’s self” provokes Binx to become suspicious of mass-produced consumerism while also rousing his desire for an authentic encounter with the real. Binx’s “search” thus configures authenticity in terms of *unmediated consciousness*, of awakening to one’s self as distinct from the interpositions of external forces. Indeed, Percy’s avowed philosophical debt to Sartre and Søren Kierkegaard suggests what becomes more pronounced later in the novel: the contours of Binx’s quest are

²⁴⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), 40. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

decisively existentialist, for it not only presupposes consciousness as the ground of knowledge but also sets up an authentic form of the self as the object of the search.²⁴⁶

It is significant that Binx returns to his “search” later in his life while rummaging through the “little pile on his bureau” of items from his ordinary existence (11). These two moments that raise the possibility of the search—the personal experience of war and the everyday artifacts of bourgeois life—are, interestingly enough, connected in the figure of the dung beetle. Binx, like the beetle, “pokes through” the items on his bureau, as if seeing them for the first time (11). Also, presaging the passage at the end of the novel where Binx’s search for authenticity yields only his “good nose for merde” (228), the particular species of beetle rummaging in front of Binx’s nose is of the *dung* variety: it rifles through leaves and other foliage in its expert hunt for “shit.” Binx’s “search” in Gentilly, in other words, becomes a form of shit-searching among the surfeit objects of his suburban existence: the quest for the authentic requires Binx to identify excreta. He must first sort through a pile of extraneous waste in order to uncover the real.

One exemplary case of Binx’s shit-searching occurs later in the novel, after he has recently purchased a new Dodge sedan and decides to vacation with Marcia (his latest secretary and romantic interest). Binx explains, “When I first slid under the wheel to drive [the sedan], it seemed that everything was in order—here was I, a healthy young man, a veteran with all his papers in order, a U.S. citizen driving a good car” (121). Binx’s vacation seems initially to epitomize a narrative of national and economic flourishing: he is both “citizen” and the owner of

²⁴⁶ Percy’s well-known debt to Søren Kierkegaard is lucidly explored in Bradley R. Dewey, “Walker Percy Talks about Kierkegaard: An Annotated Interview,” *The Journal of Religion* 54.3 (July 1974): 273-98. However, I emphasize Sartre and not Kierkegaard because the form of consciousness underlying *The Moviegoer* resonates more with the essays of the former. Also, in Dewey’s interview with Percy, the author notes that he encountered Kierkegaard through other existentialists, particularly Sartre—an inheritance that has been neglected in scholarship.

a “good car.” Yet his idyll quickly becomes unfulfilling: “All these things were true enough, yet on my first trip to the Gulf Coast with Marcia, I discovered to my dismay that my fine new Dodge was a regular incubator of malaise” (121). Binx defines the “malaise” as “the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo’s ghost” (120). Binx’s “malaise” refers, in other words, to an experience of alienation, of being set apart from intimacy with others or even reality itself. Like Macbeth’s murdered friend, the subject who suffers from the malaise has put stock in one version of the real and has been betrayed by it. The accumulation of manufactured goods—emblemized in the sedan—betrays Binx, depriving his self from attaining authenticity on the grounds that even his romance with Marcia occurs within a symbolic complex of mass-produced experience. As Binx puts it, he and Marcia had “become like the American couple in the Dodge ad” (121), reproducible identities within a mass market of advertisements. Binx’s bourgeois freedom thus amounts only to generic individuality, for he finds that “merde” intercedes between he and Marcia. Indeed, in Sartrean terms, Binx recognizes that the vacation where “everything was in order” is little more than a sustained evasion, a retreat into “bad faith,” or the avoidance of the search for authenticity through boredom and distraction.²⁴⁷ He encounters Marcia and the Gulf Coast under circumstances produced and approved by mass marketing campaigns.

The association between merde and generic individuality arises again when Binx projects existential malaise throughout the twentieth century. Binx elaborates upon the characterization of

²⁴⁷ Sartre gives the following explanation of “bad faith”: “If we define man’s situation as one of free choice, in which he has no recourse to excuses or outside aid, then any man who takes refuge behind his passions, any man who fabricates some deterministic theory, is operating in bad faith” (47). Thus, for Sartre, bad faith is the refusal to confront either the metaphysical meaninglessness of the world or (as a derivation of that truth) the radical possibilities of choice available to each individual.

his contemporary moment as the “very century of merde” by insisting that it is an epoch when “everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and prospers like a dung beetle” (228). Binx’s lament implies a paradox: the individual becomes *nonspecific*—an “anyone”—insofar as he or she embodies impersonal values regarding *originality*. Fleshing out this paradox, Binx portrays the “warm and creative person” as a generic configuration of the self—a resignation of agency by the individual subject for the values of an impersonal system of thought. In this particular passage, Binx has in mind “the shithouse of scientific humanism” (228), which he earlier ridicules for offering a comprehensive theory of the human species: one must “sleep a certain number of hours every night, breathe fresh air, eat a certain number of calories, evacuate [one’s] bowels regularly and have a stimulating hobby” (86). Modern individuals become “tranquillized in their despair” as they concede to life delineated by scientific discourse. According to Binx, the self becomes an instance of an abstract entity—merely an organism with “ductless glands”—by conforming to the prescriptions of self-help scientific discourse (86). Binx construes such scientific discourse as one of the prominent phenomena of the “very century of merde,” which for the sake of “prosperity” abstracts the individual from her self through prescriptive behaviors (“have a stimulating hobby”) and self-help philosophy (becoming a “warm and creative person”). Binx doubts, in other words, that this form of individualism—whether by attention to its bodily glands or its subjective aspirations—represents an authentic form of the self, for he says instead that this discourse is paradoxically mediated by and filtered through programmatic categories of being. The individual is alienated from the modes of producing his or her own self by following the directives of external authorities and the abstract dictates of intellectual movements.

Percy returns to this skepticism toward programmatic forms of individualism in *Love in the Ruins*. Set “at a time near the end of the world,” the novel chronicles Dr. Tom More’s growing dissatisfaction with his suburban life in Paradise, a wealthy community of mostly medical professionals in Louisiana. More, a researcher and therapist, invents the “Qualitative-Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer,” which “measures a person’s innermost self” through electromagnetic readings of the brain and spine (92). Despite More’s diagnostic acuity and the accuracy of his lapsometer, he is a physician ironically unable to understand or heal himself. Indeed, alternating fits of elation and depression, alcoholism, and general surliness plague the physician. That’s not to say that More’s discontent is without cause, for his adult life has been capsized by the death of his daughter, Samantha, and the subsequent disintegration of his marriage. Samantha’s excruciating and disfiguring death, caused by the slow growth of a neuroblastoma, leads Tom to a long-term affair with Early Times whiskey. More’s first wife, Doris, becomes lonely and aimless, and rather than finding solace in whiskey she searches for ways to “recover herself” (64).

Given their respective ways of tending the wounds from their daughter’s death, the couple not surprisingly drifts away from each other. Doris begins to read “spiritual books” that prescribe various paths to happiness and individual fulfillment. The result, More warns, is nothing less than disastrous for the life of her self:

Beware of Episcopal women who take up with Ayn Rand and the Buddha and Dr. Rhine formerly of Duke University. A certain type of Episcopal girl has a weakness that comes on them just past youth, just as sure as Italian girls get fat. They fall prey to Gnostic pride, commence buying antiques, and develop a yearning for esoteric doctrine. (64)

The “spiritual books” that Doris reads after the disenchanting death of her daughter—“That’s a loving God you have there,” she tells Tom as the neuroblastoma pushes one of Samantha’s eyes

out and around her nosebridge (72)—prompts Doris to find solace and meaning in “esoteric” forms of re-enchantment. Indeed, she adopts a foreign language for understanding her discontent—amalgamating Buddhism, Ayn Rand, and Joseph Rhine’s “parapsychology”—before eloping with a “heathen Englishman” who likewise weds science and Eastern religion. Doris’s attempts to “recover herself” through various forms of abstract individualism, such as Ayn Rand’s philosophy of “selfishness,” in which unabashed self-interest becomes prescriptive for “individual development” and politics alike.²⁴⁸ Despite his own attempts to lose himself in *Early Times*, More is suspicious of Doris’s search because she seemingly adopts the patterns of thought and abstract principles of others in order to legitimate the cultivation of her individuality. When Doris informs Tom that she plans to leave him, for example, she says simply, “I’m going in search of myself,” which elicits More’s incredulous reaction: “My heart sank,” he says, “This was not really her way of talking” (65). Adopting the language of “spiritual books” and forsaking “her way of talking,” Doris renounces an authentic search for the self by espousing instead someone else’s beliefs. “Our marriage is a collapsed morality,” she sadly tells Tom, “like a burnt-out star which collapses into itself, gives no light and is heavy heavy heavy.” Her recitation of complaints leads Tom to believe that, in fact, she abandons her search for a recovered self and retreats into the authority and programmatic individualism of another: “Collapsed morality. Law of life. More stately mansions,” Tom laments. “Here are unmistakable echoes of her friend Alistair Fuchs-Forbes,” the Englishman with whom she has an affair (66).

Percy’s recurring representation of systematic forms of individualism evince his distrust of the ways such discourses routinize the “true” and “unique” behaviors of the self: “sleep a

²⁴⁸ Although it is not clear which book of essays Doris reads, see the widely read Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: New American Library, 1964).

certain number of hours every night,” as Binx recites, “breathe fresh air, eat a certain number of calories, evacuate [one’s] bowels regularly and have a stimulating hobby” (86). This recurring skepticism of programmatic individualism is grounded within Percy’s anxiety that institutional forces divest the self of what he calls “sovereignty.” As he explains in his essay, “The Loss of the Creature,” objects and experiences are “rendered invisible” by theoretical abstractions, such as exhaustive scientific theories or bourgeois cultural expectations. Percy insists that the request to validate whether “this is really it”—to legitimate one’s knowledge, experience, or even a chosen form of individuality—actually obscures the real and the authentic. He argues,

The dogfish, the tree, the seashell, the American Negro, the dream, are rendered invisible by a shift of reality from concrete thing to theory which Whitehead has called the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. It is the mistaking of an idea, a principle, an abstraction, for the real. As a consequence of the shift, the ‘specimen’ is seen as less real than the theory of the specimen. As Kierkegaard said, once a person is seen as a specimen of a race or a species, at that very moment he ceases to be an individual. Then there are no more individuals but only specimens. (58)

It is deeply problematic that the “American Negro” figures here as an object of knowledge alongside the “dogfish”—a point to which I return later. But the essay also sheds light on Binx’s anxieties insofar as Percy suggests that knowing another individual is threatened with regulatory forces that he calls a “symbolic complex.” Even as a scientific theory may inhibit a student from seeing the “real” dogfish, Percy explains that “sanctioned” forms of experience necessarily arbitrate the individual consciousness’s experience of a thing, person, or event. He asks, for example,

Why is it almost impossible to gaze directly at the Grand Canyon under [touristic] circumstances and see it for what it is—as one picks up a strange object from one’s back yard and gazes directly at it? It is almost impossible because the Grand Canyon, the thing as it is, has been appropriated by the symbolic complex which has already been formed in the sightseer’s mind. Seeing the canyon under approved circumstances is seeing the symbolic complex head on. (47)

The tourist, in this case, encounters not the thing-in-itself but a “prepared experience,” a predetermined set of meanings that distances the subject from the landscape that she views (60). The consequence of this sifted consciousness, Percy explains, is a gradual concession of agency, or progressive “losses of sovereignty” (50).

The conclusion of Percy’s philosophy of the self is that, by experiencing the world only under “approved circumstances,” the individual becomes “lost” within the complex of forces that mediate her existence. Such an individual surrenders her “sovereignty” to “a class of privileged knowers,” and thereby becomes alienated from her own daily existence. By “sovereignty,” then, Percy means the subject’s capacity for self-recognition as “a knowing being whose peculiar property it is to see himself as being in a certain situation” (58). The “knower,” Percy argues, must reassert her authority over the thing “known” (59). Indeed, Percy’s argument recapitulates Sartre’s claim that the origins of “truth” reside in “consciousness confronting itself” (Sartre 40), for Percy’s notion of the “sovereign person” construes authentic knowledge of both the world and one’s self as deriving from self-presence—the subject exercising control over her subjectivity. Likewise, for Sartre, an authentic subjectivity lies at the root of reality: anything less than a consciousness aware of itself is a faulty foundation for the real. However, Percy’s notion of sovereignty also depends upon the *particularity of consciousness*—that is, of seeing one’s self as “being in a certain situation.” Thus, those forces that obscure the particular—e.g., exhaustive accounts of the human body, Ayn Rand’s philosophical system, or, in Binx’s case, the generic identities produced by a bureaucratic state and the national commodity system—actually preclude authentic knowledge. What this philosophy of the self suggests is that, for Percy, an idiosyncratic authentic subjectivity lies beyond the “certifying” forces of national institutions and mass-produced molds of individuality.

Percy's notion of "sovereignty" further clarifies Binx's vacation with Marcia in the Dodge sedan. Binx finds that a vague psychological state that he calls the "malaise" interposes itself between him and his romantic interest. Like the biology student who filters the dogfish through abstract scientific theories, Binx finds that he and Marcia have cast their relationship within the imaginary—the "symbolic complex"—of a Dodge advertisement featuring an American couple freely "spinning along" (121). Binx explains, "We sat frozen in a gelid amiability. Our cheeks ached from smiling. Either would have died for the other. In despair I put my hand under her dress, but even such a homely little gesture as that was received with the same fearful politeness" (121). The relationship between the two is "gelid"—cold, impersonal, even synthetic—precisely because a commercialized set of expectations mediates their intimacy. In perhaps the most chilling aspect of the scene, this veil of expectations between the two cannot drop even when Binx's hand finds its way "under her dress." During a sexual encounter in which lovers presumably experience intimacy, Binx and Marcia remain politely alienated from one another, mediated by both Dodge's commercialized script for happiness and a national narrative about being prosperous "U.S. citizens" (121). They are sealed off from one another by the impersonal norms of a commercialized national body.

That Binx conflates the scripts of mass consumerism and the American state suggests that his alienation is, at least in part, bound up with the way that the state structures its relationship to citizens in economized terms and through impersonal bureaucracy. His construal of citizenship as another form of consumerism is, in fact, historically grounded within certain shifts in the New Deal economic agenda during the postwar era. Shaken by a recession during 1937-1938, Roosevelt's administration shifted the accent of its domestic economic agenda away from regulation and central planning to Keynesian redistributive fiscal policy—a shift that begins the

so-called second or “New” New Deal. As Alan Brinkley explains, the first phase of New Deal liberalism (1933-1937) was characterized by the presupposition that the state could responsibly lead an assault on monopoly power and institute “an ordered economic world.”²⁴⁹ In contrast to this aggressive regulation of capitalism and central planning, Keynesianism maintained that an industrial economy is too convoluted for governmental mechanisms to direct, but certain fiscal measures (such as controlling aggregate demand by federal or “deficit” spending) could mitigate the volatility of recessions and depressions in an economic cycle. Following the wave of Keynesian thought that swept Europe in the 1930s, Roosevelt’s administration—particularly Henry Wallace, Harold Ickes, Harry Hopkins, and Henry Morgenthau—began to strengthen domestic programs of compensatory social insurance—earlier established in the Social Security Act (1935)—while easing the administration’s heavy-handed relationship to corporate America. As a result, New Deal liberalism became “less statist than its earlier counterparts, less concerned with issues of class, less hostile to existing patterns of economic power, committed above all to a new vision of a consumer-driven economy.”²⁵⁰

This rolling back of the reform agenda of the early New Deal era left Social Security as the central component of the postwar welfare state. As Daniel T. Rodgers explains, this emphasis upon Social Security, among its consequences, privatized the political relationship between citizens and the state by patterning it after the “form not of a broad contract between social groups but of myriad private contracts between individuals and the state.”²⁵¹ That is to say, the

²⁴⁹ Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 31.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁵¹ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1998), 445.

earlier assemblage of domestic policies and programs construed state politics as the concentration of political will and the institutionalization of a reform agenda, while the postwar New Deal state became a broker or distributor of services. Furthermore, its underlying Keynesian social-economic philosophy viewed the nation as a statistical body of collective consumption, aggregate demand, and income. Questions of “political economy” thus became almost exclusively concerned during the 1940s and 1950s with limiting unemployment and evading recessions, which “detached liberalism from its earlier emphasis on reform.”²⁵²

Brinkley’s and Rodgers’ arguments regarding the evolution of New Deal liberalism are complicated, for example, by Roosevelt’s attempts to achieve greater civil rights for African Americans during World War II. Nonetheless, the preponderance of legislation bears out Brinkley’s argument that the war “muted liberal hostility to capitalism and the corporate world.”²⁵³ As such, the principal postwar legacy of the New Deal, then, is its construal of social welfare as an actuarial science, which frames citizenship in the terms of statistical aggregations and economic transactions.²⁵⁴ Until the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s forced the hand of the Democratic Party, the political philosophy of New Deal liberalism was almost entirely determined by Keynesian redistributive policies and compensatory mechanisms. The legacy of social welfare as an actuarial science underwrites Binx’s conflation of the tokens of his national identity and the surfeit objects of mass consumerism, for citizenship becomes little more than a form of consumption facilitated by a state that is a broker of services. This form of political

²⁵² Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, 271.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵⁴ For the cultural consequences of this notion of social welfare in the 1930s and 1940s, see Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

economy, Binx believes, forecloses the possibilities of social belonging, mutual understanding, and collective welfare. This iteration of liberalism is another abstract force that alienates the self from an authentic experience of the world.

If Percy's characters are most often alienated because programmatic, institutional forces interpose themselves between these individuals and the objects of their consciousness, he nonetheless explores a variety of routes to escape that loss of the self. With Binx, Percy considers the search for authenticity, which leads his protagonist to include the state among those alienating, impersonal forces. Binx's self-ironizing promulgates a specific form of distrust regarding the individual's relationship to the state—a distrust centering on the national institution's violations of individual autonomy over the experiential life of the self. That is to say, in *The Moviegoer*, the state intervenes in the consciousness of the individual either by promulgating a generic social imaginary (the "model citizen") or through its bureaucratic edifice (the "neat styrene card"), both of which pre-package experience for the citizen and thus disassociates her from the production of her own subjectivity. Indeed, Percy portrays the self's reliance upon the state and its surfeit objects as a form of "bad faith." As Sartre puts this point, the person of "bad faith" resorts to "outside aid" despite the fact that he or she occupies a realm of "free choice" (47). Allowing the state to mediate one's consciousness through mass-produced values, duties, and experiences, then, becomes equivalent to the consumer driving a Dodge sedan: both the "model citizen" and the consumer are alienated because they encounter the real at a distant remove. The "outside aid" of advertisements and state mediation thus force Percy's "model citizen" to become an "anyone," divested of the capacity for self-determination.

Existentialism as a Novel

Insofar as Percy objects to national intervention in the consciousness of individual subjects, his configuration of the self is suited to what Mark McGurl calls the “World Pluribus of Letters,” in which postwar writers imagine literature as “a technology of disaffiliation from empirical nations in favor of something more ideal.”²⁵⁵ McGurl generally applies this description to U.S. minority writers who contest assimilation and commodification by American mainstream culture. Such minority authors find themselves connected to a “global pluralist space.” For McGurl, literary disaffiliation from the nation-state establishes a connection between U.S. minority writers and a pluralistic, transnational community (331).²⁵⁶ Yet the “disaffiliation” from the mediation of the state in *The Moviegoer* does not seem to function as a narrative strategy for finding solidarity with the marginalized around the world; rather, it appears to turn away from collective affiliation and toward a preoccupation with self-governing consciousness. Indeed, as opposed to an idealized post-national community that McGurl says is the “ideal” of the “World Pluribus of Letters,” Percy turns away from the state and toward the conscious life of the self in search of a more perfect configuration of the individual’s position in the world.

In *Love in the Ruins*, Percy inflects this concern regarding self-governing consciousness not only by criticizing esoteric and bourgeois truisms about authenticity—such as the good-natured but conniving Alistair’s cliché, “Holiness is wholeness” (271)—but also by turning that critical gaze back upon itself. Tom More inadvertently allows his ontological lapsometer to fall

²⁵⁵ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 330. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

²⁵⁶ More specifically, McGurl demonstrates that such a connection fostered by a “technology of disaffiliation” is in fact established and sustained by the American university. The institution of the university, even for those American minority writers who find lines of escape from an alienating nation-state, becomes a haven and mediating force in the postwar era.

into the hands of Art Immelmann, a Mephistophelian character who promises More the Nobel Prize and a lucrative grant to develop his diagnostic tool. In exchange, More agrees to hand over his rights to the lapsometer to Immelmann, who quickly appends a “treatment” device that distorts the selfhood of the residents of Paradise. Becoming more than a diagnostic tool in Immelmann’s hands, the lapsometer incites violence, abstract hate, and anarchy through “treatments” of Heavy Sodium ions to the “pineal body,” or the “seat of the self” (370). Besides widely applying these treatments, Immelmann also indiscriminately hands out the lapsometer to the town’s physicians. Havoc quickly breaks out among “Knotheads”—the future moniker of conservatives, More explains—and the “new Left Party,” also known as the LEFTPAPASANE, an acronym for “what the Left believed in: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, The Pill, Atheism, Pot, Anti-Pollution, Sex, Abortion Now, Euthanasia” (18). Immelmann uses More’s lapsometer to distort the “selfhood” of these factions, but he explains,

[W]e operate on a cardinal principle, which we never violate. We never ‘do’ anything to anybody. We only help people do what they want to do. We facilitate social interaction in order to isolate factors. If people show a tendency to interact in a certain way, we facilitate the interaction in order to accumulate reliable data. (363)

Immelmann’s distortion of the lapsometer provides the impetus for another permutation of the skepticism recurring throughout Percy’s work. As an allusion to the myth of Faust, Immelmann’s character eerily employs the royal “we” in his explanation to More about his work. That is to say, much like Mephistopheles, Immelmann not only requires More to sell his soul, so to speak, for worldly gain; also, he becomes the representative of demonic forces. The implication is that, for More, the “principalities and powers” of the demonic seemingly draw out the evil that he believes to be innate within human nature (5). As such, Percy raises a problem with his own valorization of self-governing consciousness: human beings are seemingly inclined toward

anarchy, violence, and even self-destruction. That proclivity for evil seems to be intrinsic to the life of the self. How, then, can the “sovereign knower” be a prescriptive philosophical ideal when consciousness is rife with contradictions and cruelty?

Despite the problems that Percy raises with “the secret ills of the spirit” and the tools that humanity uses to cultivate the life of that innately estranged self (5), Percy nonetheless sustains his commitment to the idea of sovereignty in *Love in the Ruins*. After the apocalyptic events precipitated by the lapsometer, More seeks refuge in a rundown Howard Johnson’s motel with his secretary, Ellen Oglethorpe. While Paradise is upended—the white residents flee as black “Bantus” become rich and take control of the town—Tom and Ellen get married and, eventually, continue their therapeutic practice. Five years after the apocalypse, they have two children and are poor residents of the inverted segregation that characterizes the new Paradise. Despite the difficulties of the “new age,” the physician’s life has finally settled into a “healthy” equilibrium. The apocalypse seemingly enables his recovery of the self, although that recuperation is not absolute, for More still experiences mild, occasional “depressions and unnatural exaltations.” The destruction of civilization has enabled him to arrive at a less crowded vista, and he reflects on the things that emerge into view as important during the new age:

Strange. I am older, yet there seems to be more time, time for watching and waiting and thinking and working. All any man needs is time and desire and the sense of his own sovereignty. Kingfish Huey Long used to say: every man a king. I am a poor man but a kingly one. If you want and wait and work, you can have.
(382)

Where Doris fails, More succeeds: he recovers his self not through abstract principles and routinized behavior but by attention to “time and desire.” The ideal of “every man a king” is not without its ambiguities—More earlier recalls the defunct afterlife of Huey Long’s political program, not to mention his notoriously dictatorial strategies for achieving that populist agenda

(151). Yet More nonetheless recuperates that ideal about ordinary kingship: the alienated self can piece together life in ruins through attention to the quotidian. While remaining an “exile,” More is nonetheless a “sovereign wanderer” (383). His self is no longer “abstracted from itself” through hazy “terror” regarding daily existence (11). Indeed, in contrast to the problems that plague the physician at the beginning of the novel, *Love in the Ruins* concludes with More coyly inviting his second wife to bed. They fall on a new “\$600” mattress that he has saved up for a year to buy, and the reader is left with the image of the couple “at home in bed where all good folk belong” (403). The association between More’s figure of the “sovereign wanderer” and his acclimation to quotidian life promotes a form of authentic selfhood that achieves self-possession through attention to the ordinary. Whereas Doris tries to “recover herself” through programmatic forms of individualism and Art Immelmann simply unleashes the unreflective proclivities of human nature, More becomes a “lordly exile” by slow, meditative work upon the self and its daily commitments (383). The ordinary experience of the self becomes the avenue for sovereignty.

The importance of this quest for an awakened, self-determining consciousness not only influences the ambiguities and trajectories of the “quests” that preoccupy Percy’s characters. His philosophical ideal of the “sovereign knower” or “wanderer” also surfaces in his novels through a recurring mechanism in which the reader is invited to succeed—to “know” or recognize the real—where Percy’s characters fail to do. Percy’s first suggests this novelistic strategy during correspondence with his publishers at Knopf, in which the novelist defends certain stylistic and narrative peculiarities in *The Moviegoer*. He writes to his editor,

Your calling attention to dropped characters and interrupted story-strands is certainly valid novelistic criticism, but it does not seem applicable here—at least it does not strike a chord with me. [...] I suppose I am trying to say that the fragmented alienated consciousness, which is Mr Binx Bolling, cannot be done up

in a *novel* in the usual sense of the word. At least I would not have the stomach for the job. Also, I am working on something else.²⁵⁷

It is clear enough that *The Moviegoer* is fragmented narratively and that this structure mirrors Binx's own sense of being "cut loose" from society (75). It is also clear that *The Moviegoer* calls attention to the causes of that estrangement. What is less clear, however, is that this detective work of the novel is based upon Percy's assumptions about what constitutes "good" reading. For example, as Jay Tolson explains, Percy's teaching philosophy during his semester at Loyola University in the fall of 1967 followed a consistent pattern: "Whatever the novel of the week, Percy asked the same leading questions: What was the protagonist's problem? Why was he so alienated from the rest of society? How did each novel work as a diagnostic and cognitive tool?"²⁵⁸ Such questions also surface in related form during Percy's acceptance speech for the National Book Award: "it is perhaps not too farfetched to compare [*The Moviegoer*] in one respect with the science of pathology. Its posture is the posture of the pathologist with his suspicion that something is wrong."²⁵⁹ The point is that, as both teacher and writer, Percy understood the primary function of the novel to be its "diagnostic" capacities for uncovering the conditions of alienation. Like More's lapsometer, Percy understands the novel as a mechanism for diagnosing "a person's innermost self" (92).

Percy's letter to his editor, Stanley Kauffmann, also suggests the awareness with which the author departs from the "usual sense" of the novel. If *The Moviegoer* diagnoses Binx's

²⁵⁷ Letter from Walker Percy to Stanley Kauffmann, 11 February 1960, qtd. in Heather Moore, "Walker Percy's 'The Moviegoer': A Publishing History," *Library Chronicle of the University of Texas* 22.4 (1992): 129.

²⁵⁸ Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 343.

²⁵⁹ Walker Percy, "Accepting the National Book Award for *The Moviegoer*," *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Picador, 2000), 246.

alienation, Percy also explains that “something else” is at stake. While he does not elaborate upon this innovation, the contours of this “something else” are traced throughout his correspondence with his publishers. For example, Percy originally entitled his work “Confessions of a Moviegoer,” although his editor at Knopf recommended the final title as a “short” and “memorable” alternative.²⁶⁰ The significance of Percy’s original title is that it stages Binx’s narrative as a confession and, as such, *The Moviegoer* calls attention to the reader’s responsibility for making his or her own judgments about the protagonist’s ironic declamations. Indeed, Binx’s confessions throughout the novel positions the reader in a “sovereign” position—a positioning that also accounts for the ill-defined contours of Bolling’s “search.” This accentuation of the reader’s responsibility is particularly prominent after Binx has returned from running away with his suicidal cousin Kate. Aunt Emily, Kate’s mother, summons Binx for a final interrogation of her nephew. During this confrontation, Aunt Emily silences Binx by asking, “What do you love? What do you live by?” (226). Even as he is earlier “constrain[ed]” from “mentioning the object of my search” because he “do[es] not know the answer” (14), Binx is likewise silent in response to Aunt Emily’s questions. That is to say, the novel poses questions about which it remains ambiguous, refusing to resolve the existential problems that it diagnoses. Thus, rather than filling out the empty space left by Binx’s silence, *The Moviegoer* positions readers in the “sovereign” role of searching for their own answers. Unlike Art Immelmann, whose “treatments” in *Love in the Ruins* institutes a demonic tyranny, Percy does not prescribe a definite or programmatic solution to the illnesses of the self that he identifies.

This refusal to offer a definite alternative social world in *The Moviegoer* is not without its ambiguities. Even if Binx’s anxieties center on the interventionist forces of consumerism and the

²⁶⁰ Letter from Stanley Kauffmann to Walker Percy, 1 September 1960, qtd. in Moore, “Walker Percy’s ‘The Moviegoer’: A Publishing History,” 132.

bureaucratic order of the state, Percy's ideal of the "sovereign" individual and his understanding of the novel as an existential confrontation is, in effect, only a reconfiguration of the bourgeois novel, rather than a departure from it. In particular, in Percy's attempt to reconcile the reader to her "sovereignty," the turn in *The Moviegoer* toward autonomy and self-authentication reframes but ultimately perpetuates the bourgeois subject that Fredric Jameson identifies as the persistent hazard of the modern novel. In Jameson's account of realism and the "problem of the subject," an indivisible and atomized consciousness lingers throughout the history of this modern genre of fiction.²⁶¹ He explains that the novel

plays a significant role in what can be called a properly bourgeois cultural revolution—that immense process of transformation whereby populations whose life habits were formed by other, now archaic, modes of production are effectively reprogrammed for life and work in the new world of market capitalism. (152)

Reading Balzac's *La Vieille Fille* and *La Rabouilleuse*, Jameson argues that bourgeois individuality plagues the novel precisely in the "very life world" that it imagines. Even in novels that express discontent with market capitalism, these supposedly "realistic" representations of human existence nonetheless seek "to find a way out of its intolerable closure and to produce a 'solution'" (167). That is to say, the "life world" of realism produces a form of subjectivity tailored to resolving the tensions of a demystified and alienating reality. The realism of the novel, then, "has the structure of a wish-fulfillment, [...] a daytime fantasy into which the subject projects his own image and of which the reader or spectator [occupies] precisely the place of one of the other characters in the daydream" (174). Jameson offers here a Marxist turn on the Lacanian notion that desire constitutes the subject, for the wish-fulfilling text imagines opportunities for the inhabitant of late capitalist society to evade the material conditions of

²⁶¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981). Hereafter cited parenthetically.

reality through imagining an alternative social world and subjective state of being. Thus, narrative realism—and the novel in particular—produces a desiring bourgeois self, a mode of consciousness that resolves its alienation under illusory conditions of its own making.

For Jameson, this complex construction of the subject also yields a “closed monad,” an indivisible entity governed by privatized laws of its own psyche. The “monadized subject” is at once alienated from society and in search of a home within it. In the “life world” of the novel, then, this tension between estrangement and the quest for personalized property—a home of one’s own—transfigures the Lacanian subject into an agonizing self who navigates the uncertain conditions of capitalist society. The image of bourgeois desire, a “Utopia of the household,” is the “‘still point’ around which the disorder and urgency of a properly novelistic time will turn” (157). That is to say, within Jameson’s schema, the novel produces an atomized or autonomous self who is displaced within the ruins created by modern capitalist society. That alienated individual searches for a domesticized “still point,” some subjective state or private property that constitutes the *telos* of the subject’s quest. Indeed, as Percy puts it in a later book of essays, the “Self” is “the Ghost which Haunts the Cosmos.”²⁶² The Utopian search of this displaced individual surfaces in *The Moviegoer*, in particular, through Binx’s quest for a peculiar possession: his own consciousness authenticated through its independence from external authorities. Binx is at once an exile from and a pilgrim in search of self-possession.

In fact, the view of subjectivity underlying *The Moviegoer* shares several features of the desiring bourgeois self that Jameson identifies in Balzac’s realism and the subsequent tradition of the novel. For one, while Percy’s existentialist individual is not strictly “monadized,” the diagnostic aims of his novel nonetheless try to revive the individual’s autonomous self-

²⁶² Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Picador, 1983), 1. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

production. The “diagnosis” of Binx’s “problem” thus presupposes a normative ideal: if the commodity system or the edifice of the state were only surpassed, then the knowing subject would be capable of self-governance and control over its experience. This normative ideal also underwrites Tom More’s lapsometer, whose name recalls a “lapse, or fall” of the self that the tool attempts to measure (205). This lapsarian metaphysics is indebted to Christian theology, which, much like Binx’s quest for sovereignty, presupposes an original state of grace or natural perfection—i.e., like in the garden of Eden—that offers a normative ideal to which the self longs to return. This state of sovereignty, in other words, is the utopian state underpinning Percy’s explorations of characters whose various quests are repeatedly frustrated.

Percy’s work re-stylizes other important features of the desiring bourgeois self that haunts realism and the tradition of the novel. *The Moviegoer*, in particular, poses a conflict between an alienated consciousness and a social order in crisis (“the very century of merde”), such that self-governing individuality fills the vacuum created by a fragmented world. This view of the self not only positions consciousness (as opposed to, for example, historical-material conditions) at the foundations of the real and the authentic. Percy also reinstates a form of the self that inhabits an as-yet unrealized space of resolution amidst uncertain socio-economic conditions. That is to say, the “life world” of Percy’s novel imagines a place where the pilgrim resolves her estrangement under conditions of her own making. Binx’s quest for existential “sovereignty” admittedly purports to resolve the anxiety that derives from the uncertain conditions of the national capitalist economy. But insofar as Percy invests the novel with the possibilities of reviving the lost “sovereignty” of the reader, *The Moviegoer* reproduces the “solution” of a wish-fulfillment narrative, finding that resolution not in the material order of society but in individual subjectivity.

Yet the form of selfhood promulgated in *The Moviegoer* is not merely a palimpsest of Jameson's desiring subject produced with the birth of modern capitalism. In its anxieties regarding mediating authorities and its normative vision of the self as sovereign over experience, Percy's novel also brings definition to the experience of a new configuration of capitalist society within postwar America. Namely, *The Moviegoer* imagines the individual and the alienating effects of state mediation in such a way that at once marks and helps precipitate the disintegration of the New Deal era. That is to say, Percy's novel is what Raymond Williams calls a novelistic "confirmation" of "a pressing and varied experience which was not yet history," an instance among other intellectual and cultural sensibilities that provide existential terms for the decades-long shift toward neoliberalism. Writing about the long *annus mirabilis* of the English novel between 1847 and 1848, Williams explains that novels published by Dickens, the Brontë sisters, and other writers "defin[ed] society, rather than merely reflecting it" at a moment when that public space was in crisis.²⁶³ For Williams, these novels did not merely evince societal conditions but *clarified* and *circulated* a particular understanding of collective experience, thus shaping a new social order emerging in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, Chartism, and growing individual and national debt.²⁶⁴ However, if Dickens and others shape what Williams calls "the crisis of the knowable community," *The Moviegoer* inverts that crisis by giving substance and legitimacy to one among many competing forms of individualism in postwar American society.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 11.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 12, 14.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

Percy's scattered political writings and interviews also consider the felt crises of his historical moment regarding the authentic life of the self and the alienating effects of the state. He often expresses doubts regarding state welfare programs and federal methods for enacting desegregation, for example, because he believed that these government interventions were poorly executed and generative of unforeseen economic and social consequences. Although he supported the Civil Rights Movement, Percy's philosophical sensibilities were seemingly at odds with his political commitments—a tension that often prompted him to write about the landscape of American politics from a distance. Indeed, as Percy's friend Ben Toledano explains, "Walker is interested in politics—from a hundred miles away."²⁶⁶ Percy was well-informed about American and international politics, but he rarely campaigned for any defined set of political goals. As his friend and priest James Boulware recalls, "My first encounter with [Percy] was around the work for civil rights. [...] I think he was a little hesitant when it got down to being involved in a demonstration. He would do things quietly, but he did not want to get overtly involved in a lot of stuff."²⁶⁷ This nominal support but reticence to get involved in political activism surfaces in an 1957 essay, where Percy holds up Martin Luther King, Jr., as a paragon of "wise and successful" leadership, even as he asserts that the "worst fate that could overtake the struggle against segregation would be its capture by a political orthodoxy of the left."²⁶⁸ Percy explains that he is opposed to "militant liberalism," which enforces reform rather than

²⁶⁶ Qtd. in Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, 443.

²⁶⁷ Interview with James Boulware, *Walker Percy Remembered: A Portrait in the Words of Those Who Knew Him*, ed. David Horace Harwell (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 23.

²⁶⁸ Walker Percy, "A Southern View," *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Picador, 2000), 93.

encourages it.²⁶⁹ Indeed, Percy's response to the Civil Rights Movement is emblematic of his larger political sensibilities, which evince fears of "growing federal power and federal money."²⁷⁰ For example, Percy maintains that the "Northern politicians" who "support any and every proposal of federal intervention" are well intentioned but still introduce inadvertent resentment and other ills through their heavy-handed attempts to impose social reform.

In contrast to "militant liberalism," Percy envisions progressive reform on the "race question" from within society, rather than imposed by impersonal federal authority. He explains that rapid "social changes are taking place which can only have the effect of radically altering the character of the problem, if not solving it." Elaborating upon this rejection of state intervention and reliance upon a changing social landscape, Percy offers two social conditions that will alter, if not solve, the "dilemma of the Negro": first, "the ongoing emigration of the Negro from the South," which will disperse the crisis beyond one region of the nation. Second, the South will accommodate "its dwindling Negro population as it moves from second- to first-class citizenship, a pattern which has nothing to do with the harsh words and extremist laws, which is imperfect but bids fair to be effective." Percy explains this second societal change more directly: "Racial injustice is bad business."²⁷¹ Percy maintains, in other words, that federal intervention in the struggles for desegregation is both maladroit and preemptively pointless, for socio-economic conditions—along with the wise work of individual leaders—are capable of achieving the reform that regulation aims to institute.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Walker Percy, "The Southern Moderate," *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Picador, 2000), 94.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 96.

Percy's view of the Civil Rights Movement and federal intervention resonate with his larger anxieties regarding the politics of the New Deal era. Tolson captures the tensions of the author's political affiliations when explaining Percy's brand of "liberalism":

In the early 1950s, as later, Percy was reluctant to label himself politically. Despite his aversion to FDR, he maintained that he always voted for Democrats in presidential elections, but he was never particularly partisan in his political thinking. [...] During the 1950s and 1960s, however, he did seem to find a position on the political continuum—that of a moderate liberal, concerned domestically with civil rights and greater social justice, and internationally with the containment of communism.²⁷²

Percy's attraction to Democratic politics had little to do with the party's *economic* policies or what he understood to be its bungling relief and welfare programs; rather, according to Boulware and Tolson, Percy's liberalism was a consequence of his conversion to a brand of Catholicism that promoted *social* equality. "Percy made peace with liberals, and liberalism," Tolson explains, "because doing so seemed the only way to work for a political solution to the problem [of civil rights]."²⁷³ This "peace" with the Democratic Party suggests that Percy was hedging his bets regarding desegregation: while Republicans would oppose reform, the Democrats would only mishandle it. Nonetheless, Tolson argues that Percy felt there were "pernicious effects of [the Democrats'] ill-conceived welfare projects," and, as his friend Shelby Foote says, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was Percy's lifelong "political bugbear."²⁷⁴

Percy's liberalism thus translates into support for the Democratic Party only as a pragmatic commitment to social equality, but his political sensibilities were nonetheless rife with internal conflicts and anxieties regarding the role of federal intervention in the everyday lives of

²⁷² Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, 250.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 345.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 444, 180.

individuals. Percy cites significant problems with New Deal relief programs and their effects upon farming communities. For example, revitalizing the farming industry of rural America comprised one of the cornerstones of the New Deal relief programs. The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 enabled the federal government to pay subsidies to farmers who reduced their output, thus decreasing the supply of crops and—by virtue of staving off a flooded market—regulating food prices to the benefit of consumers and farmers alike. Such programs simultaneously distributed monetary relief to rural communities while also increasing the value of the goods they provided. Consequently, by 1935 the average income of farmers in the South had almost doubled.

Percy criticizes this New Deal program of central economic planning in his 1965 essay “Mississippi: The Fallen Paradise.” Percy argues that the so-called farming parity of the New Deal agricultural plank misfires, for its outcomes marginalize some groups at the expense of others, creating unforeseen consequences and merely reshuffling the social ills that Roosevelt’s brand of liberalism purported to alleviate. While Percy is primarily concerned in the essay with providing an account of the particularly violent race relations of postwar and Civil Rights-era Mississippi, he suggests that state intervention in the farming economies was one factor contributing to the scale and intensity of Mississippi’s race-related violence. Percy argues, “Mississippi desperately needed the New Deal and profited enormously from it. Indeed, the Roosevelt farm program succeeded too well. Planters who were going broke on ten-cent cotton voted for Roosevelt, took federal money, got rich, lived to hate Kennedy and Johnson and vote for Goldwater—while still taking federal money.”²⁷⁵ Percy explains that the New Deal enabled poor farmers to construct a populist coalition that later employed its wealth and influence in

²⁷⁵ Rpt. in Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Picador, 2000), 46.

opposing desegregation and economic reform. Such results appear as tokens of the larger inability of state intervention to achieve its desired ends, for these outcomes effectively undermined the work of the Civil Rights Section of Roosevelt's Justice Department. Percy suggests, in other words, that the imposition of federal authority results in tragic unforeseen consequences, thus undermining its own aspirations to foster a social arena of equity through economic planning.

Percy's anxieties signal one form of the growing opposition toward New Deal liberalism, despite the fact that his political commitments would lead him to criticize the resurgence of a new form of conservatism that had become institutionalized by the end of his life. In 1987, for example, he chastised his friend Dick Faust for the latter's unquestioning support of President Reagan: "Why do [you] feel obliged to make out Ron Reagan as perfect?" he wrote Faust in a letter. "Nobody has been perfect since Hitler and Stalin. I find it more useful to think of conservatives as ordinary fucked-up humans with perhaps a good idea or two, and of liberals as perhaps even more fucked-up and hardly an idea beyond good intentions."²⁷⁶ Even if Percy's caustic dichotomy between "good intentions" and "a good idea or two" led him to affiliate with the "even more fucked-up" liberals, he nonetheless felt some sympathy with the new brand of conservative Republicans that had come to power in the 1980s. Boulware explains that Percy "admired Reagan's simplification, Reagan's communication of what we all should hold to." Yet even when he accepted a dinner invitation from Reagan in 1987, Percy still remained distant from the latest resurgence of conservatives because of his "serious doubts" about their

²⁷⁶ Letter from Walker Percy to Richard Faust, 14 August 1987. Qtd. in Patrick H. Samway, *Walker Percy: A Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 395.

intentions.²⁷⁷ He was attracted simultaneously to a “simplification” of federal regulations *and* the social vision of Presidents Johnson and Kennedy; a voluntary desegregation of the South *and* the enforcement of civil rights legislation; the freedom of the individual *and* a set of ideals that resolve by fiat the “shit” surrounding the self. Percy felt attracted, in other words, to two competing forms of political thinking: a liberal social arena of “sovereign knowers” and a liberalized economic arena governed by virtuous—“what we all should hold to”—behavior. Boulware observes these tensions and explains Percy’s reasons for his political ambivalence through his conservative brand of Catholicism. Explaining the paradox of Percy’s religious and political commitments, Boulware says simply, “[Walker] kind of wanted that code.”²⁷⁸

Boulware’s characterization of the tensions underlying Percy’s commitments recalls the persistent but ultimately failed pursuit of a “code” by Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, the titular narrator of Percy’s *Lancelot* (1977). A former “liberal” NAACP lawyer and scion of a distinguished Southern family, Lancelot narrates his intermittent recollections for how he has come to be confined to a mental hospital. The narration is stylized as a series of confessions to a silent second party, a priest-psychologist named Harry, who is also a former college friend of the narrator. Lancelot is confined to a cell in the Institute for Aberrant Behavior because, he slowly allows himself to remember, he went temporarily insane after his mansion, Belle Isle, burned to the ground, killing his wife, Margot, along with three members of a movie crew making a film at the estate. While the therapists at the Institute believe that Lancelot merely finds Belle Isle burning and is burned trying to rescue his wife, Lancelot confesses that he is the architect of the catastrophe. The seeds to destroy Belle Isle along with Margot are planted when Lancelot

²⁷⁷ Interview with James Boulware, *Walker Percy Remembered*, 23.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

inadvertently discovers that his youngest daughter, Siobhan, is not his biological offspring. With some investigative work, Lancelot discovers that his wife has sustained a long-term affair with an actor, Merlin, and later with Janos Jacoby, the director of the film being made at Belle Isle. Merlin, he believes, is the biological father of Siobhan. Lancelot's disgust with Margot's affair and the sexual habits of the film crew reaches a fever pitch when his sixteen-year-old daughter, Lucy, becomes the lover of Troy Dana, a famous handsome actor, and his girlfriend, Raine Robinette. Immediately after discovering his daughter's participation in a "rough swastikaed triangle" of sexual acts, Lancelot resolves to take revenge. He makes a "shopping list" of items needed to trap natural gas within his home, and he thus designs a scheme to create a devastating explosion while Margot, Troy, Raine, and Jacoby are in his home.²⁷⁹

The violence and destruction reaped by Lancelot's disenchantment and intermittent madness prompts him to doubt humanity's capacity for love. For example, in a moment of anger and disillusionment, Lancelot tells the priest-psychologist, "the monstrous truth lying at the very center of life" is that "[women's] happiness and the meaning of life itself is to be assaulted by a man" (222). Lancelot insists that "rape" is the "omega point of evolution," for modern civilization is still governed by sexual foundations—indeed, all human behavior derives from sexuality. Turning on a famous phrase from Pascal, Lancelot concludes, "man is [...] a thinking reed and a walking genital." Women, on the other hand, are either passively subject to this sexual logic or self-deluded about the other sex's motivations. Those women who try to "escape" this social order are "like a hen wanting to be a hawk" (223). Such declarations construe human beings according to one of two categories—the violent and the violated—and Lancelot thus suggests that sexual assault is the inescapable horizon for those competing forms of existence.

²⁷⁹ Walker Percy, *Lancelot* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1977), 192, 193. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Yet Lancelot also undermines his own beliefs about the “omega point” of human life, which is seen most clearly in his attempts to have an “innocent” relationship to the patient in the cell adjacent to his own. This patient, Anna, is the victim of a violent gang rape and refuses to eat or speak since the assault. However, Lancelot slowly draws Anna out of her silence through kindness and, significantly, his attempts to communicate with her through a “code,” a system of taps upon the shared wall of their adjoining cells. This “code” is simple: each tap corresponds to a letter in the alphabet: “One knock = A, two = B, and so on.” He admits that introducing this “code” is not “as easy as you might think,” especially to a silent subject who does not necessarily reciprocate the desire for communication (34). But Lancelot persists in establishing this code because, he enigmatically explains, Anna “may be a prototype of the New Woman. It is no longer possible to ‘fall in love.’ But in the future and with the New Woman it will be” (35). Lancelot explains that he has developed a “sexual theory of history,” beginning with a “Romantic” period, in which people “fell in love,” followed by a “sexual period” of indiscriminate mores, and finally a “catastrophe of some sort” that inaugurates a “new age” populated by “new” men and women (35-36).

The larger significance of Lancelot’s desire to disseminate a “code” becomes clearer when he later elaborates upon his theory about the “new age” and the “New Woman.” Suggesting the extent to which his expectations are dislodged from reality, Lancelot says that he intends to marry Anna. Then, explaining his confused rationale, Lancelot says,

She is the first woman of the new order. For she has, so to speak, endured the worst of the age and survived it, undergone the ultimate violation and come out of it not only intact but somehow purged, innocent. Who else might the new Virgin be but a gang-raped social worker? I do not joke. Her ordeal has made her like a ten-year-old. (159)

Lancelot's idealization of Anna comes to naught—she later denies his marriage proposal—but even his tortured understanding of her as a “new Virgin” suggests that his harsher assertions about the sexual assault latent within all human behavior is tempered by his hope for an “innocent” humanity. The implication of Lancelot's claim is that Anna, unlike most self-deluded women, has encountered the violence underpinning the sexual age. Being the victim of the “omega point” of civilization, she is seemingly able to reject it. Catastrophe enables Anna to see society's rampant faults and fundamental violence, and so she retreats into a state of innocence.

Anna's return to a “ten-year-old” virginal state, as an unraveling of her adult place in society, represents Lancelot's larger conviction that catastrophe will undo civilization itself, thus forcing humanity—or, at least, those who survive the apocalypse—to enter a new mode of existence. Lancelot receives this apocalyptic vision through frequent dreams about a “future life” (36, 220). In one permutation of this dream, Lancelot imagines a “young man” standing “in a mountain pass above the Shenandoah Valley. A rifle is slung across his back.” The man inhabits a world of “great dying cities,” collapsing after an unidentified crisis, and the figure is thus forced to live as an isolated wanderer. “He is waiting and watching for something,” Lancelot explains. “What? A sign? Who, what is he? WASP Virginian? New England Irish? Louisiana Creole? Jew? Black? Where does he live? It is impossible to say” (221). The “young man” of this apocalyptic new age emerges after “Washington, the country, [has gone] down the drain” (220). His attentiveness—“waiting and watching for something” (221)—replaces the passivity of the former age: “The people have lost [the country] to the politicians, bureaucrats, drunk Congressmen, lying Presidents, White House preachers, C.I.A., F.B.I., Mafia, Pentagon, pornographers [...]” (220). The new man cannot rely upon societal structures for his significance or welfare, and indeed the social categories of the former age do not apply to him—it is

“impossible to say” the race or class or origin of Lancelot’s man of the future. The “impossibility” of these categories derive from the fact that civilization has collapsed—there is no more New England, no more South, no more races—and, as such, the apocalypse forces him to become an individual. The self in reliance upon itself is the only form of life available to the “young man” living after the collapse of civilization.

Lancelot’s man of the future, much like the “New Woman,” returns to a state of innocence. But, unlike in his descriptions of Anna, Lancelot specifically notes that the “new age” for men will allow them to be independent from politics. Washington having fallen, parties likewise fall away, and only individuals remain. (Women, it seems, are not part of Lancelot’s political schema in either the pre- or post-apocalyptic ages.) The implication of Lancelot’s claim is that partisan politics is a function of the disease infecting the present age. For example, in an earlier permutation of Lancelot’s apocalyptic dream, he imagines a revolution in which there will be no “speeches, rallies, political parties. There will be no need of such things. One man will act. Another man will act,” initiating a sequence of independent action by atomized individuals (157). This new form of existence will allow men to understand one another as “gentlemen used to know each other,” rather than as members of a party or movement. Lancelot qualifies his ideal of the “gentleman,” explaining,

I’m not talking about social classes. I’m talking about something held in common by men, Gentile, Jew, Greek, Roman, slave, freeman, black, white, and so recognized between them: a stern code, a gentleness toward women and an intolerance of swinishness, a counsel kept, and above all a readiness to act, and act alone if necessary—there’s the essential ingredient—because as of this moment not one in 200 million Americans is ready to act from perfect sobriety and freedom. If one man is free to act alone, you don’t need a society. (157)

To Lancelot’s earlier presentation of the “New Woman” who recuperates her virginity as a result of catastrophe, he adds that she will receive “gentleness” from men. Thus, if the new woman

regains her innocence in the apocalypse, men recuperate their status as gentlemen who voluntarily adhere to a “code.” The new gentleman is able to subvert or perhaps circumvent the sexual violence that is the “omega point” of human civilization, although Lancelot seems conflicted even on this point (222). Still, the form of life imagined in his theory of the new gentleman centers on the idea of “a counsel kept,” a shared mode of life that at once establishes an ideal ethic even as it first and foremost values self-possession. The “essential ingredient” of the new gentleman is that he is willing to “act alone.” No Americans in the present age live according to this code, Lancelot decries, because they refuse to act from “perfect sobriety and freedom.” Instead, he suggests they retreat into absurd sexuality and political dependencies.

For Lancelot, then, the “code” refers to an ideal mode of being. “You have your Sacred Heart,” he tells the therapist-priest. “We have Lee” (157). Even as Catholics look to the traditional image of the heart of Christ as an ideal of compassion, the new gentleman looks to paragons of the former age who acted singularly. Lancelot abstracts the Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s status as “gentleman” from the political and historical contexts of his actions, focusing instead upon an idealized understanding of Lee’s willingness to “act alone,” to live with “perfect sobriety and freedom” (157). Lancelot thus identifies the code not so much with specific beliefs, political positions, or religious dogma as with a mode of being shared by exemplary figures. Indeed, the notion that this code is a “counsel kept” explains why Lancelot uses the same term to describe the system of communication that he earlier proposes to Anna. Much like the apocalyptic ideal for the new gentleman, the earlier simplistic code is “something held in common,” a communicative order (157). Lancelot hopes, in other words, to establish a shared understanding of the world with Anna from the bottom up, as it were, creating a simplistic language of taps and knocks. He imagines constructing a new linguistic plane to communicate

with Anna because, by implication, the conventional language they used before their respective catastrophes does not suffice. On the one hand, then, Lancelot's "code" is a further permutation of Percy's earlier figure of the "sovereign knower": the new gentleman is the individual who in full self-possession of him or herself acts singularly. Yet, on the other hand, Lancelot's "code" inflects the ideal of sovereignty through a desire for a shared communicative order which cultivates understanding ("a counsel kept") and even intimacy (e.g., the desire to marry Anna) among its adherents. The "code" therefore represents a communal permutation of Percy's recurring interest in the sovereignty of the self.

However, despite the appeal of the "code" to Lancelot, this route for resolving his anxieties about the "present age" are not without its problems and ambiguities. In particular, Lancelot's anxieties about conformity and, paradoxically, the difficulties of shared life frustrate the aspirations of intimacy underlying his conception of the "code." Lancelot explains, for example, that his encounter with catastrophe has taught him that "the only way to avoid imitation is to ask a question and the only way to establish a code is repetition" (34-35). Lancelot's statement evinces the paradox that ultimately unravels his search for a shared communicative order: that is to say, the "code" and its constitutive mechanisms of "repetition" are themselves forms of "imitation," the hazard that demands asking questions. This tension between Lancelot's skepticism toward imitation and his valorization of a shared form of life is further complicated by his own vacillations between uncertainty and conviction. As he puts it when faced with the possibility that Siobhan is not his biological daughter, "One has to know for sure before doing anything" (43). Sober action is the child of conviction, he implies, and so one either has to take the word of another or sort out the truth for one's self (156). That standard of absolute certainty chips away at Lancelot's confidence in a shared code, for even his "conviction not [to] tolerate

this age” is a close cousin of the certainty about Margot’s infidelity that precipitates his scheme to destroy Belle Isle along with its visitors (156). In other words, Lancelot suspects that his convictions often form the basis of destruction, not just new life. Likewise, skepticism—the demand for certainty, the questioning of imitation—nurtures Lancelot’s suspicion that an individual may *not* act singularly while also enjoying intimacy with others. For example, explaining his hopes to “make a new life, an absolutely new beginning,” Lancelot muses,

Begin with a burrow, a small clean well-swept place such as this [cell], with one tiny window on the world and another creature in the next room. That is all you need. In fact, that is all you can stand. Add more creatures, more world, books, talk, TV, news—and we’ll all be as crazy as we were before. (108)

Lancelot’s “new life” begins with isolation, a space where the self is not crowded other “creatures” and things. Indeed, “all you need” in terms of shared life is “another creature in the next room.” The intimacy of Lancelot’s “new beginning” occurs at a remove, as if self-possession demands that the individual remain set apart within his or her own enclosed cell. Shared space becomes partitioned space, for any greater intimacy with other “creatures” precipitates “craziness.”

Therefore, even as Lancelot desires a shared code that facilitates mutual understanding among its adherents, his figure of the new gentleman is nonetheless atomized, cordoned off from others within an oubliette of skepticism, irony, and self-sufficiency. The communal aspirations of Lancelot’s code are never fully established because of his simultaneous, paradoxical desire to retain the “freedom to act on my conviction.” Lancelot desires intimacy with Anna and to be recognized as a gentleman like General Robert E. Lee, while also remaining within the silo of his own sovereignty. The result of these conflicting aspirations underwriting Lancelot’s quest for a code is that he does not conquer alienation and is rejected by Anna, who tells him to “shove off” (252). Lancelot consequently slips further into isolation because of the failure of his attempts to

establish a communicative order, vowing to “start a new world singlehandedly or with those like me who will not tolerate [the present age]” (255-56). Indeed, whether others “like” Lancelot join him, he insists that he will act alone to “destroy” the corrupt world he inhabits (255). As he puts it, “I am my own instrument,” for Lancelot concludes that he does not need others to institute a “new “order” (256). He hopes Anna will change her mind or that other mavericks will join him (257). Yet Lancelot nonetheless resolves to usher in a new world regardless of whether others keep counsel with him.

Much like Lancelot’s own vacillations, Percy provides scope for validating Lancelot’s suspicions about the present age and his apocalyptic figure who is “waiting and watching for something” (221), but also Percy raises doubts about the isolation that results from Lancelot’s final conviction to “start a new world singlehandedly” (255-56). These doubts surface when Lancelot explains Anna’s rebuff of his marriage proposition. Lancelot proposes that, after marrying and fleeing to the hills of Virginia, they might become “the new Adam and Eve of the new world” (251). However, Anna rejects Lancelot’s construal of her sexual trauma as a catastrophe that somehow purifies her. “Are you suggesting,” she says, enraged, “that I, myself, me, my person, can be violated by a *man*? You goddamn men. Don’t you know that there are more important things in this world? Next you’ll be telling me that despite myself I liked it” (251). Anna rejects Lancelot’s implication that rape is inherent to the relationship between men and women and that, as such, the latter’s existential worth is somehow tied up in being violated. Intuiting such implications in Lancelot’s proposal, Anna retorts that her “person” is *not* predicated upon—and therefore cannot be violated by—a man. If her very self could be violated by the other sex, the implication is that Lancelot’s sexual theory—as he earlier puts it, that “[women’s] happiness and the meaning of life itself is to be assaulted by a man” (222)—would

be correct. But Anna responds instead by dismissing the notion that her self—its value and wellbeing—is dependent upon the actions of men, much less their sexual appetites.

Lancelot, at first chastened, admits that there “is something to what she says,” although he soon reverts back to his theory of sexuality. Despite her protestations, he even hopes that Anna, along with other women, “will admit the truth, will refuse to accept it, and then they will be my best recruits” (252). While still nurturing fantasies about the male-dominated “truth” governing the lives of women, Anna’s rebuff nonetheless seems to make Lancelot less beholden to his theory of sexual violence than to his conviction about instituting a new world through singular action. Indeed, the scope that Percy provides for being suspicious of Lancelot’s theories—that is, Anna’s repudiation of the idea that the “person” of a woman is predicated upon the actions of a man—only reinforces another dimension of Lancelot’s conflicting aspirations. In particular, the fact that Lancelot admits there is “something to what she says” prompts Lancelot merely to expand his apocalyptic figure of self-sufficiency to include women. The “something” of Anna’s rebuff that Lancelot suggests is correct is the notion that the “person,” the selfhood, of a woman cannot be violated by a man, for this idea fits squarely within Lancelot’s image of the “new life” predicated upon the individual enclosed within her own uncrowded cell—a self that is sufficient unto itself (108). In other words, while there is scope in the novel to doubt Lancelot’s theory of sexual violence, the grounds that Percy provides for doing so depend upon Lancelot’s alternative notion of a self that has settled into the cul-de-sac of its own self-possession.

This failure to establish “something held in common” in *Lancelot*—the inability of the code to cultivate understanding, much less love, between Anna and Lancelot—signals the foundering of the communal permutation of Percy’s “sovereign knower.” The different routes for resolving individual alienation in Percy’s work find their center of gravity in this ideal of

sovereignty. Indeed, that philosophical crisis of an estranged self, which is adrift in an incalculable society and perpetually searching for a secure framework for self-realization, is the centerpiece of the crisis that Percy identifies with postwar society. According to the author's social imaginary, New Deal liberalism—along with mass media society—is an estranging interposition. Yet Percy's work suggests that a more substantial or authentic form of experience lies beyond the mediating forces of impersonal authorities. Indeed, this nuanced set of tensions and anxieties resides at the heart of *The Moviegoer*, despite the fact that national politics surfaces in much subtler ways than in the author's later works. As Percy explains in his comparison of *The Moviegoer* and “the science of pathology” during his acceptance speech for the National Book Award: “the pathology in this case had to do with the loss of individuality and the loss of identity at the very time when words like the ‘dignity of the individual’ and ‘self-realization’ are being heard more frequently than ever.”²⁸⁰ If only on this account, *The Moviegoer* affirms the political sensibilities of Aunt Emily, who asserts, “Oh I am aware that we hear a great many flattering things nowadays about your great common man—you know, it has always been revealing to me that he is perfectly content so to be called, because that is exactly what he is: the common man and when I say common I mean common as hell” (223). For Aunt Emily, collectivist philosophies take away the dignity of the individual, the self's ability to be a unique legislator of its own existence. Furthermore, Aunt Emily maintains that the consequences of a social order organized around the “common man” are quite dire: “Our national character stinks to high heaven. But we are kinder than ever” (223). Aunt Emily's irony is that the kindness and consensus characterizing the postwar “national character” is a veneer that covers up social decay. Indeed, her denunciation alludes to Binx's own preoccupation with the malaise, concurring with

²⁸⁰ Walker Percy, “Accepting the National Book Award for *The Moviegoer*,” 246.

her nephew that the stench of popular American discourses regarding programmatic self-realization is yet another form of alienation. Thus, even as New Deal Democrats traded extensively on the terms of “the dignity of man” to gain political capital, it is only one more instance of the *angst* that besets Binx: the social and political frameworks for his experience are disputed, isolating, and dubious at best.

While Percy pursues different routes for the alienated self to search for a more authentic form of experience, his work nonetheless centers upon the figure of the “sovereign wanderer.” This figure recovers some form of authenticity by preserving the sovereignty of its own roving consciousness, at least until a collective framework—perhaps, for Percy, even a new religious order—may be realized. Percy’s nostalgia for a communal past and his longing for a shared “code” or order of shared understanding is countervailed by the self-possession of the pilgrim awaiting the arrival of the new age. This central tension surfaces in Binx’s odd agreement with his theosophist Aunt Edna, who asserts that Bolling “had been a Jew in a previous incarnation.” Binx agrees, explaining, “it is true that I am Jewish by instinct. We share the same exile” (89). Binx construes his social and existential crisis after the fashion of the Jewish Diaspora, where Zion is no longer inhabitable but nonetheless resides in the heart and mind of the exile. Indeed, what is lost for Binx is his dignity as an individual self, his status as a “sovereign wayfarer” in Martin Luschei’s turn on Percy’s own phrase.²⁸¹ Much like the existential crisis facing human beings in Sartre’s philosophy, Binx is adrift and without a clear or present metaphysic for making meaning of his life. What is left in the ruins of this modern situation is the burden of existential choice placed upon the individual, unique and alone in the world. While Binx’s exile suggests an Edenic (or Zionistic) past, that prior communal state has been lost. Thus, as Sartre

²⁸¹ Martin Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy’s Diagnosis of the Malaise* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972).

might put it, Binx's crisis of experience "remind[s] man that there is no legislator but himself" (53). Even if Bolling hunts for other epistemological and existential grounds, he finds that independent self-realization is the avenue for his search. Indeed, the longing for communal life that haunts Percy is indicative of a paradox that comes to preoccupy both European existentialism and its American variety in the postwar moment: the relationship between individual consciousness and the problem of intersubjectivity. Percy navigates this tension in ways that mark one variation upon the existentialist themes of authenticity and choice that is especially prominent in the American reception of existentialism.

Intersubjectivity, Consciousness, and the Varieties of American Existentialism

Readers of Percy's essays and academic articles may object that my characterization of the various cul-de-sacs created by his pursuit of sovereignty misrepresents the author. In this view, rather than unmediated consciousness, Percy instead believes (following the existentialist Gabriel Marcel) that an "intersubjective milieu" lies at the base of reality and is thus the object under consideration in Binx's search.²⁸² Indeed, in essays such as "The Delta Factor" (1975), Percy rejects the notion that subjectivity is self-enclosed or autonomous from other human beings. He likewise rejects the Kantian distinction between the unknowable noumenon (a thing-in-itself) and the phenomenal attributes that are intelligible to individual consciousness, for he maintains that such distinctions "let the world slip away."²⁸³ Percy instead argues that the

²⁸² Walker Percy, "Symbol, Consciousness, and Intersubjectivity," *The Journal of Philosophy* 55.15 (July 1958): 640. Percy reprinted the essay in *The Message in the Bottle*, but I cite here the earlier version because of its proximity to the publication of *The Moviegoer*.

²⁸³ Walker Percy, "The Delta Factor," in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Picador, [1975] 2000), 33.

triangulation between the individual subject, the “real” object in the world, and the medium of language comprises “the ultimate and elemental unit not only of language but of the very condition of the awakening of human intelligence and consciousness.”²⁸⁴ Human beings “break through into the daylight of language” as children, or as existentialists, but they do so because the public phenomenon of language makes it possible.²⁸⁵

Binx’s anxieties about consciousness are in fact made more complex by Percy’s debt to Marcel’s notion of intersubjectivity, as well as Sartre’s fraught invocation of the idea in “Existentialism is a Humanism.” What’s more, Percy’s interest in semiotics and the philosophy of language throughout his essays presupposes a shared or public field of consciousness. Percy’s self-avowed debt to European existentialism began in the 1940s after experiencing a nearly fatal bout of tuberculosis. According to Patrick Samway, Percy first encountered existentialism through Sartre’s novel, *Nausea* (1938), although he later “made a transition [...] from Sartre to Marcel.”²⁸⁶ Critics such as Mary Deems Howland have also emphasized the influence of Gabriel Marcel’s Catholic existentialism upon Percy.²⁸⁷ But Tolson argues that Percy’s novels bear the imprint of Kierkegaard’s philosophy most prominently, even to the point that almost all of his protagonists imitate “the Kierkegaardian progression from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 40. Percy has been heavily influenced on this point by Charles Sanders Peirce’s notion that the sign is an irreducible triadic relationship. Whether Percy correctly or fully understood Peirce, who himself was often obscure on “thirdness,” is debatable.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 45.

²⁸⁶ Patrick Samway, “Grappling with the Philosophy and Theology of Walker Percy,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 17.3 (Summer 1999): 37.

²⁸⁷ Mary Deems Howland, *The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel’s Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy’s Novels* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1990).

and then on to the religious stage—or at least to the brink of this last stage.”²⁸⁸ However, few scholars have fully appraised Sartre as a resource for Percy’s novels, perhaps because the former’s atheism is thought to be antithetical to the metaphysical contours of the latter’s “search.” Yet Percy argues that Sartre’s “atheism is ‘religious’ in the sense [...] that the novelist betrays a passionate conviction about man’s nature, the world, and man’s obligation in the world” (“Notes for a Novel about the End of the World” 103). While Percy differs from Sartre in terms of his religious “affiliation,” he shares the French philosophers concern to explore narratively the “problem of the subject” (111). The existentialist sensibilities that Percy borrows and restylizes from Sartre center on the idea of an awakening consciousness, while also diagnosing the alienation caused by intercessory forces and bad faith. In fact, as Percy claims during his interview with Bradley R. Dewey, “Sartre’s version of existentialism [is] peculiarly suited to novel writing,” and Percy felt that *Nausea* was the prevailing novel for “translating a philosophy to art, to fiction. That was the first time I had ever seen it done.”²⁸⁹ The point is that the influence of Sartre’s philosophy—and European existentialism more broadly—upon Percy’s so-called post-Southern fiction is not a question of imitation so much as a variation upon a theme. From Sartre, Percy takes the existentialist sensibilities about consciousness and authenticity, repurposing them to respond to the felt exigencies of his historical moment.

For example, while Percy restylizes Sartre’s central image of the subject awakening to itself, he also continues Sartre’s vexed attempts to reconcile that existentialist image of the subject with the competing aspiration to base a theory of consciousness upon the idea of intersubjectivity. In his famous 1946 lecture, “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” Sartre offers an

²⁸⁸ Jay Tolson, “The Education of Walker Percy,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 8.2 (Spring 1984): 165.

²⁸⁹ Dewey, “Walker Percy Talks about Kierkegaard,” 296.

account of the subject that speaks to the problem of whether the self-in-existential-crisis actually brings in “bourgeois subjectivity” through the back door. That is to say, Sartre responds to the Marxist charge that his existentialism is tailored to individual capitalist society at “the very moment in which man fully comprehends his isolation” (18). According to Sartre’s detractors, understanding one’s self as an autonomous, self-governing individual actually renders the existentialist “incapable of re-establishing solidarity with those who exist outside of the self, and who are inaccessible to us through the *cogito*” (18). Sartre responds to these allegations by clarifying why “our point of departure is, indeed, the subjectivity of the individual” (40). He insists that his philosophical starting point, which in the mid-1940s runs counter to the historical materialism of the Marxist tradition, is “not because we are bourgeois, but because we seek to base our doctrine on truth, not on comforting theories full of hope but without any real foundation” (40). Sartre’s reference to “comforting theories full of hope” seems in the context of the essay to refer to dialectical history. In Marx’s materialist inversion of Hegel’s dialectic, history is structured according to the “antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes.”²⁹⁰ Yet this dialectical struggle also entails a kind of Utopian future for Marx and Engels, for a class-less and property-less society becomes the inevitable outcome of dialectical materialism. Furthermore, within this materialist tradition of thought, the production of history resides *not* in individual consciousness but in the material conditions of a historical world.

For Sartre, in contrast, the Marxist dialectic is, “at the outset, a theory that suppresses the truth, for outside of this Cartesian *cogito*, all objects are merely probable, and a doctrine of probabilities not rooted in any truth crumbles into nothing” (40). The fact that historical-material conditions purport to precede consciousness is, for Sartre, both nonsensical and philosophically

²⁹⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (ed. Lawrence H. Simon; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 168.

unsupportable. Categories such as “history” and “material reality” are comprehensible only as concepts that derive from the certainty of consciousness. Therefore, the individual only “defines himself” after “he encounters himself” (22). By recognizing this fundamental truth, Sartre maintains that human beings are confronted with the fact that they alone are responsible for their actions. Only by “directly seizing” this truth of the self is one able to formulate authentic resistance to forces of oppression (22).

However, after insisting upon the privileged place of individual consciousness, Sartre then pivots in “Existentialism Is a Humanism” to another facet of his argument which would become increasingly important in his later philosophy. In particular, Sartre argues that this fundamental positioning of consciousness does not imprison the individual within monadic subjectivity, as his opponents claim, for the moment in which “consciousness confronts itself” is actually conditional upon the perception of the existence of others (41). There are ethical ramifications for Sartre’s qualification, such as the fact that the existentialist’s responsibility for the self does “not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men” (23). But pressing this ethical responsibility into an epistemological claim, Sartre maintains that his philosophical arrangement also imbricates the self and other, for the individual “who becomes aware of himself directly in the *cogito* also perceives all others” (41). In other words, Sartre argues that consciousness only becomes authentic—that the self is aware of itself—insofar as it recognizes the existence and freedom of other human beings. Therefore, according to Sartre’s postwar existentialism, self-determination occurs within the “intersubjectivity” of the world (42).

Sartre’s response to his Marxist critics in “Existentialism Is a Humanism” signals a transitional moment in his career. His earlier work, such as *Transcendence of the Ego* (1936),

repudiates the Husserlian notion of a “transcendental ego”—the thinking ego that exists above or outside the objects that it contemplates—but Sartre nonetheless construes consciousness as reliant upon itself for being in the world. That is to say, Sartre’s pre-war philosophy centers on the phenomenological “problem of being,” and he attempts to avoid the hazards of solipsism by presenting the ego as itself an object of consciousness. While in his early work Sartre makes certain claims about the material world that abstractly prefigure his later concerns, the problem of intersubjectivity only begins to surface in his work toward the end of World War II. During the war Sartre read Alexandre Kojève’s Marxist interpretation of Hegel, and through Kojève’s influential arguments the French philosopher became increasingly interested in thinking about the ethical and political implications of existentialism. The foundations of this ethical concern are signaled in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), but the political import of Sartre’s philosophy of freedom is, at best, implicit in his opus. However, beginning with “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” Sartre’s postwar work attempts to reconcile systematically the tensions between his earlier existentialist construal of consciousness with Marxism. Sartre most explicitly articulates this project in *Search for a Method* (1957), which became the de facto introduction to *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960).

The reconciliation between Sartre’s postwar Marxism and his earlier privileging of individual consciousness and authenticity creates a paradox that would become notorious among his readers. In 1955, for example, Sartre’s longtime friend and co-founder of *Les Temps modernes*, Raymond Aron, criticizes Sartre’s postwar turn as an “incompatible” union of Kierkegaard and Marx.²⁹¹ Even Thomas R. Flynn, who is more sympathetic to Sartre’s project than most postwar American academics, concludes, “It is among the ‘revisionists,’ if at all, that

²⁹¹ Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, [1955] 2009), 328.

we must find the criteria for Sartre's Marxism."²⁹² Flynn argues that the existential phenomenological perspective that Sartre preserves in later works such as *Search for a Method* ultimately distance him from the dialectical materialism that forms the centerpiece of orthodox Marxist thought. The point is that the majority of critics of Sartre's turn toward intersubjectivity insist that his refusal to abandon his philosophy of individual consciousness undermines and complicates his postwar project. Indeed, Sartre's later political project received significantly less intellectual purchase among American existentialists than his claims about freedom, authenticity, and the absurdity of existence. This selective reception of Sartre's work began as soon as his explicit Marxist turn became apparent, and it was spearheaded by New York intellectuals such as William Barret, Philip Rahv, and William Phillips. During this phase of American existentialism, many of this group of writers and editors "worked to popularize central texts in existentialism, to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, and to judge how well it responded to the spirit and needs of the age."²⁹³ In fact, being attuned to the "spirit and needs of the age" prompted many of these intellectuals to reject the political agendas of Sartre, Camus, and de Beauvoir, while still refashioning existentialism to respond to that perceived "spirit." Hannah Arendt, for example, argues in "What Is Existenz Philosophy?" (1946) that modern existentialism has its roots in the German tradition of Kant and Schelling, who establish "the *autonomy* of man."²⁹⁴ The art critic and New York intellectual Clement Greenberg ambivalently explains the modified influence of the French movement upon his compatriots: "Whatever the affectations and philosophical

²⁹² Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test Case of Collective Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 173.

²⁹³ George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 105.

²⁹⁴ Hannah Arendt, "What Is Existenz Philosophy?" *Partisan Review* 13 (1946): 40.

sketchiness of Existentialism, it is aesthetically appropriate to our age.”²⁹⁵ The felt need for philosophical avenues of individual action gave the early advocates of existentialism cultural equipment—and the intellectual capital of a European touchstone—to respond to the political and social angst they identified with the postwar moment.

Apart from the New York intellectuals, other postwar American existentialists wrote about the movement for a wider audience and soon began to fashion a philosophical canon. Marjorie Grene’s *Dreadful Freedom* (1948) provided one of the first systematic “critiques” or elaborations upon existentialism. Suggesting how the movement might speak to the “aesthetic” or felt concerns of the age, as Greenberg would have it, Grene presents existentialism as “a brilliant statement of the tragic dilemma if not of man, at least of man in our time” because of its “relentless, even extravagant, honesty in the rejection of easy solutions or apparent solutions” to the anxieties of “modern man.”²⁹⁶ In 1956, for example Walter Kaufmann collected the influential anthology, *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, which extends existentialism beyond France and also into literary terrain. (In addition to helping define and circulate existentialism in the United States, Kaufmann was also responsible for completing the first English translations of many of Nietzsche’s works.) Going even further, Hazel Barnes in *The Literature of Possibility* (1959) argues that many nineteenth-century American philosophers, such as William James, share the European existentialists’ “value of consciousness itself.”²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ Clement Greenberg, “Jean Dubuffet and French Existentialism,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2, *Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 92.

²⁹⁶ Marjorie Grene, *Dreadful Freedom: A Critique of Existentialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 14.

²⁹⁷ Hazel E. Barnes, *The Literature of Possibility: A Study in Humanistic Existentialism* (Lincoln, N.E.: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), 171.

These interpretations of existentialism within its philosophical context tended to stifle direct discussion among American intellectuals regarding its political radicalism. In the case of Barnes's work, as Cotkin explains, she "attempted to steer existentialism away from its presumed pessimism toward a greater sense of possibility and individual responsibility, even flirting with optimism, themes that might be expected to resonate more deeply with American readers."²⁹⁸ As William Barrett argues, in contrast to the "oversimplified picture of man" in Marxism, existentialism "attempts to grasp the image of the whole man, even where this involves bringing to consciousness all that is dark and questionable in his existence. And in just this respect it is a much more authentic expression of our own contemporary experience."²⁹⁹

These attempts by American existentialists in the 1950s to attune existentialism to the alienation and angst of their postwar moment often resulted in marginalizing Beauvoir's and Sartre's accounts of intersubjectivity along with their political programs. The idea receives no sustained discussion in the major American existentialist essays and texts of the 1940s and 1950s, and indeed the French existentialists' various political agendas—particularly their vocal criticisms of American foreign policy—are likewise elided from the presentation of existentialism. Many American existentialists of the 1960s undid this omission, however. On the one hand, the New Left frequently invoked Sartre in the movement's criticisms of American imperialist intervention in Vietnam. For example, Jerry Rubin, the leader of the so-called Yippie faction of the New Left, referred to Sartre during a 1966 antiwar rally: "Sartre calls the Left in America 'the accursed of the earth' because of the difficulties it faces in this nation." Following Sartre's increasingly incendiary rhetoric, Rubin advises, "We must begin the politics of radical

²⁹⁸ Cotkin, *Existential America*, 135.

²⁹⁹ William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), 19.

alternatives.”³⁰⁰ On the other hand, the radical student movements of the 1960s found in the work of Camus, rather than Sartre, articulate form for its rebellious attitudes and activism against segregation and the Vietnam War.³⁰¹ The generation that came of age in the 1960s had, as Tod Gitlin explains, “breathed the intellectual air of existentialism: action might not avail, but one is responsible for choosing. . . . [T]hey leaped to a paradoxical conclusion: that history was alive and open.”³⁰² Another significant iteration of this activism centers on Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialism. While never gaining the kind of independent purchase among American women that Sartre gained among intellectuals and Camus among the student movements, de Beauvoir influenced these groups by way of other activists such as Betty Friedan. Indeed, as Sandra Dijkstra puts it, Betty Friedan’s landmark feminist study, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), “translated” de Beauvoir’s argument in *The Second Sex* (1949) that women are socialized to accept an artificial “femininity” and, by extension, an oppressive confinement to domestic life.³⁰³

These variations upon European themes suggest the heterogeneity of the place of existentialism within American life. Indeed, many intellectuals continued in the 1960s to engage principally with Sartre within the context of philosophical history—e.g., his relationship to Husserl, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard—rather than his decolonial and leftist writings of the 1960s. The roots of existentialism within the soil of American intellectual and cultural life was thus both tangled and deeply established. It inspired political protest and abstract philosophical

³⁰⁰ Jerry Rubin, “Alliance for Liberation,” *Liberation* 11 (April 1966): 9, 11. Qtd. in Cotkin, *Existential America*, 227.

³⁰¹ For an analysis of Camus’s influence on the 1960s’ student movements, see Cotkin, *Existential America*, 225-51.

³⁰² Tod Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1989), 84.

³⁰³ Sandra Dijkstra, “Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan: The Politics of Omission,” *Feminist Studies* 6.2 (Summer 1980): 290-303.

inquiry; it informed sit-ins in the South and a short-lived interest in Heidegger among the American public and academic philosophers alike. Following in the tradition of American existentialists like Barnes and Barrett, many intellectuals in the United States during the 1960s continued to view existentialism as principally a philosophical avenue for exploring the problems of freedom, the absurd, and individual consciousness, while rejecting those elements of French thought that tend toward radical politics.

The “sovereignty” that preoccupies Percy throughout his career is part of the tangled influence of existentialism within the cultural marketplace of postwar America. Indeed, Percy’s commitment to the existentialist tradition is unique among most of his contemporaries because of his attempts, much like Sartre, to construe authenticity and alienation in terms of “consciousness confronting itself,” but also by insisting upon the theoretical importance of intersubjectivity. As part of this project, Lancelot’s longing for a shared communicative order is, I have shown, fraught with problems. The protagonist of Percy’s *The Last Gentleman* (1966), Will Barrett, is similarly alienated from the world around him and obsessed with finding a communal home. Barrett, “dislocated to begin with,” moves to New York and is overwhelmed by the teeming possibilities around him. As such, Barrett “hardly knew who he was from one day to the next. There were times when he took roles so successfully that he left off being who he was and became someone else.”³⁰⁴ Barrett eventually meets the Vaughts, a Southern family living in the city so their son, Jamie, can receive medical treatment. Mr. Vaught invites Barrett to return to the South with them to “show [Jamie] how folks act” (79). Taking the invitation, Barrett eventually discovers that upon his return to life in the South with the Vaught family “I was no less

³⁰⁴ Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman* (New York: Picador, 1966), 20. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

dislocated” (320). His philosophical ruminations and attempts to love one of the Vaught’s daughters are both abortive, and Barrett continues to be isolated from other people.

The various failed attempts in Percy’s career to resolve the isolation of his characters through intimacy with other people suggests that his figure of the “sovereign knower,” despite the ambiguities that Percy identifies in his fiction, is the bone that the novelist continually worries. This vexed affirmation even surfaces in *The Moviegoer*, although almost all of Binx’s relationships seem trivial. Indeed, Binx’s ironic distance makes intimacy—and, more broadly, the recognition of the other—impossible, such that his “shit-searching” method becomes as much a part of the problem as it is a method for identifying and resolving his alienation. Much like Sartre’s attempts in “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” Percy calls attention to the deficiencies of Binx’s “search” by pointing to his blindness to others. This is especially vivid during Binx’s interactions with Mercer, the African American butler who has worked for the Bolling family for decades. In a moment of self-ironizing, Binx candidly admits his blindness toward Mercer: “Ordinarily it is hard to see him,” for the Bolling family “retains” Mercer for his services. Continuing this instrumental view of the man, Binx says that his “main emotion around Mercer is unease that in threading his way between servility and presumption, his foot might slip” (22). This confession exposes Binx’s stratified sense of the social order, in which class and race draw the distinguishing lines. Binx is less concerned with “seeing” Mercer—with sifting through the layers of social and racial conventions that impinge upon his consciousness—than with preserving the tenuous ecosystem of his Southern household. However, the fact that Binx is aware of his difficulties in “seeing” Mercer suggest his ambivalence about the racial structures of his domestic arrangement as well as his ironic distance. Binx nonetheless is unable to overcome this habitual oversight. He later divulges, for example, “Truthfully I do not know, and Mercer

does not know, what Mercer really is” (50). Binx explains that the conventions of Mercer’s relationship to the Bolling family—and, indeed, for African Americans living in the South—mediate the two men’s knowledge of one another. Binx “does not know,” and across the course of the novel never knows, “what Mercer is.” The impersonal pronoun “what” suggests the extent to which the racial protocols and class etiquette of their society preclude intimacy and understanding: that is to say, Mercer is a “what” for Binx, not a “who.”

While Percy suggests that Binx’s failure to “see” others deepens his alienation and self-absorption, the grounds for articulating that criticism of Binx’s search and his ironic distance nonetheless presuppose an ideal of unmediated consciousness. Like Aunt Emily, who “transfigures everyone,” the unreliability of Binx as a narrator comes through clearest when he fails to escape the social scripts that predigest his experience, whether of Mercer “the old retainer” or of his various love interests (49). Indeed, in a novel rife with anxiety about mediation, the only way for Binx to imagine authenticated consciousness is through an apocalyptic vision—a precursor to *Love in the Ruins*. This vision recurs to Binx after his final chiding by Aunt Emily. “For a long time,” he explains, “I have secretly hoped for the end of the world and believed [...] that only after the end could the few who survive creep out of their holes and discover themselves to be themselves and live as merrily as children among the viny ruins” (231). Binx’s vision imagines that the survivors “discover themselves to be themselves” only after the destruction of social scripts and the impersonal authorities of the adult world. Binx’s catastrophe, like Lancelot’s, is a recuperation of innocence, but the other side of that return to childhood is that it amounts to an escape from social responsibility. Indeed, Binx presents the destruction of the world as a mechanism for consciousness becoming aware of itself (the survivors “discovering themselves to be themselves”), as if the present reality has to pass away

in order for the self to find its home. As such, the current social world is not sustainable as an ecosystem for the self. Binx hopes that such unspoiled self-realization is possible without the “ruins” of the world: “Is it possible that—it is not too late?” he asks (231). Like all of the existential questions posed in *The Moviegoer*, Binx shirks the burden of response and foists it on the reader.

The ways that Binx approaches the threshold of recovering an authentic form of life but nevertheless remains within his alienation recalls the larger ambiguities that Percy explores throughout his career. The problems that Binx identifies with a liberal script regarding social welfare—its construal of collective national life as another form of consumption analogous to mass consumerism—undermines his attempts to find a collective sense of identity. Similarly, Tom More’s criticism of “liberal anxiety” and “conservative rage” leads him to abandon these partisan groups, and relative isolation is the cost of his psychological and existential recovery. Lancelot likewise fails to establish a shared communicative order, and he anticipates (probably without justification) leaving the “nuthouse” and retreating to the hills of Virginia alone to start a new “order of things” (3, 156). Yet individual sovereignty and self-reliance do not solve their alienation, either. Binx’s commitment to marry his “cousin” Kate, who is still emotionally unstable after the death of a former lover, is only another form of alienation: he becomes a kind of cinematographer, directing her every move on a common errand (241-42). The moviegoer becomes the moviemaker, but the cost of that transformation is the sovereignty of another. The consequence of Percy’s exploration of these ambiguities is that the possibilities of structuring collective welfare appear to be worse than the existential disease they purport to alleviate. The best that Percy’s characters can hope for is that, as a local and temporary salve for their

alienation, they can become Tom More's "sovereign wanderer," the "lordly exile" whose isolation and angst are mitigated by the work of "watching" and "knowing" (383).

Percy's suspicions about the possibilities of a shared communicative order—the loss of the self that occurs when one gains the social world—gives articulate form to the felt crises of the postwar moment. The ambiguities of Percy's communal aspirations suggest that losing the independence of the self is the cost one incurs by entering social space, by subordinating individual authenticity to collective welfare. Suspicions about such a cost preoccupy Percy's work, and instead the reader is left in a liminal position, waiting as an "exile" for a new social world. As part of the "aesthetically appropriate" rise of existentialism, Percy's exilic position perpetuates the struggle for individual consciousness that emerged as the principal route for resolving the postwar "malaise." That is to say, while he explores how both social welfare and self-governing consciousness are fraught with problems, Percy nonetheless responds to these uncertainties by retaining the figure of the waiting exile. Percy construes the anxieties of the postwar moment, then, as a crisis of *existence*, where the "victims of the malaise" are "lost" to themselves by living at a distant remove from the burden of self-production. The individual is little more than the remainder of political calculation and the product of mass consumption. The sovereign wayfarer, on the other hand, has gained the self but lost the social world. For Percy, this vexed dilemma leaves the postwar individual in an uncertain existential struggle: she is an exile from political programs and institutional formations—a pilgrim wandering the ruins of social space.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adelstein, Richard P. "‘The Nation as an Economic Unit’: Keynes, Roosevelt, and the Managerial Idea." *Journal of American History* 78 (1991): 160-87.
- Adorno, Theodore. *The Culture Industry*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Ahnebrink, Lars. *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction: A Study of the Works of Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris, with Special Reference to Some European Influences, 1891-1903*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1961.
- Appel, Alfred, Jr., and Vladimir Nabokov. "An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov." *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8.2 (Spring 1967): 127-52.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.
- . *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 2nd ed. New York: Meridian Books, [1951] 1958.
- . *On Revolution*. New York: Penguin Books, [1963] 1977.
- . *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969.
- . "What Is Existenz Philosophy?" *Partisan Review* 13 (1946): 40.
- Aron, Raymond. *The Opium of the Intellectuals*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, [1955] 2009.
- Barnes, Hazel E. *The Literature of Possibility: A Study in Humanistic Existentialism*. Lincoln, N.E.: University of Nebraska Press, 1959.
- Barrett, William. *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*. New York: Doubleday, 1958.
- Barth, John. "The Literature of Exhaustion." In *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction*. New York: Putnam, 1984.
- Baughman, James L. *Same Time, Same Station: Creating American Television, 1948-1961*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.
- Bengal, Michael H. "Bend Sinister: Joyce, Shakespeare, Nabokov." *Modern Language Studies* 15.4 (1985): 22-27.
- Bone, Martyn. "The Postsouthern ‘Sense of Place’ in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* and Richard Ford’s *The Sportswriter*." *Critical Survey* 12.1 (2000): 64-81.

- Bowden, Sue, and Avner Offer. "Household Appliances and the Use of Time: The United States and Britain Since the 1920s." *Economic Historical Review* 47 (1994): 725-48
- Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Brand, Dana. "The Interaction of Aestheticism and American Consumer Culture in Nabokov's *Lolita*." *Modern Language Studies* 17.2 (Spring 1987): 14-21.
- Brier, Evan. *A Novel Marketplace: Mass Culture, the Book Trade, and Postwar American Fiction*. Philadelphia, P.A.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.
- Brinkley, Alan. *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War*. New York: Knopf, 1995.
- Broyard, Anatole. *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir*. New York: Carol Southern Books, 1993.
- Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.
- Burnham, John. "A Shift in Perspective." In *After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America*. Ed. John Burnham. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Chambers, Clarke A. "Social Security, The Welfare Consensus of the New Deal." In *The Roosevelt New Deal*. Ed. Wilbur J. Cohen. Austin: University of Texas, 1986.
- Colton, Ethan. *Four Patterns of Revolution: Communist U.S.S.R., Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, New Deal America*. New York: Association Press, 1935.
- Cornis-Pope, Marcel. *Narrative Innovation and Cultural Rewriting in the Cold War Era and After*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.
- Cotkin, George. *Existential America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.
- Cowie, Jefferson, and Nick Salvatore. "The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 74 (2008): 1-32.
- Cowley, Malcolm. "Naturalism in American Literature." In *Evolutionary Thought in America*. Ed. Stow Persons. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950. Rpt. in *American Naturalism*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004. 49-79.
- Dahmer, Helmut. "Adorno's View of Psychoanalysis." *Thesis Eleven* 111(1): 97-109.

- Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Verso, 1998.
- Dewey, Bradley R. "Walker Percy Talks about Kierkegaard: An Annotated Interview." *The Journal of Religion* 54.3 (July 1974): 273-98.
- Dewey, John. *The Public and Its Problems*. New York: Holt and Company, 1927.
- Dijkstra, Sandra. "Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan: The Politics of Omission." *Feminist Studies* 6.2 (Summer 1980): 290-303.
- Dodds, E. R. "Plato and the Irrational." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 65 (1945): 16-25.
- Dore, Florence. "The New Criticism and the Nashville Sound: William Faulkner's *The Town* and Rock and Roll." *Contemporary Literature* 55.1 (Spring 2014): 32-57.
- . *The Novel and the Obscene: Sexual Subjects in American Modernism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky; New York: Knopf, 2004.
- Dragunoiu, Dana. *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011.
- Dreher, Carl. "The American Way: A Voice from the Left." In *The American Way*. Ed. David Cushman Coyle. New York: Harper, 1938.
- Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. New York: Modern Library, [1900] 1917.
- Dvosin, Andrew J. *Essays on Literature and Politics, 1932-1972*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1978.
- Edmunds, Susan Louise. "'Just Like Home': Richard Wright, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the New Deal." *American Literature* 86.1 (March 2014): 61-86.
- Edsall, Thomas B. *Building Red America: The New Conservative Coalition and the Drive for Permanent Power*. New York: Basic Books, 2006.
- Edwards, Michael. *Civil Society*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2009.
- Elias, Robert H. ed. *Letters of Theodore Dreiser*. Vol. 2. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Going to the Territory*. New York: Vintage, [1986] 1995.

- . *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage, [1952] 1995.
- . *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- English, James F. *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Fabre, Michel. *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993.
- Feulner, Edwin J. *Intellectual Pilgrims: The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Mont Pèlerin Society*. Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 1999.
- Fleissner, Jennifer. *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004.
- Flynn, Thomas R. *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test Case of Collective Responsibility*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Foley, Barbara. "Reading Redness: Politics and Audience in Ralph Ellison's Early Short Fiction." *Journal of Narrative Theory* 29.3 (Fall 1999): 323-39.
- . *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Foley, Michael W., and Bob Edwards. Introduction to "Beyond Tocqueville: Civil Society and Social Capital in Comparative Perspective," *American Behavioral Society* 42.1 (September 1998).
- Foster, John Burt, Jr. "Bend Sinister." In *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. Ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov. New York: Garland, 1995.
- Frankel, Max. "U.S. Study Scores Chicago Violence as 'A Police Riot.'" *New York Times* (2 December 1968).
- Fromm, Erich. *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Avon, [1941] 1969.
- Fulton, Ann. *Apostles of Sartre: Existentialism in America, 1945-1963*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999.
- Gay, Peter. *Freud: A Life for Our Time*. New York: Norton, 2006.
- Gall, Gilbert J. *Pursuing Justice: Lee Pressman, the New Deal, and the CIO*. New York: SUNY Press, 1999.

- Galston, William. "Liberal Egalitarianism: A Family of Theories, Not a Single View." In *Civil Society and Government*. Ed. R. Post and N. Rosenblum. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Gilbert, James Burkhart. *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.
- Gitlin, Tod. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. New York: Bantam, 1989.
- Goldin, Claudia, and Robert A. Margo. "The Great Compression: The Wage Structure in the United State at Mid-Century." *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper*, No. 3817 (August 1991): 1-14.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.
- Greenberg, Clement. "Jean Dubuffet and French Existentialism." In *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*. Vol. 2, *Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Greenstone, J. David. *Labor in American Politics*. New York: Knopf, 1969.
- Grene, Marjorie. *Dreadful Freedom: A Critique of Existentialism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.
- Grogan, Jessica. *Encountering America: Humanistic Psychology, Sixties Culture, and the Shaping of the Modern Self*. New York: Harper, 2013.
- Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. "Winner-Take-All Politics: Public Policy, Political Organization, and the Precipitous Rise of Top Incomes in the United States." *Politics & Society* 38.2 (2010): 152-204.
- Hale, Nathan, Jr. *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917-1985*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Harrison, Russell. *Patricia Highsmith*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Harwell, David Horace, ed. *Walker Percy Remembered: A Portrait in the Words of Those Who Knew Him*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006.
- Highsmith, Patricia. *A Game for the Living*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, [1958] 1988.
- . "Scene of the Crime." *Granta* 29 (Winter 1989).

- . *Strangers on a Train*. New York: Norton, [1950] 2001.
- . *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. New York: Norton, 2008.
- Hayek, Friedrich. *The Road to Serfdom*. Vol. II. *The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1944] 2007.
- Hayes, Kevin J. "Editing Naturalism." In *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism*. Ed. Keith Newlin. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Philosophy of Right*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952.
- Hoberek, Andrew. *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White Collar Work*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Hofstadter, Richard. *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR*. New York: Knopf, 1955.
- Howe, Irving "The Idea of the Modern." In *Literary Modernism*. Ed. Irving Howe. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1967.
- Howland, Mary Deems. *The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel's Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy's Novels*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1990.
- Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Johnson, D. Barton. "'Don't Touch My Circles': The Two Worlds of Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*." *Delta* 17 (October 1983): 33-52.
- Kaestle, Carl F., Helen Damon-Moore, Lawrence C. Stedman, Katherine Tinsley, and William Vance Trollinger, Jr. *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
- Katznelson, Ira. *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*. New York: Liveright Publishing, 2013.
- Kersten, Andrew E. *Labor's Home Front: The American Federation of Labor during World War II*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. *A Kierkegaard Anthology*. Ed. Robert Bretall. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1946.

- Lacy, Robert. "The Moviegoer, Fifty Years After." *The Southern Review* 47.1 (Winter 2011): 49-54.
- Latham, Earl. *The Communist Controversy in Washington: From the New Deal to McCarthy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966.
- Lawson, Lewis A. "From Tolstoy to Dostoyevsky in *The Moviegoer*." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 56.3 (Summer 2003): 411-19.
- Lennon, Michael. *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013.
- Lee, L. L. "Bend Sinister: Nabokov's Political Dream." *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8.2 (Spring 1967): 193-203.
- Lobrano, Alexander. "Patricia Highsmith: Serial Thriller." *The Lively Arts* 20 (20 October 1989).
- Locke, John. *Second Treatise on Civil Government*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 1980.
- Lukin, Joshua. "Identity-Shopping and Postwar Self-Improvement in Patricia Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 33.4 (Summer 2010): 21-40.
- Luschei, Martin. *The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy's Diagnosis of the Malaise*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1972.
- Mailer, Norman. *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*. New York: Plume, [1968] 1998.
- . *Miami and the Siege of Chicago: An Informal History of the Republican and Democratic Conventions of 1968*. New York: New York Review Books, 2008.
- . *The Naked and the Dead*. New York: Picador [1948] 1998.
- . "Superman Comes to the Supermarket," *Esquire* (November 1960). Rpt. in *The Presidential Papers*. New York: Berkeley Medallion Books, 1963.
- . "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster." *Dissent* (Summer 1957): 276-93.
- Marton, Kati. *The Great Escape: Nine Jews who Fled Hitler and Changed the World*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. "The Communist Manifesto." In *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Ed. Lawrence H. Simon. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994.

- May, Dean L. *From New Deal to New Economics: The American Liberal Response to the Recession of 1937*. New York: Garland, 1981.
- May, Rollo, ed. *Existence*. New York: Basic, 1958.
- . *The Meaning of Anxiety* 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton, [1950] 1977.
- Mazurek, Raymond A. "Writer on the Left: Class and Race in Ellison's Early Fiction." *College Literature* 29.4 (Fall 2002): 109-35.
- McBride, William. "Existentialism as a Cultural Movement." In *The Cambridge Introduction to Existentialism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 50-69.
- McCabe, Mary Margaret. *Plato and His Predecessors: The Dramatization of Reason*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- McCann, Sean. *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- McCullough, David. *Truman*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003.
- McGowan, John. *Hannah Arendt: An Introduction*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Menand, Louis. "Freud, Anxiety, and the Cold War." In *After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America*. Ed. John Burnham. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- . "How the Deal Went Down: Saving Democracy in the Depression." *The New Yorker* (4 March 2013).
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- . *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Mirowski, Philip, and Dieter Plehwe, eds. *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Moore, Heather. "Walker Percy's 'The Moviegoer': A Publishing History." *Library Chronicle of the University of Texas* 22.4 (1992).

- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Bend Sinister*. New York: Vintage, [1947] 1990.
- . *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: the Nabokov-Wilson letters, 1947-1971*. Ed. Simon Karlinsky. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- . *Invitation to a Beheading*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- . *Lectures on Literature*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt, 1980.
- . *Lolita*. New York: Vintage, [1955] 1989.
- . *Pale Fire*. New York: Knopf, [1962] 1992.
- . *Pnin*. New York: Vintage, [1957] 1989.
- . *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. New York: Vintage, [1967] 1989.
- . *Strong Opinions*. New York: Vintage, [1973] 1990.
- . *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975.
- Naiman, Eric. *Nabokov, Perversely*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010.
- Neal, Larry. "Ellison's Zoot Suit." In *Visions of a Liberated Future*. Ed. Michael Scwhartz. New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1989. 30-56.
- Nieland, Justus. "Everybody's Noir Humanism: Chester Himes, *Lonely Crusade*, and the Quality of Hurt." *African American Review* 43.2-3 (Summer/Fall 2009): 277-93.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin, [1886] 2003.
- . *Ecce Homo*. Trans. Anthony M. Ludovici. New York: Macmillan, 1911.
- . *The Gay Science*. Trans. Josefine Nauckhoff. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- . *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Douglas Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Nisly, Paul W. "A Modernist Impulse: *Notes from Underground* as Model," *College Literature* 4.2 (Spring 1977): 152-58.
- Parekh, Bhikhu. "Putting Civil Society in Its Place." In *Civil Society: Views and Reviews*. Ed. G. K. Rathod. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2012.

- Percy, Walker. *Lancelot*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1977.
- . *The Last Gentleman*. New York: Picador, 1966.
- . *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*. New York: Picador, 1983.
- . *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*. New York: Picador, 1971.
- . *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other*. New York: Picador, [1975] 2000.
- . *The Moviegoer*. New York: Vintage, [1961] 1998.
- . *Signposts in a Strange Land*. New York: Picador, 2000.
- . "Symbol, Consciousness, and Intersubjectivity." *The Journal of Philosophy* 55.15 (July 1958): 631-41.
- Perlstein, Rick. *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2001.
- Piketty, Thomas. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2014.
- Piketty, Thomas, and Emmanuel Saez. "Income Inequality in the United States, 1913-1998." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118.1 (2003): 1-39.
- Pizer, Donald. *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Rev. ed. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984.
- Poole, Keith T., and Howard Rosenthal. *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll Call Voting*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Powell, Frederick. *The Politics of Civil Society: Neoliberalism or Social Left?* Bristol, U.K.: Policy Press, 2007.
- Purcell, Aaron D. *White Collar Radicals: TVA's Knoxville Fifteen, the New Deal, and the McCarthy Era*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2009.
- Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Rahv, Philip. "Notes on the Decline of Naturalism." *Partisan Review* IX (November-December 1942). Rpt. in *Literature and the Sixth Sense*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1969. 76-87.

- Rampersad, Arnold. *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 2007.
- Rampton, David. *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Rand, Ayn. *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*. New York: New American Library, 1964.
- Raz, Mical. *What's Wrong with the Poor?: Psychiatry, Race, and the War on Poverty*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.
- Rubin, Jerry. "Alliance for Liberation." *Liberation* 11 (April 1966): 9-11
- Rodgers, Daniel T. *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1998.
- Roosevelt, Franklin D. Radio Address. "The Forgotten Man." 7 April 1932.
- Rosenof, Theodore. *Patterns of Political Economy in America: The Failure to Develop a Democratic Left Synthesis, 1933-1950*. New York: Garland, 1983.
- Ross, Dorothy. "Freud and the Vicissitudes of Modernism in the United States, 1940-1980." In *After Freud Left: A Century of Psychoanalysis in America*. Ed. John Burnham. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Rowley, Hazel. *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*. New York: Henry Holt, 2001.
- Salzman, Jack. "The Critical Recognition of *Sister Carrie*, 1900-1907." *Journal of American Studies* 3.1 (July 1969): 123-33.
- Samway, Patrick H. "Grappling with the Philosophy and Theology of Walker Percy." *U.S. Catholic Historian* 17.3 (Summer 1999): 35-50.
- . *Walker Percy: A Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
- Sandis, Constantine. "Hitchcock's Conscious Use of Freud's Unconscious." *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 3 (2009): 56-81.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1953.
- . *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Trans. Carol Macomber. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Schaller, Michael, and George Rising. *The Republican Ascendancy: American Politics, 1968-2001*. Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 2002.

- Schenkar, Joan. *The Talented Miss Highsmith: The Secret Life and Serious Art of Patricia Highsmith*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009.
- Schickler, Eric, Kathryn Pearson, and Brian D. Feinstein. "Congressional Parties and Civil Rights Politics from 1933 to 1972." *The Journal of Politics* 72.3 (July 2010): 672-89.
- Schryer, Stephen. *Fantasies of a New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Schultz, John. *No One Was Killed: The Democratic National Convention, August 1968*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1969] 2009.
- Schulzinger, Robert D. "Richard Nixon, Congress, and the War in Vietnam, 1969-1974." In *Vietnam and the American Political Tradition: The Politics of Dissent*. Ed. Randall B. Woods. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 282-300.
- Seligman, Adam B. "Civil Society as Idea and Ideal." In *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society*. Ed. Simone Chambers and Will Kymlicka. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Shannon, Edward A. "Where Was the Sex?: Fetishism and Dirty Minds in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*." *Modern Language Studies* 34 (Spring-Autumn 2004): 17-27.
- Simmons, Philip E. "Toward the Postmodern Historical Imagination: Mass Culture in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* and Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*." *Contemporary Literature* 33.4 (Winter 1992): 601-24.
- Simpson, Lewis. *The Brazen Face of History: Studies in the Literary Consciousness of America*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980.
- . "The Southern Review and a Post-Southern American Letters." *Triquarterly* 43 (1978): 278-99.
- Small, Melvin. *At the Water's Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005.
- Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Penguin, 1992.
- Stone, Edward, ed. *What Was Naturalism?: Materials for an Answer*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959.
- Storrs, Landon R. Y. *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.

- Strauss, Leo, and Joseph Cropsey, eds. *History of Political Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Symons, Julian. *The Modern Crime Story*. Edinburgh: Tragara Press, 1980.
- Szalay, Michael. *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.
- . *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Tolson, Jay. "The Education of Walker Percy." *The Wilson Quarterly* 8.2 (Spring 1984): 156-66.
- . *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.
- Trattner, Walter I. *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America*. 6th ed. New York: Free Press, 1999.
- Walcutt, Charles C. *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956.
- Wald, Alan M. *American Night: The Literary Left in the Cold War Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.
- Wall, Wendy L. *Inventing the "American way": the Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement*. Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Walzer, Michael. "The Idea of Civil Society: A Path to Social Reconstruction." In *Community Works: The Revival of Civil Society in America*. Ed. E. J. Dionne. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 1998.
- West, Cornel. *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.
- Whitman, Alden. "Vladimir Nabokov, Author of *Lolita* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, Is Dead." *The New York Times* (5 July 1977).
- Williams, Raymond. *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Wilson, Andrew. *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2003.
- Wilson, Christopher P. "Sister Carrie Again." *American Literature* 53.2 (May 1981): 287-90.

- Wilson, Sloan. *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. New York: Da Capo Press, [1955] 2002.
- Wolfe, Robert, and Matthew Mendelsohn. "Values and Interests in Attitudes toward Trade and Globalization: The Compromise of Embedded Liberalism." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 38.1 (March 2005): 45-68.
- Woods, Randall B. *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*. New York: Free Press, 2006.
- Wright, Richard. *Black Boy: A Story of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Buccaneer, 1993.
- . "How 'Bigger' Was Born." In *Native Son*. New York: Harper, 2005.
- . "I Tried to Be a Communist." In *The God That Failed*. Ed. Richard Crossman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- . "The Man Who Lived Underground." In *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: Norton, 1997. 1414-50.
- . *Native Son*. New York: Harper, 2005.
- Wurmser, Léon. "Shame: The Veiled Companion of Narcissism." In *The Many Faces of Shame*. Ed. Donald Nathanson. New York: Guilford, 1987.
- Yates, Richard. *Revolutionary Road*. New York: Vintage, [1961] 2007.
- Young, Marilyn. *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*. New York: Harper-Perennial, 1991.
- Young, Stark. "Weaknesses." *The New Republic* (9 December 1946): 764.