NUCLEAR FAMILIES:
THE BOMB AND THE FUTURE IN THE AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS

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Abstract

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The postwar American novel offers important testimony on the promise of the future in the American middle class within the historical and cultural moment of the atomic age. In this study, I question fundamental assumptions of the Cold War, particularly the degree to which an embrace of consumer goods eclipsed the impact of the nuclear arsenal on the affluent middle class. In fiction that scrutinizes postwar complacency, an obvious irony lies in the unfolding middle class commitment to quality of life while the nation grappled with the chance of imminent apocalypse. Though Norman Mailer's essay "The White Negro" recognizes the countercultural response to the bomb, mainstream American writing contains a reaction to the threat of thermonuclear war that reflects the anxiety of the figure Mailer calls "the square." Separate chapters on Lionel Trilling, John Cheever, Saul Bellow and Don DeLillo indicate that

assumptions about quality of life are the result of sublimated nuclear anxiety, not a booming postwar economy. Trilling's understanding of American culture in the aftermath of World War II brings to his fiction an early illustration of this future-orientation. His short stories and his novel *The Middle of the Journey* consider "the well-loved child of the middle class" during this period of historical uncertainty. In short stories and the Wapshot novels, John Cheever considers questions of continuity and catastrophe in the newly-created suburbs that define middle-class affluence. Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* revises Cheever's assumptions in the light of 20th history as an allegory of U.S. thermonuclear imperialism. The final chapter treats Don DeLillo's *Underworld* as a post-Cold War coda, where the absence of an ideological foe dismantles the mid-century American community that reacted to the bomb in unison. The impact of the bomb on expectations of prosperity reconfigures the future-orientation of the middle class, placing in a new light its influence on American abundance.

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Contents

Introduction: The Flight from Ground Zero

In 1959, Vice President Richard Nixon asked Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, "Would it not be better to compete in the relative merits of washing machines than in the relative strength of rockets?"[1] By reducing the globe-threatening friction of the Cold War to a meritocracy of household appliances, Nixon demonstrated the affinity between consumer goods and nuclear anxiety. At what has come to be called "the Kitchen Debate," with both superpowers engaged in a visible declaration of ideological authority and military supremacy, Nixon's mention of a washing machine and not a dishwasher or television set, all fixtures of the model American ranch that became the impromptu site of this Cold War melee, may be emblematic. In 1951, Lionel Trilling wrote that "our deep comprehensive aesthetic sense...really our metaphysics...is satisfied by the performance of a Bendix washing machine."[2] How did the washing machine, in the eight years between the appearance

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[1] Richard Nixon, "Remarks between Vice President Richard Nixon and Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev at the U.S. Exhibition," Sokolniki Park, Moscow, 24 July 1959.

[2] Lionel Trilling, "William Dean Howells and the Roots of Modern Taste," *The Opposing Self* (1955; New York: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 1979) 80.

of Trilling's essay in *Partisan Review* and Nixon's remarks at the American Exhibition in Moscow, became the hallmark of America's domestic mission, our surest weapon against the spread of Communism? In his Kitchen Debate exchange, Vice President Nixon did far more than to forewarn a corps of American journalists that he would someday become the U.S. President most reliant on electric appliances: he defined the national faith in consumption Americans would rely on throughout the Cold War to tranquilize their anxiety about the bomb.

The episode occurred during a period when material goods appeared alongside atomic paraphernalia throughout the culture. At first glance, this intersection is simply the result of across-the-board technological achievement in U.S. laboratories and assembly lines and fueled by related demands. Historian Tom Engelhardt observes "a double set of desires" in the 1950s "for technological breakthroughs leading to ever more instant weapons of destruction and to ever easier living."[3] But this strange relationship is also a product of atomic anxiety. We recall 1950s visions of fallout shelters, including the honeymoon suite described by Elaine Tyler May where a newlywed couple spent two weeks

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[3] Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) 77.

underground with the fundamental supplies that would see them through a nuclear winter (food, water, a radio) as well as the plunder accumulated from their recent wedding (crystal, silver, table linen). While the world's geopolitical index may have left some room for argument over the need for a fallout shelter, there was no dispute that in its furnishings it should come as close to resembling a suburban home as possible.[4] When the nexus of nuclear fear and consumer goods appears in American literature, it informs the way we read and react to the materialism of the postwar years. Given both the availability and proliferation of consumer products during the Cold War, as well as the importance Nixon readily bestowed on them in 1959, the impetus to improve the quality of life through consumption is part of our postwar identity and intimately related to Americans' response to the bomb.

As the United States entered the atomic age, it experienced a period of unprecedented material growth.

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[4] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War* (New York: Basic Books, 1988) 3. In spite of their impracticality, fallout shelters are assumed always to duplicate middle-class American lives underground. In the 1999 film "Blast from the Past," a child matures to manhood in a bomb shelter when his parents mistake an airplane crash to be a nuclear explosion. When he departs the shelter to rejoin society, he benefits from the carefully-constructed suburban upbringing his parents have simulated for more than 20 years, including foreign languages instruction, ballroom dancing, and the class-conscious bias that a girl from Pasadena is "just a little nicer" than other prospective brides.

While the nation's per capita gross national product increased steadily 169.8 percent from 1940 to 1970, the total for personal consumption of commodities increased 692.9 percent during the same years.[5] After the economic lethargy of the 1930s, the postwar United States led the world in fashioning a level of domestic prosperity that was itself national policy. Western European nations were encouraged to follow the example of the United States to create the "increasingly integrated economic life" enabled by U.S. style democracy, as if President Roosevelt's wish for worldwide distribution of the Sears-Roebuck catalogue would finally be granted after all.[6] This consumer extravagance was accentuated by Nixon, who boasted to Khrushchev:

> Thirty-one million families own their own homes and the land on which they are built. America's 44 million families own a total of 56 million cars, 50 million television sets and 143 million radio sets. And they buy an average of nine dresses and suits and 14 pairs of shoes per family per year.[7]

The connection between this luxuriant U.S. democracy and the new middle class is significant, particularly as material

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[5] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Basic, 1976).

[6] Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1988) 202.

[7] Richard Nixon, "Remarks at the Opening of the American National Exhibition," Sokolniki Park, Moscow, 24 July 1959.

possessions are associated with a life of affluence and leisure more readily available to Americans after World War II. But it is ironic that the global future becomes clouded by uncertainty at the same time so much emphasis is placed on enhancing the material quality of American life. Many first-time homeowners were able to make down payments through the provisions of the G.I. bill, enacted by Congress in 1944, further linking the rise of the middle class and the emergence of suburban America with the outcome of V.J. Day and U.S. victory in World War II. Home and automobile ownership, a guarantee of college education for children, and an expectation of domestic prosperity as a distinctly American entitlement put the middle class at the center of this paradox. For these new beneficiaries of a thriving national economy, the future was most important. In his memoir *Blue Sky Dream*, David Beers, the son of a California aerospace executive, refers to his middle-class childhood home as "a certain perfection of potentiality" and his family as "having been placed in charge of the future."[8]

This dissertation associates the atomic age with the beginning of an era in our cultural history where control of human life left the realm of humanity and entered a world

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[8] David Beers, *Blue Sky Dream: A Memoir of America's Fall from Grace* (New York: Doubleday, 1996) 39, 132.

simultaneously smaller and larger, that of the atom. In spite of the apparently obvious irony of economic growth occurring as the nation grappled with the impact of nuclear weapons, these two cultural forces have rarely been examined together. An understanding of the links between economic growth and the impact of nuclear weaponry informs our reading of major figures of postwar American letters. During the atomic age middle-class Americans, characterized by Lionel Trilling and others as more inclined to anticipate the future than to reflect on the past, were introduced to the possibility, perhaps even the likelihood, of a dramatically abridged future. I examine the promise of the future in the American middle class within the historical and cultural moment of the atomic age, illustrating that assumptions about a quality of life the middle class should be able to enjoy were founded as much on sublimated nuclear anxiety as on the booming postwar economy.

We need not know the extent to which human life was altered the morning of August 6, 1945, nor whether our collective intellect will ever be capable of understanding the fundamental change that came to American society as the creators and first beneficiaries of atomic power; we must nonetheless agree with Jonathan Schell that no single aspect of humanity remained unaltered after the advent of atomic

warfare.[9] Postwar American life is marked by an awareness that global destruction is a scientific possibility even a decade after the collapse of the Cold War binary of rival superpowers. But the idea of the future in the United States, which changed radically after World War II, is especially susceptible the pervasive influence of the bomb. I examine the idea of the future modified by nuclear capability, particularly in the culture of the affluent middle class which grew in size, visibility, and influence after World War II.

One writer who addressed the cultural implications of nuclear anxiety among the middle class is Norman Mailer, whose 1957 essay "The White Negro" analyzes the counterculture and the "Beat" presence in literature just before it matured into the student free speech and anti-war movements. Because Mailer's primary specimen is the white, middle-class youth, his essay pays particular attention to changing expectations of the future. Mailer recognizes that the bomb, which thoroughly alters Americans' relationship to death, is central to a strange new public consciousness. Though his ostensible project is to introduce a new "type" to the culture, "The White Negro" is best read for its understanding of the postwar middle-class ability to

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[9] Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Knopf, 1982) 3-4.

accommodate thoughts of this new kind of mortality. The first paragraph is a foundation treatment of postwar American anxiety, explaining the impact of both the bomb and the Holocaust upon the contemporary imagination:

> Probably, we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years. For the first time in civilized history, perhaps for the first time in all of history, we have been forced to live with the suppressed knowledge that the smallest facets of our personality or the most minor projection of our ideas, or indeed the absence of ideas and the absence of personality could mean equally well that we might still be doomed to die as a cipher in some vast statistical operation in which our teeth would be counted, and our hair would be saved, but our death itself would be unknown, unhonored, and unremarked, a death which could not follow with dignity as a possible consequence to serious actions we had chosen, but rather a death by *deus ex machina* in a gas chamber or a radioactive city.[10]

This postwar consciousness imagines death as a mutual, national experience. In spite of the collective slaughter Mailer describes, his essay deals almost entirely with the fears of individual men and women. Mailer admits our shared failure to measure the bomb's impact, except to guarantee that every individual on the planet lives now and forever with the "suppressed knowledge" of the bomb. Its awesome

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[10] Norman Mailer, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," *Advertisements for Myself* (1959; Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 338. Subsequent references to this essay will be indicated by page number.

power is rendered here not as the ability to terminate the life spans of nations after the failure of diplomacy but the lives of individuals, those who haven't failed at all but are still subject to dying anonymously, without recognition of their idiosyncratic abilities, allegiances, or accomplishments. The essay's title comes from Mailer's positioning of this paradoxically terrified and fearless white individual as a type of black man, the Cold War equivalent of a Negro who cannot "saunter down a street with any real certainty that violence will not visit him on his walk."(340) In spite of Mailer's observations about race, described by a recent critic as "self-valorizing... white mythology," the essay does illustrate the schism that develops within the middle class as it embraces nuclear consciousness.[11] How does the middle class respond? Mailer tells half of the story.

The bomb's power to bring about totalizing destruction transforms the culture. Along with the abdication of individual responsibility for life that accompanies that bomb's capacity for mass death comes a new character on the American scene, the hipster. As Mailer characterizes him, the hipster is a renegade from society who looks at the

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[11] Eric Lott, "White Like Me: Cross-Dressing and the Construction of American Whiteness," *Cultures of United States Imperialism,* ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 484.

current situation and poses this thought:

> if the fate of twentieth-century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as an 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.(339)

Mailer goes on to define the hipster as a middle-class male whose anxiety is the result of an adolescence that mirrors the tumultuous history of war, the Holocaust, and the bomb. These historical circumstances catapult the hipster into a renegade existence of downtown jazz clubs, homosexuality, and spontaneous language unfamiliar to the rest of the middle class which attempts to keep track of him. Though everyone lives with the specter of mass death, the hipster is first to respond to its frightening power by abdicating the privileges and responsibilities of the middle class. Mailer sketches a number of binaries to separate the hipster from his middle-class peers: hip/square, rebel/conformist, "a frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life/a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian issues of American society."(339)

But as the above passage makes clear, Mailer sees a logical connection between living under constant threat of death and abandoning society, so he never looks beyond the hipster to see how the other half lives. And indeed, the

hipster and his Beat descendants have been of great interest to readers who have found their narratives of social rejection representative of the chaotic nature of Cold War America. But it is the converse of Mailer's hipster, the square, whose life reflects a different narrative tradition: the conformist generates a master narrative for the Cold War novel. No less a direct reflection of atomic anxiety, the reaction of the square is to embrace a sanguine conformity. Like David Riesman's "other-directed man" in *The Lonely Crowd*, he takes his behavioral cues from others. While the more "Negro" partner in these pairings stares directly at death, the conventional one appropriates a defining behavior of the middle class: sublimation, the "middle-class morality" Bruno Bettelheim diagnosed whereby an individual "learn(s) to let go of present pleasures at times for greater ones in the future."[12]

One cultural situation engenders radically different responses. The hipster takes one look at the atomic future and heads straight for Ground Zero, to urban areas like Greenwich Village, San Francisco's North Beach or the Left Bank of Paris, delighting in bisexual orgasm, facial hair, and linguistic riffs. He does not wait for pleasure to come to him, and his Bohemian pursuit of instant gratification

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[12] Bruno Bettelheim, "Children Must Learn to Fear," *New York Times Magazine*, 13 April 1969: 125.

looks very much like apocalypse itself. Though Mailer insists that the hipster does not read, a discreet literary heritage of "spontaneous bop prosody," in Jack Kerouac's words, comes to be associated with the hipster and his successors in the counterculture, retaining today much of the popularity that greeted it in the late 1950s.[13]

Mailer says nothing of the hipster's conformist counterpart who sublimates the same anxiety into a form which, rather than challenging social expectations, reinforces them. Equally frightened of a sudden end to the familiar, the square's sublimated reaction to the bomb is difficult to detect. Unlike the hipster's, this response looks nothing like apocalypse. But at its core remains an uneasy recognition of mortality, "a vague but pervasive anxiety that threatens to become terror," and often succeeds.[14] The square's master narrative gives the

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[13] Two assessments of the literature spawned by the hipster and Beat movements appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1958, Norman Podhoretz's "The No-Nothing Bohemians" 25 (1958): 305-18; and Diana Trilling's "The Other Night at Columbia," reprinted in *Claremont Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964) 153-73. Mailer's "ex-friend" Podhoretz suggests in his essay, "[T]he whole point of *Marjorie Morningstar* was to assure the young marrieds of Mamaroneck that they were better off than the apparently glamourous *luftmenschen* of Greenwich Village."(306) Trilling is equally dismissive, arguing that "there is no more menace in 'Howl' or *On the Road* than there is in the Scarsdale P-T.A."(162).

[14] Steven Marcus, "The Terrors of Yoknapatawhpa and Fairfield." *Commentary*. 14 (1952). 580.

impression of life continuing, even improving along the lines Nixon suggested to Khrushchev that outlasts the Cold War itself. Instead of moving to the center of the city, the square chooses to live further away, settling in Scarsdale, perhaps because of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists'* recommendation "defense through decentralization" for depopulating the core of American cities. He marries to consummate his heterosexuality and reproduces as "one way to express civic values" rewarded by his conforming neighbors.[15] To embrace most completely the safe anodyne of the commodity culture that keeps fear of the end far from his conscious mind, he finds work in advertising, and if financial success never fully satisfies this gray-suited middle-class hero, as a metaphysical distraction it is hard to beat. That this hypothetical master narrative actually happens, not only in Sloan Wilson's quintessential *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* but in much of John Cheever's writing, should point out that not everything in "The White Negro" can be laughed away as fatuous.[16] If Mailer's account of the genesis of hip is to

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[15] For a discussion of the containment of sexual deviance through Cold War reproductive patterns, see May, *Homeward Bound*, 135-161.

[16] Many writers were less enthusiastic about the Beat's diagnosis of society's tenuous situation, including Cheever, who was uncharacteristically contrarian in his journal: "My first feelings about the Kerouac book were: it was not good...that the

be believed, then it is the hipsters who are the real practitioners of "duck and cover," acknowledging that the bomb demands a response. Even if their suburban brothers are equally frightened, they endure their terror from behind the house, equipped only with an apron and a pair of barbecue tongs.

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Upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950, William Faulkner gave early and influential testimony on the atomic age burden on the novel. In his Nobel address, Faulkner acknowledges the raw material of human spirit out of which he crafted his fictions, but admits that the bomb may deprive a postwar writer of this essential commodity:

> Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.[17]

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apocalyptic imagery was not good enough -- was never lighted by true talent, or deep feeling, vision....My life is very different from what he describes. There is almost no point where our emotions and affairs correspond. I am most deeply and continuously involved in the love of my wife and my children. It is my passion to present to my children the opportunity of life." (New York: Random House, 1991) 96-97.

[17] William Faulkner, "I Decline to Accept the End of the World," *Essays and Speeches of William Faulkner* (New York:

In order to provide a reading audience with "the pillars to help [them] endure and prevail," which Faulkner calls a requisite duty of the writer, the novelist must disregard this fear. Anticipating Saul Bellow's Mr. Sammler, Faulkner is concerned that writers who can only recognize doom will only write about lust, which is of little enduring value to readers. Faulkner wants the novel to disseminate a message of enduring humanism, devoid of pessimism and threatening technological influence, and entirely free of the bomb. But the major postwar novel, though seldom addressing it explicitly, recognizes the fear of the bomb in the embrace of the consumer culture central to American middle-class identity after World War II. Rather than ignore potential apocalypse, these novels turn their attention to a critique of the middle class as it accommodates that fear.

While Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell have observed that "You cannot understand the twentieth century without Hiroshima," the bomb's impact on consciousness has not been examined in fictional texts representative of this distinctly affluent age.[18] A valuable study of the bomb in popular culture, Paul Boyer's *By the Bomb's Early Light*, makes this claim outright: "In most of the major novels of

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Random House, 1966). 119-120.

[18] Robert J. Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1995) xi.

the immediate post-Hiroshima years" - Boyer cites Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey* by name as well as work by Bellow and Mailer, all of whom are discussed here - "the atomic bomb is notable by its absence."[19] Novelists write what they know, Boyer claims, offering Trilling's depiction of the radical politics of the 1930s as an example. But as I argue, *The Middle of the Journey*, though set in the 1930s, is very much a book of the late '40s, fully aware of the tenuous American future. It is not an exaggeration to say that the bomb informs every fiction implicitly, even if it is mentioned explicitly only in the popular science fiction of the day (as Boyer goes on to say). Those critics who study novels expressing popular understanding of nuclear holocaust examine only science fiction, or poetry and novels which directly speak to questions of nuclear destruction like Allen Ginsberg's poem "Plutonian Ode" and James Agee's short story "Dedication Day." Among these are Boyer, Thomas Schaub and Paul Brians, whose 1987 book *Nuclear Holocausts* provides an index of post-apocalyptic novels, relying only on science-fiction titles. Again in 1994, Albert Stone's *Literary Aftershocks: American Writers, Readers and the Bomb* uses texts which either deal directly with the A- or H-bomb

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[19] Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 246.

or provide allegories conjured from the hypothetical situation of a third world war, leaving unexamined the narratives of domestic life that are central to postwar American letters.

Faulkner's warning forces us to confront the tenor of this fear in our literature. The paradox of wealth amid this potentially abridged future appears in realistic novels that seek to reproduce domestic prosperity. As long ago as 1952 Steven Marcus observed that "[t]he terror in the society of Connecticut would seem to be an intensification of the sense that the quasi-urban life of the upper middle class wants purpose."[20] Characters in these "Connecticut novels" are motivated by the shared knowledge that complete destruction of both material and human life is possible. Addressing the social issues which accompany middle-class affluence, including the nuclear family, white-collar employment and suburbanization, texts within and outside of the canon of mid-twentieth-century fiction engage American consciousness on the nuclear future.

In popular literature of this period, explicit references to the bomb are rare. In Laura Z. Hobson's 1947 *Gentlemen's Agreement* for instance, a character wonders to himself whether a bomb could "vaporize" the Chrysler

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[20] Marcus 580.

Building "out of existence," but the topic, admittedly a more hypothetical dilemma than the novel's anti-semitism, is never broached again. Frank Wheeler in Richard Yates' 1961 *Revolutionary Road* insists that sentimentality, not "the profit motive or the loss of spiritual values or the fear of the bomb" is the problem with America. One might argue that characters in popular novels became inured to atomic fear, but the connection between the bomb and material goods remains. Even in texts which valorize conventional suburban living, nuclear anxiety does not stop the professional striving and material desires of their heroes. Commuting to New York City, Tom Rath, the title character in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit,* glances over a newspaper column that asks whether the Russians have a hydrogen bomb, but nevertheless cannot be distracted from imagining the new job he is about to accept at a television station. Though all of Rath's decisions are motivated by his concern about the future, his ability to provide for his family emotionally and materially, the Russians as future-denying enemies are never again mentioned. In a sequel to the comic essay collection *Please Don't Eat the Daisies,* Jean Kerr writes about cosmetic saleswomen, "If they but knew that before the discovery of the hydrogen bomb I used to spend all my time worrying about my dry skin," turning nuclear anxiety into a

subject of domestic satire.[21]

The single threat that links the texts I consider is their suspicion about the affluent middle class. In using this term, I radically simplify the complicated social stratification of postwar society. I mean to avoid the ubiquity of the "middle class" of which Barbara Ehrenreich warns, meaning all Americans, intend "middle class" to be one discrete class among others, the professional, managerial class which grew in size and influence after World War II.[22] To the extent that these works were written by members of the middle class, they are a reflexive body of criticism, preoccupied with the kind of self-examination that at times leads to ambivalence. These authors nonetheless offer a consistent critique of middle-class

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[21] Laura Z. Hobson, *Gentlemen's Agreement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947) 10; Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (Boston: Little, Brown) 128; Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955) 74-75; Jean Kerr, "Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall, I Don't Want to Hear One Word Out of You," 1960. *How I Got to be Perfect* (New York: Doubleday, 1978) 21.

[22] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989) 5-6. Ehrenreich takes special care to mention that a professional writer, even one still in graduate school, is a member of the middle class and will have a difficult time reading its assumptions as class-bound if they are autobiographical. As I grew up in the very suburb where Ehrenreich herself lives, I yield to the challenges of this observation.

behavior in response to Cold War fear.[23]

To establish the intellectual climate of the age in the discourse of the quality of American life, I begin with a close examination of the fiction and criticism of Lionel Trilling who helps to define the postwar middle class for all who follow. Morris Dickstein observes that "Trilling was...one of the first to perceive the affinity between modernism and the apocalyptic strain in modern social life,"[24] a relationship at the center of this argument. In criticism and fiction, Lionel Trilling attended the inner life of the middle class, its routine interests and its obsession with providing future generations with an abiding sense of morality amid affluence. The other novelists observed, John Cheever, Saul Bellow and Don DeLillo are also relentless interrogators of postwar prosperity, subtly acknowledging the bomb's relationship to middle-class consumer behavior. Even DeLillo, whose 1997 novel *Underworld* offers a coda to the Cold War, places his

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[23] Obviously the bomb appears in literature written and read outside of the middle class as well, but the anxieties it stirs up are less often metaphysical, more often practical. An example can be found in Tillie Olsen's short story "I Stand Here Ironing," where the narrator concedes she was unable to ease her daughter's terror about the bomb because financial pressures forced her to spend much of her daughter's childhood away from home.

[24] Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (1977; New York: Penguin, 1989) 266.

examination of the bomb's grip on middle-class consciousness in a context of commodity culture, consumer waste, and the aftermath of Cold War fears.

Wini Breines observes in the 1950s "an apocalyptic consciousness that fed the hyperactive consumer market," one that refused to wait for anything.[25] In separate chapters on each author, I show this market to be an anodyne to nuclear fear for many of the characters. The novels and stories of John Cheever illustrate a suburban gentry whose fear of atomic destruction is allayed by civic improvement - for example Mrs. Irene Wryson, whose nightmare of nuclear holocaust makes her an avid proponent of "upzoning" in prosperous Shady Hill. Cheever's genealogical fables, his two Wapshot novels, find ordinary anxiety quelled by the surface value of consumer goods even as the technology that produces them causes havoc, hatred, and frequently its own unanticipated (and hilarious) death.

Mr. Sammler's Planet, Saul Bellow's 1970 philippic, could be called a novelistic exegesis of Mailer's remarks in "The White Negro." Bellow depicts an affluent middle-class family in comic disagreement over the last days on earth. Its setting moves back and forth between New York and New Rochelle, differentiating the urban environment of decay and

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[25] Wini Breines, *Young, White and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon, 1992) 7.

the suburb's faux pastoral quality. The novel also illustrates the generational strife engendered by the tenuous fate of the earth. Published right after the first moon landing, Bellow's novel mockingly asks whether transplanting human civilization to the moon is the last chance of the human race or a kind of assurance that the race has already been lost.

Because Don DeLillo's *Underworld* takes place after the fall of the Soviet Union, nuclear anxiety is regarded with measured nostalgia and sentimental hope for the new world order. *Underworld* ultimately realizes the cohesiveness of the American community, which dwelled in shared fears of collective destruction, was a function of global bipolarity, a thesis considered by the other novels in this study. But first and foremost, *Underworld* establishes the link between American fear and consumption, for instance when a housewife conflates President Kennedy's military build-up with a greasy build-up in her oven. *Underworld*'s illustration of an American community created and then destroyed by the respective rise and fall of Soviet military power concludes sentimentally, but only after its characters migrate to the pages of the World Wide Web. Until that point, each individual lives among the detritus of consumer waste that is one legacy of the Cold War, disconnected from the

community that thrived on American fear during the Cold War.

Alan Nadel reads "the fetishizing of domestic security" as an integral part of the Cold War's containment culture, but for these texts, his use of the word 'domestic' has two meanings.[26] The superimposition of national security and domestic, that is, household, security reveals once again the technological breakthroughs that advance the capacity for nuclear destruction and home conveniences simultaneously. This link is particularly resonant in these fictions, where middle-class characters are obsessed with material circumstances during moments of advanced nuclear anxiety. These authors place housewives in the position of guarding the home against infiltration that could be radioactive, ideological, or merely threatening to the quality of life they embrace. Cheever's suburban matrons attempt to preserve the sanctity of their homes by retreating from the community during times of crisis. For Mrs. Pastern, this means denying neighbors and members of her extended family entry to the bomb shelter conspicuously awaiting the end beneath her front lawn. Erica Deming in *Underworld* finds her giddy recitation of the names of her domestic appliances interrupted when she learns that Sputnik is circulating above her suburban California home. Even

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[26] Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) 3.

Trilling's Lucy Elwin and Nancy Croom, better educated and less obviously comic custodians of the middle-class family, strive to keep their homes free of the contaminating influences of racial and political discord, concentrating on the most mundane household rituals and home improvements to avoid facing their fear. The 'fetish' of this consumer glee applies as well to the erogenous license of Angela Gruner in Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, a young woman whose sexual libertinism is a product of her wealth and her fear of the end, and to the comic monologues of Lenny Bruce in *Underworld*, which conjure up a "sure thing" weekend tryst that coincides with the Cuban Missile Crisis, possibly jeopardizing more than his sexual gratification.

While these fictions are often more comedic than serious considerations of life on the brink of destruction, they demonstrate an affinity between the affirmation available through consumption in postwar America and the uncertainty of the future. Significantly, the protagonists of these books are seldom the source of much of the humor. Each one shares a personal relationship with death that separates them from the mostly comic consumers. Both Trilling's Laskell and Bellow's Sammler are described as having "returned from the dead," one after a life-threatening illness, the other after having been left for dead by the Nazis. In both cases, admitting death to any

collective consciousness - and in Laskell's case, even talking about it - drives others into a frenzy. When Cheever's Francis Weed has a brush with death during an emergency airplane landing, he experiences a short-lived epiphany that causes him to violate his neighbors' meticulous standards and face social expulsion.[27] DeLillo's Nick Shay, who inexplicably sends a friend to an early death as a teenager, is so fascinated with death that he becomes part of the walking dead throughout his adult life. These characters, though conformists after the model of their consuming cousins, reflect the mind of Mailer's hipster, "that incandescent consciousness which the possibilities within death has opened for them" that survives the Cold War because, as DeLillo finally shows, Americans -- in fact all human beings -- are still mortal.(342)

In a study of Cold War culture, Alice Jardine asks "How did this country get from Hiroshima and Nagasaki to Disneyland in ten years?"[28] This question mistakenly reads U.S. reaction to the bomb and the animated idyll of Disney's benign fantasy land as contrary developments. But the

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[27] In his journal, Cheever uses the phrase "returned from grave" when he becomes "regrettably morose and self-indulgent about the possibility of my death." 378.

[28] Alice Jardine, "'Flash Back, Flash Forward' The Fifties, the Nineties, and the Transformed Politics of Remote Control," *Found Object* 6 (1995): 39.

radical change that comes to American culture with the new capacity for nuclear destruction fosters a defining enthusiasm for improving the American quality of life. The looming awareness of atomic destruction may not mean that affluent Americans expected their lives to end abruptly. But the Cold War marks a period when the American middle-class terror at the possibility of absolute destruction is fused with a passion to maintain a higher standard of living. The culture has been slow to realize that the century's greatest period of economic growth matched that of its greatest fears of sudden destruction. The impact of the bomb on expectations of middle-class prosperity continues to resonate today. In the current climate, which has seen a surge of economic growth exceeding even that of the Cold War, quality of life remains a national concern. In New York, the phrase - used every time the mayor speaks of car radio disturbances and sidewalk vendors - is meant to connote middle-class desires that frequently oppose the needs of other classes. Nationally, "quality of life" is not a matter of foreign affairs, access to education, civil rights or even distribution of wealth; instead it conveys the vague expectations of what the world should look and feel like, expectations that come directly from the cultural assumptions of the postwar middle class.

In the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, Morris

Dickstein, who advised this project, comments that "[a]fter 1945, very few American writers thought they could make much sense of history."[29] Perhaps he is correct. But Dickstein's observation is akin to recognizing that few writers after 1945 could make much sense of language, which, however inadequate, is still the only medium in which a novel can be recorded. In spite of its complexity, the themes, the events, even a few proper nouns of postwar American history have a distinct presence in the novel after World War II, even if the corresponding reality makes very little sense. This is not to say that a historical presence is literal. While it is easy to see the bomb within the alert insurgence of the hipster, it is more challenging to locate a representation of nuclear fear within the mainstream middle-class considered in this study because its representatives disguise their fear. This dissertation points to key places where this significant entry from the postwar years, anxiety caused by nuclear weapons, insinuates itself into major postwar novels, in spite of how nonsensical that history appears.

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[29] Morris Dickstein, "Apocalypse Now: A Literature of Extremes," *The Cambridge History of American Literature,* ed. Sacvan Berkovich (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999) 244.

The well-loved child of the middle class: Lionel Trilling sees the future

> He wanted, as it were, to lay his near experience of death at the feet of life, to put it at the service of life, and life could have no better representatives than the Crooms....More than most people they were committed to life. Their commitment was expressed in their youth, their vigor, their unquestioning attachment to each other, the child they had and the child to come; but it did not stop there, as Laskell knew--it went beyond, expressing itself in their passionate expectation of the future, an expectation that was at once glad and stern, in their troubled but clear sense of other people all over the world, suffering or soon to suffer. Life could not reach further, could not pitch itself higher, than it had in these young Americans.[1]

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On the eve of the United States' entry into World War II, "a representative list of American writers" including John Dos Passos, Katherine Anne Porter, Wallace Stevens, Robert Penn Warren and Lionel Trilling, received a questionnaire from the editors of *Partisan Review*. Responses to "The Situation in American Writing," appeared in the Summer and Fall numbers in 1939. The seven questions touched on an array of topics that reveal as much about what

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[1] Lionel Trilling, *The Middle of the Journey* (1947; New York: Scribners, 1975) 13. Subsequent references to this novel will be indicated by page number.

it meant to be a writer within the critical climate of the 1930s as do any respondent's answers. Questions about a "usable past" in American literature, about critical and audience response to their writing, and about nationalistic, class or party alliances evident in an author's work, suggest the political involvement of literary criticism associated with the 1930s. With the exception of Gertrude Stein who, bellowing her lack of interest in all the questions, gave curt one-sentence answers, all of the writers surveyed, including conservatives like Warren and John Crowe Ransom and more progressive writers like James T. Farrell and Dos Passos, responded in ways that lend credence to the stereotypical notion of the committed American writer of the '30s. Obeisance is paid to party affiliation, political engagement and the writer's role in mediating relationships between the haves and have nots of American society.

But Lionel Trilling sees these questions in a different way. Taking them out of order, Trilling focuses on the U.S. role in the European conflict and what the aftermath of a possible second World War might mean for American society, turning the perfunctory assignment into a platform that foreshadows many of the concerns that would occupy American criticism in the half-century to follow. This is the text of the final question, the one to which Trilling replies

first:

> Have you considered the question of your attitude towards the possible entry of the United States into the next world war? What do you think the responsibilities of writers in general are when and if war comes?[2]

Though they do not agree, the other writers surveyed answer in purely political terms: we must be an enemy of the Axis powers; we must maintain a policy of isolation; there will not be another European war. Warren responds pointedly: "I think that if we get into the next war we are suckers"; Farrell, sarcastically: "the real estate business has not been my *metier*." Trilling alone speculates about writing in the aftermath of war, and this makes his answer most resonant. Calling the war question "the only one that I 'face'" and saying it is "immediate and crucial," Trilling anticipates the watershed that will follow World War II. Due to the threat to continuity a war would necessarily introduce, political categories of writing and thinking about literature will be superseded by a critical tradition with moral and material concerns. Because Trilling intuits a number of the social issues that will preoccupy American artists and their audiences during the Cold War, his answer is remarkably prescient:

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[2] "The Situation in American Writing," *Partisan Review* 5 Summer (1939): 26.

> Whether or not he is wholly conscious of it, the writer lives by his faith in continuity. He must feel that he himself will go on indefinitely to practice his craft; he must suppose a connection between himself and the past; and he must assume, however modestly, that he has some connection with the future.[3]

In other words, the postwar writer is less focused on the social concerns of the present: inequality, poverty, and the government's role in alleviating the conditions of the '30s. His business is to write and he is by definition attuned to succeeding days in the distant future when his work will be read. The abstraction of continuity is rendered as a faith, a secular humanist idea that reading will remain a practice of succeeding generations.

> This sense of continuity is, of course, attenuated or destroyed by the possibility of war. Perhaps tomorrow, the writer feels he will cease to be a writer -- and immediately it becomes infinitely more difficult for him to be a writer today.[4]

Much in Trilling's statement begs our attention. Chief among the issues raised is the hypothetical writer Trilling creates, one who depends on the future for his very identity. Jonathan Schell observes that "[i]t is the very business of artists to speak to future audiences."[5] The

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[3] Lionel Trilling, "The Situation in American Writing," *Partisan Review* 5 Fall (1939): 108.

[4] Trilling, "The Situation in American Writing" 108.

[5] Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Knopf, 1982) 163.

writer needs not only a future in which to write, but a guaranteed audience and opportunity for the written word to be read and engaged with in ensuing years. Trilling uses the word "continuity," establishing it as an outright need for the writer. If circumstances such as global conflict jeopardize continuity, a writer's identity either suffers or ceases to exist entirely. In the earliest hours of a world where continuity cannot be taken for granted, Trilling establishes a tone for American writing for the next 50 years. Though the Cold War still looms in the distance, its two opposing forces years from solidifying the terms of their argument, Trilling anticipates the impending crisis in the minds of future-oriented American writers and their audiences at the suggestion of a sudden end to the familiar.

Of course in 1939, Trilling is talking about conventional, not atomic, warfare. While any global conflict might mean the cessation of the familiar and the introduction of an unknown set of systems, personalities, and political agendas, war in the atomic age guarantees a complete ending to life as we know it -- or so we have believed from the moment the United States used atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Trilling further indicates the special relationship a writer has not just to the future, but to the past, a relationship on which any artist depends that cannot be maintained in the aftermath of war. As

Trilling prophesies, "[t]he post-war political situation will discontinue the culture of the past and prevent the culture of the future."[6]

This connection galvanizes the link between the figure of the writer and the American middle class. Both live for the future, their identity dependent not on instant gratification, but in the promise of time to come, in continuity. Jonathan Schell tells us that art, "the very prow of the future, is in radically altered circumstances if the future is placed in doubt."[7] Similarly, the customs and habits of the middle class demand succeeding generations to practice them, creating social patterns and esteeming their ancestry. A character in Trilling's short story "The Other Margaret" sees his daughter preparing a cocktail for the express purpose of being able to share the experience with her children years later. If no future generation follows to appreciate their creations and maintain their traditions, the identity of both the writer and the middle class suffers.

It is no surprise that Trilling imagines an American writer who can stand in for the middle class. As Thomas Bender points out, he was the "representative intellectual"

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[6] Trilling, "Situation in American Writing" 109.

[7] Schell 163.

of the postwar middle class.[8] Louis Menand says that Trilling "made literature part of the language of the educated middle class."[9] He appears at the vanguard of issues of middle-class life after World War II, compelling for his prolific if ambivalent considerations of materialism and the postwar American conscience. This is the defining characteristic of Lionel Trilling's writing, both essays and fiction, which demonstrate the changing context for American criticism after World War II. As Bender comments, "[i]n an era of perceived and real economic prosperity that expanded the middle class and increased the level of its education, Trilling's issues -- 'quality of human life' rather than redistribution -- were middle-class issues."[10] While other writers in the *Partisan Review* symposium address the political, Lionel Trilling, "the public guardian of our personal life," speaks to the personal and so sees the future.[11] Trilling's first volume of critical essays, *The Liberal Imagination,* itself became a popular commodity,

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[8] Thomas Bender, "Lionel Trilling and American Culture," *American Quarterly* 42:2 (1990): 340.

[9] Louis Menand, "Intellectual Identity After Trilling," Columbia University Trilling Lecture, New York, 9 Nov. 1996.

[10] Bender 340-41.

[11] Daniel O'Hara, *Lionel Trilling and the Work of Liberation* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988) 28.

according to Bender, "one of the first serious paperbacks," eventually selling more than 100,000 copies.[12] The hypothetical writer of Trilling's response to the *Partisan Review* survey, one who "lives by his faith in continuity" and "will go on indefinitely to practice his craft," is defined by this future-orientation.

As I have said, after August 6, 1945, humankind experienced an awareness of its own mortality in a new and complicated way. Lionel Trilling's work is one barometer of this consciousness. Images of the apocalypse are not found more frequently in Trilling's work after World War II; in fact literal representations of the bomb do not appear at all in Trilling's work, as they rarely do in much postwar middle-class writing. Yet its focus on the values of conscientious, educated Americans enjoying a privileged life makes Trilling's writing a site for anxiety in the minds of a class of people during the period of our cultural history when the bomb became a social issue. If Trilling's fictional characters never speak directly of potential nuclear apocalypse, their lives are nonetheless predicated on the uncertainty of continuing this middle-class tradition that came into its own after World War II just as the threat to its continuity became most evident.

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[12] Bender 324.

As a critic, Trilling is a generalist. His essays and full-length studies move through years, continents and genres. Trilling gave important testimony on Austen, Dickens, Fitzgerald, Flaubert, Henry James, Orwell, Tolstoy and Wordsworth, among others, and wrote books on Matthew Arnold and E.M. Forster. His literary interests evade disciplinary boundaries of nation and century, expressing themselves instead through his own unsatisfying formulation, literature in relation to ideas.[13] Trilling is engaged in a career-long search for an author to serve as "the representative of a mode of the American mind and temperament," guided by the intellectual and social interests of the middle class.[14] In his single-author essays, particularly those that address the contemporary audience for American novelists like Hawthorne, James, Howells, and Anderson, he takes as his template the interests of "comfortable middle-class readers." In one essay, middle-class taste is the starting point for a valuation of Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* over novels by the literary descendants of William Dean Howells, Frank Norris

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[13] Trilling, "The Meaning of a Literary Idea," *The Liberal Imagination* (1950; New York: Anchor, 1953) 273.

[14] Trilling, "William Dean Howells and the Roots of Modern Taste," *The Opposing Self.* (1955; New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979) 67. Subsequent references to this essay will be indicated by page number.

and Hamlin Garland.(77) We esteem Henry James for incorporating "the tone of the center,"[15] but dismiss Sherwood Anderson for too often retreating "to the bosom of a solid bohemia" whose crude hatred of materialism goes against everything American readers currently value.[16] Trilling's essays demonstrate the slow accommodation of literary interest to themes of materiality and comfort, a departure from the austere aesthetic epitomized by Modernist writers like Eliot, Joyce and Kafka. If neither comfort nor austerity are particularly political categories of analysis, Trilling's critical taste nevertheless anticipates the shifting interests of middle-class postwar readers, even explaining their consumption of nineteenth-century texts, as Amy Kaplan writes, "recasting a literary tradition to echo [his] own generation's disillusionment with oppositional politics."[17]

The document that best exemplifies this shift is his essay on William Dean Howells, a formidable chronicler of the turn-of-the-century middle-class family. As many have

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[15] Trilling, "Hawthorne in Our Time," *Beyond Culture* (New York: Viking, 1965) 179.

[16] Trilling, "Sherwood Anderson," *The Liberal Imagination* (1950; New York: Viking, 1953) 29.

[17] Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) 4.

pointed out, Trilling does not quote a single line from the novelist, instead presenting Howells' fiction in relation to a change in reading interests and middle-class artistic disposition. "William Dean Howells and the Roots of Modern Taste," which appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1951, considers the potential middle-class literary and critical insight has for recognizing at long last Howells' novels as important to the growth of American fiction. Only a decade after Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* re-defined the American canon of literature worthy of serious consideration, this essay speculates that the popularity of an author like Howells could rise and fall with contemporary tastes, finally insisting that Howells will never regain much popularity. But the essay is more valuable for Trilling's discussion of the cultural moment of postwar America, what material a reading audience at a specific moment in history may or may not embrace.

Throughout this discussion of Howells, Trilling notes a change in contemporary taste, one that echoes a change that abandoned Howells at the end of the prior century. If the demise in popularity Howells experienced in his lifetime showed that "the culture of the American nineteenth century had at last come it its very end," this essay indicates that the culture which superseded it, that of the early twentieth

century with its valuation of both the Realism of Dreiser and the Modernism of Eliot, is over as well. If Howells "gives us one of the points from which we can measure what has happened to the humanistic idea of the modern world," Trilling offers a way to measure the same thing after another period of radical change in American culture.(69)

Trilling makes his explanation for Howells' failure to meet our tastes by examining Henry James' judgement of the novelist. James tells us that Howells prefers "the familiar and the vulgar," that "he hates a story," and that his novels study the actual as opposed to the evil of American life. Briefly, according to Trilling, "the commonplace" in late nineteenth-century America fails to meet the contemporary tastes. Readers are drawn to the commonplace only "as it verges upon the rare and the strange" as it does in Kafka, Joyce or Eliot.(77) For these authors, "the family serves as but an ideality, a rather wistful symbol of peace, order, and continuity; it does not exist in anything like actuality."(79)

But William Dean Howells, who writes about middle-class actuality, performs "considerations of way of life, of quality of being" that do not appeal to contemporary audiences. Modifying the critical quarry of generations, Trilling describes the content of Howells' novels, including the daily life of the middle-class family, as

"representative of a mode of the American mind and temper."(75-76) Howells illustrates middle-class concerns about social etiquette, home decor, choice of residential neighborhood. Trilling labels Howells' examination of these "material circumstances in which spirit exists" as "the conditioned." The relative affluence of Trilling's audience in the 1950s, bears a greater resemblance to the anxiety of the Lapham family, for example, than James' *nouveau riches* Daisy Miller who does not know enough of the world to be self-conscious. A host of unfamiliar critical concerns emerges that mirror not only expectations for the appreciation of art, but middle-class life and the mundane decisions we make each day:

> this sense of the conditioned is carried out in our elaborate theories of child-rearing, and the extravagant store we set by education; and in our theories of morality and its relation to social circumstance.(79)

It is as if middle-class circumstances "condition" a reader to look for instances of him or herself in a text. While Howells' novels would reward reading on these grounds, the same approach would unearth little in "The Waste Land" or *Ulysses*, and even "The Metamorphosis" would come up short. Gregor Samsa's condition is not meant to approximate a reader's reality, nor is the resultant behavior of his parents, his sister or his employer. On the other hand, the

presence of "recognizability" is a factor in Trilling's analysis of "The Three Sisters" whose liberal Prozorov family has a political and material affinity with the postwar American middle class (and with the characters in Trilling's own fiction). Of Chekhov's cultivated family stranded in the provinces, Trilling writes:

> nothing stands in the way of our saying that they are much like ourselves and our friends. They are decent, well-intentioned people, not extraordinary in their gifts but above the general run of mankind in intelligence and sensitivity, well enough educated to take pleasure in the arts and to aspire to freedom, the enjoyment of beauty, and the natural development of their personalities, all the benefits to which we give the name of 'the good life.'[18]

Acknowledging his telling assumption about who reads (or goes to see) "The Three Sisters," Trilling presents a reflexive critical mood. The work I consider in this dissertation, the fiction of John Cheever, Saul Bellow, Don DeLillo and especially Trilling, is filled with characters recognizable to their readers. Their benign material circumstances and the ethical questions they entertain resemble those of their audience. My contention, that the "condition" of the Cold War determines the way the middle class envisions the future, is deeply concerned with the

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[18] Trilling, "The Three Sisters," *Prefaces to the Experience of Literature* (1967; New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981) 28.

social and material behaviors Trilling cites above, including child-rearing, education and consumption, aspects of society that have a direct bearing on the future and have little meaning without it. The historical situation of nuclear weapons and the long shadow they cast on the future reflects nothing more than "morality and its relation to social circumstance," something at the very core of the Trilling short story "The Other Margaret" for instance, considered below.

Given its connection to affluence and the growth of the American middle class, this critical mood has a historical context that requires some examination. Trilling's Howells essay was published during a period of considerable material growth, when commodities were celebrated for their value above and beyond their practical use. Trilling is ambivalent about this, suggesting that "our possessions, although they have reference to status and comfort, have a larger reference to the future of our souls," as if their meaning is bound up in the future, and only serve the present as indicators of class. "Our materialism...is not meant to imply ease and rest and self-indulgence but rather an ideal of alertness and readiness of spirit." (79)

But evidentially not even Trilling believes this. In the very next paragraph, he admits that "our deep comprehensive aesthetic sense...is satisfied by the

performance of a Bendix washing machine."(79-80) The washing machine is emblematic, the very household item Richard Nixon wielded as a Cold War weapon against Premier Khrushchev in the 1959 Kitchen Debate. As a consumer product, the washing machine becomes increasingly visible in middle-class homes as a vital but mundane necessity. It is for Trilling as it will be for Nixon, a symbol of a higher standards of living that has a reason in and of itself. This is a quality of life that relies on things, not ideas, to make it better, and its presence or absence is an important enough detail for many postwar writers and readers to notice -- a marked departure from nineteenth and early twentieth-century tastes. Stated perhaps too crudely, Coverly Wapshot must provide his wife with a washing machine to meet her expectations and those of Cheever's readers, but if Isabel Archer had a washing machine, we would not have learned about it from James. The reconfiguration of a critical mindset to value materiality, coming during a time of greater consumer wealth and even greater political instability, makes these "quality of life issues," as Bender calls them, central to the analysis of postwar American culture. "[T]hey are reality," Trilling writes, "and *in a time like this* [emphasis Trilling's] what we need is reality

in large doses."[19] The authors considered in this study illustrate these timely critical concerns that make it possible to read their work with regard to the effects of nuclear fear. Nowhere is this more evident than in the small body of fiction Lionel Trilling himself produced.

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At one level, there is no good reason to examine Trilling's fiction, no more than a fraction of his work, as a separate category. Trilling is best-known as a critic and a teacher, even though he thought of himself as a novelist well after the popular success of *The Liberal Imagination* in 1950. His short stories and the novel *The Middle of the Journey* are in many ways so similar to the essays and criticism for which Trilling is known, that they almost fail to meet our expectations for imaginative writing. Edith Sitwell's remark about Matthew Arnold, the subject of Trilling's dissertation, that people who like Arnold are people who don't like poetry, might be applied to Trilling and his fiction. Trilling eventually reached the same conclusion, abandoning writing fiction entirely a few years after the lukewarm U.S. reception for *The Middle of the*

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[19] Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals and the Novel," *The Liberal Imagination* (1950; New York: Anchor Books, 1953) 208.

Journey.[20] In an influential review of the novel, Robert Warshow defined Trilling's method, influenced by E.M. Forster as "confront[ing] his characters with situations for which their moral preconceptions have left them unprepared."[21] In its silent insistence that the educated individual in the twentieth century faces moral dilemmas at every turn, Trilling's fiction is better at characterizing moments of personal revelation than providing a narrative which satisfies even minimal requirements for a compelling story.

Trilling frequently had to answer the charge that he was a critic without method, without any guiding principles, one guilty of ambivalence and self-contradiction. His essays and his books on Arnold and Forster do not present a coherent system of critique. If at times he appears to be arguing with himself, it should be regarded not as ambivalence, but as the arduous process of identifying "both the yes and no of culture" through which he reached his resolution. But if this is true of every piece of non-fiction Trilling wrote, the complete opposite may be said of his fiction. In the novel *The Middle of the Journey* [1947]

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[20] The British response to the novel was far more enthusiastic. (See n.25)

[21] Robert Warshow, "The Legacy of the '30s," *The Immediate Experience* (New York: Atheneum, 1970) 43.

and the handful of short stories he published in the '20, '30s, and '40s, Trilling is unwavering. While scholarship on Trilling's writing concentrates on his essays and academic career, his fiction provides the clearest example of his most characteristic ideas. Free from rhetorical display, Lionel Trilling's fiction is undiluted. Mark Krupnick says, "Trilling's characters *are* their ideas."[22] The "we" of his essays -- which might be the Trilling family of Claremont Avenue in New York City, subscribers to *The Griffin*, a newsletter he directed for the Readers' Subscription book club, or the middle-class people depicted in his fiction -- are given names and actions in his stories. At last "we" are one with the narrator in fiction which assumes that we will invariably share the narrator's perspective.

Trilling writes about the liberal middle class in a mildly accusatory tone, tempered perhaps because his fictional world is virtually identical to the world in which the Trillings lived. Trilling's subjects are the readers who buy his books and they are also his friends. His protagonists have the careers we might expect them to have: Stephen Elwin is a publisher of scientific books; John

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[22] Mark Krupnick, *Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1986) 95.

Laskell is an author of books on public housing; Joseph Howe, a poet and an English professor; Vincent Hammell, a graduate student and part-time teacher. The unnamed protagonist of "Impediments" is an undergraduate taking a literature class; the protagonist in "Notes on a Departure" is a member of the faculty teaching one. It would not be unfair to criticize Trilling for choosing to write only about men whose profession is literature, provided we see this not as a lack of imagination on Trilling's part (and certainly not as coincidence), but as evidence of the importance attached to talking about books during the years Trilling's fiction was published. The centrality of the college English professor to twentieth-century culture can be exaggerated, but not in the world of Trilling's fiction. Further, if none of these agonizingly reflexive book-buying protagonists are named Trilling, all may stand-in for the author from college and graduate school through intellectual maturity with few adjustments.

It is not my purpose to demonstrate the autobiographical element of Trilling's fiction, though that would not be a challenging project, but to show that Trilling's fiction is filled with the sense of the middle class approaching dramatic change in imagining the future. Trilling's characters are concerned with living according to a moral sense and meaning in a world that is rapidly

becoming less stable than the one for which their parents and teachers trained them. They are as unprepared for the situations Trilling assigns to them as his audience is unprepared for the potential terror of the Cold War. Much of his fiction was written well before the war, while Trilling was a graduate student. But focused as it is on the values of principled, educated Americans enjoying a privileged life, Trilling's fiction is an obvious site for middle-class anxiety about the future. Thoughts of destruction and the futility of continuity are present in Trilling's writing even without overt mention of the bomb.

The short story "The Other Margaret" is the best place to examine both Trilling's anxious middle class and the critical shift he articulates in the Howells essay, suggesting the fiction's value for elucidating Trilling's criticism. Appearing in 1945 in *Partisan Review*, "The Other Margaret" is inextricably linked with its date of publication, coinciding with a watershed moment in American cultural history, the devaluation of the future among those who use it to define themselves. Though Trilling wrote "The Other Margaret" a few years earlier, it found an audience in *Harper's Bazaar* the very month of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. "People are just much meaner since the war," Lucy Elwin says as she, her husband and her daughter describe the

absence of kindness they have each witnessed that afternoon.[23] The story is a study of a middle-class household acutely conscious of cultivating its own traditions, traditions involving domestic rituals, ownership, education and even home decor. "The Other Margaret" provides a glimpse of Trilling's agenda for his whole career: the social business of the middle-class home; interpersonal relations and civility; and the function of art in postwar lives. Members of the middle class with families to raise, Trilling's characters wonder about the prospects for their children, the question of the future, and a newly permissive relationship to material goods. Stephen Elwin watches his daughter Margaret learn to appropriate the self-conscious behavior of the middle class. It will be Margaret's moment of "conditioning," the process Trilling details in the Howells essay for recognizing that material and social circumstances have a grave impact on her perception. Insofar as these cultural practices and beliefs are instilled in the young at the precise moment situations render them obsolete for the future, "The Other Margaret" has tragic implications.

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[23] Trilling, "The Other Margaret," *Of This Time, Of That Place and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979) 24. Subsequent references to the short stories in this volume will be indicated by an abbreviation and page number.

Throughout the afternoon the story takes place, Stephen Elwin, its central character, is haunted by a line from William Hazlitt. He repeats to himself throughout the day, "No young man believes he shall ever die," from the essay "On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth." As a kind of choral refrain, the Hazlitt line establishes a theme, the slow realization of mortality played against a surge of material circumstances that suggest eternal life. This begins as Elwin picks up a framed, "severe" reproduction of an African king by Rouault: "A person looking at it for the first time might find it repellent, even brutal or cruel. It was full of rude blacks that might seem barbarically untidy."("OM" 11) Race is mentioned early in the story as an appraisal a (white) viewer might make of a piece of art. Because the painting will hang in the home of an affluent white Manhattan family, its "rude blacks" are rendered harmless. Later in the story in fact, they will be mocked by their inability to contribute to a discussion about the behavior of the Elwin's black maid, the other Margaret. But the painting is a commodity too, valued for future returns it will deliver from an initial investment, not as the embodiment of an artistic idea. As the framer tells Elwin, "It will give you a lot of satisfaction....It was exactly as if he had just sold a suit or a pair of shoes."("OM" 12)

The dinner hour is beginning as Elwin arrives at home

and announces his new purchase. He watches his daughter proceed with the ordeal of making him a cocktail:

> Elwin thought that she needed to establish a 'custom,' not only for now but for the future, against the time when she could say to her children, "And every night before dinner it was the *custom* in our family for me to make my father a drink." He supposed that this ritual of the drink was Margaret's first traffic with the future.("OM" 21)

This passage equates the trappings of middle class, material routine with the future. Margaret, whom her father suggests has begun to resemble a well-bred pony, is learning to regulate the quality of life of the Elwin home. She brings up other family traditions, like their joke about a 'tossed' salad needing instead to be 'hurled,' to establish beyond a doubt that she belongs to the Elwin family. Margaret lives in a household where her talents and expectations will be cultivated. She will become the child Herbert Gans describes as "one who can perform autonomously in all spheres of life valued by the upper middle class, especially a rewarding professional career."[24] Margaret is also akin to her father's new painting; she too will guarantee dividends following expenditure. Like his daughter, Elwin recognizes that children are bound closely with the future, that everything they do is predicated on the notion that

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[24] Herbert Gans, *The Levittowners' Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburb* (New York: Pantheon, 1967) 30.

"the future is always brighter and more spacious than the present," as Trilling says in *The Middle of the Journey.*(139) I point in particular to the passage of Elwin peering into Margaret's bedroom. Though Margaret is aware of the transitory nature of commodities, she is surrounded by them:

> His daughter's room was full of life. His own old microscope stood on Margaret's desk and around it was a litter of slides and of the various objects from which she had been cutting sections, a prune and a dried apricot, a sliver of wood, a piece of cheese, and what seemed to be a cockroach. There were tools for carving wood and for cutting linoleum blocks. The books were beginning to be too many for the small bookshelf, starting with *The Little Family* and going on to his own soiled copy of *The Light that Failed* that Margaret had unearthed. There was her easel and on one wall was a print of Picasso's trapeze people in flight, like fierce flames, and on another wall one of Benton's righteous stylizations, both at home, knowing nothing of their antagonism to each other. The dolls were no longer so much to the fore as they once were, but they were still about, and so was the elaborate doll's house which contained in precise miniature, accumulated over years, almost every object of daily living, tiny skillets, lamps, cups, kettles, packaged groceries.("OM" 29)

We should not be surprised that this passage mentions an actual doll's house or a little family. The Elwin home is a doll-house in its accumulation of possessions and manners, and Margaret is her father's doll. This rendering contains in miniature many of the items used by full-sized people as

dinner is being served during the story (skillets, cups, a kettle, groceries). She has paintings representing two conflicting schools of Modern art, and her father's copy of *The Light that Failed*, reminding us of Kipling's pessimistic tale of art's race against time, and a tradition of reading passed to another generation. However playful, she is a young girl of many convictions and activities, "the well-loved child of the middle class," given encouragement to pursue chemistry and biology, painting, printmaking and modern art. There is very little in Margaret's bedroom that suggests the concerns of the present moment; she is being trained exhaustively for the future.

> Surrounded by all that his daughter made and did and read, Elwin could not understand how she found the time. And then, on the thought of what time could be to a child, there came to him with more painful illumination than usual, the recurrent sentence, "No young man believes he shall ever die." And he stood contemplating the room with a kind of desolation of love for it.("OM" 29)

This vision culminates with Elwin repeating the Hazlitt line, recognizing his relationship to his daughter's feeling of immortality. It has echoed all day, first at the framer's, when he met a young soldier who enlisted because "he did not want to miss sharing the experience of his generation."("OM" 14) The line occurs again when Elwin witnessed the driver of a city bus deliberately and cruelly

ignore a young would-be passenger. But its power has never been greater than when it is applied to his own daughter, confronted with the potential for achievement thrust upon her by her class. Obviously, a young man eventually learns that he *will* die, and Elwin has done nothing to prepare Margaret for an idea she will soon understand in all its gravity.

Though Trilling tried to publish it prior to 1945 in *The New Yorker*, one can read "The Other Margaret" as a story that anticipates the wholesale destruction of new weaponry. Consider the quiet horror of the way in which Elwin is struck repeatedly by Hazlitt:

> Every now and then, sometimes just as he was falling asleep, sometimes just as he was waking up, sometimes right in the middle of anything at all, the sentence and the full awareness of what it meant would come to him. It felt like an external explosion. It was not, however, an explosion of force but rather an explosion of light. It was not without pain but it was not wholly painful.("OM" 15)

There is a bomb in Elwin's future. He cannot anticipate when this feeling will overtake him, but he understands that it is out there, and someday it will make its presence felt. Its power is represented as an external explosion of light, not force, but as a parent, Elwin knows the peril of the future represented by the destructive impact of this sentence.

Margaret on the other hand knows only of the future's promise. She attends a progressive school where she learns about privilege and responsibility. "We studied the transit system," she tells her parents in defense of the crude manner of the city bus driver: "they are underpaid."("OM" 27) It pleases the Elwins to hear their daughter use a conventional explanation of social and economic determinism. Margaret understands that she cannot be held responsible for injustice. Like her parents and other liberals, Margaret sees herself as an amorphous force working against this inequality in spirit and word. And like her parents, she is content to enjoy material possessions and status without using her wealth to alleviate these social conditions.

But Margaret's liberal predilections do not survive the story. When the subject of the other Margaret is first introduced, Stephen and Lucy admit that she is a spiteful, malicious person, an unpleasant employee and bad housekeeper. Lately, the other Margaret has been given to breaking only those objects that hold a special sentimental or commercial value to the Elwins. The denouement of the story is the maid's deliberate destruction of a ceramic lamb that Margaret made for her mother's birthday. Realizing that the maid's clumsiness was willful, Margaret Elwin is thrust into the future against her will, confronted by the flaws in her system of thought. Her father witnesses

Margaret's moment of revelation:

> It came suddenly, as no doubt was the way of moments of wisdom, and he perceived what stupidly he had not understood earlier, that it was not the other Margaret, but herself that his Margaret was grieving for, that in her foolish and passionate argument, with the foolish phrases derived from the admired Miss Hoxie, she was defending herself from her own impending responsibility. Poor thing, she saw it moving toward her at a great rate, and she did not want it. Naturally enough, she did not want it. ("OM" 35)

This external explosion of light that comes to Margaret Elwin is a second bomb. Rendered as human responsibility, it is the same introduction of mortality her father feels at the ceaseless intrusion of the Hazlitt line.

Recriminations for the lack of human kindness are never far from the surface of this slight narrative. Every detail contains a reflection on middle-class comforts, and each pleasure carries with it an attendant responsibility. Replete with manners and material possessions, "The Other Margaret" is a peculiar morality tale. Even if two of the characters had not been named Margaret, Hazlitt's line would resonate against Hopkins's: "It is Margaret you mourn for." One might also suggest that the reader of the story becomes another other Margaret, holding tightly the practices of liberal humanism and the promise for the future that accompany them while the world changes. The painful awareness of the future will be examined further in

Trilling's body of fictional writing.

Trilling's best-known short story, "Of This Time, Of That Place," has not improved with age. Yet the way it illustrates the corruption of human expression, the empty ideas that are rewarded to the detriment of more painful, less optimistic ones, does offer a caution to the postwar materiality Trilling otherwise concedes. Perhaps because of its subject, a freshman composition class, it is frequently anthologized. Like "The Other Margaret," it presents a moral conundrum for the educated middle class. Joseph Howe, poet and professor, is concerned with two students, the cheerful, universally admired Theodore Blackburn and the socially inept Ferdinand Tertan. While it is obvious that Blackburn's written work and classroom bravado demonstrate a sophisticated command of contemporary language, Tertan's peculiar prose presents Howe with a problem. It shows either a genuine understanding of subject matter or a kind of madness. Like the narrative of "The Other Margaret," the story becomes an ethics trial for the protagonist. At the risk of his career at the university, Howe must rule on the academic futures of these two students.

It strikes a contemporary reader as more than odd, nearly Orwellian, that the sensitive Howe would consider it his responsibility to inform a college dean of his student's mental illness. Howe is naming names and does it guiltily.

On the other hand, he is scandalized by Blackburn's knowing manipulation of the institutions of power. The professor cannot fathom that a student would hand in an exam on "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" without having read the poem. However inept, Blackburn's essay on Coleridge's poem uses a lexicon very much of its time:

> In *The Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge lives in and transports us to a honey-sweet world where all is rich and strange, a world of charm to which we can escape from the humdrum existence of our daily lives, the world of romance. Here in this warm and honey-sweet land of charming dreams, we can relax and enjoy ourselves."("OTT" 102)

This is the language of a Madison Avenue copywriter that might be used to sell a reclining lounge chair or an imported bath oil. Blending familiar buzzwords of indulgence from any magazine ad with repetition and escapist images that suggest a quiet domestic idyll, Blackburn's language celebrates consumer goods. Its clear misapprehension of *The Ancient Mariner* notwithstanding, it is prose more accessible to a contemporary audience than would be a meaningful reading of the bleak and unforgiving poem. Blackburn is a figure similar to the wealthy middle-aged women in Trilling's sketch "The Lesson and the Secret," enrolled in a creative writing class but more concerned with profitable storytelling than craft. These women nonetheless berate their instructor, a long-suffering graduate student,

for failing to teach them the tricks of magazine publication in spite of their failure to complete a single one of his writing assignments.[25]

In "Of This Time," we are not surprised that on the day of graduation, Blackburn is hailed by the dean as "the first man of his class to be placed," while the philosophical Tertan, his academic career and his future in jeopardy by the diagnosis of a college-appointed psychiatrist, is last seen muttering to himself "instruments of precision."("OTT 144-15) However dishonest, Blackburn has learned to celebrate material things, the commanding skill of his age, and will glide easily into the middle class as a professional. Tertan, on the other hand, acknowledges that "instruments of precision" will not accommodate his unique and sophisticated understanding of society. The future in "Of this Time..." is even bleaker than the Ancient Mariner's, but the villainous Blackburn has been well-schooled to succeed there.

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[25] "The Lesson and the Secret" was written as a chapter of a novel based on the life of Walter Savage Landor. Vincent Hammell is able to leave his part-time teaching responsibilities behind when he is invited to write a biography of Jorris Buxton, a celebrated physicist and failed novelist. In her memoir *The Beginning of the Journey* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1993) 387-89, Diana Trilling attributes Viking's lukewarm response to Trilling as a novelist to his abandonment of fiction. The untitled manuscript is part of the Trilling Collection at Columbia University's Butler Library. "The Lesson and the Secret" was published as a short story in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1945.

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In chapter six of *The Middle of the Journey*, John Laskell enters a room where his friend Nancy Croom is knitting. She is reciting aloud, "forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty..." without making any other sound until she reaches 74. While Nancy counts, Laskell can hear crickets outside: "It seemed to him that it was the sound made by the passing of time."(138) As Nancy ticks off the numbers from 47 to 74, her hypnotic tally reminds us of the novel's currency and the 27 years after 1947 when it was published. The novel is set in the 1930s where Trilling can trace the leftist sympathies of a group of intellectuals, a project which would have little resonance after World War II when many former fellow-travelers, including Trilling himself, declared themselves anti-Stalinists and lost their faith in radical politics. But for the exigencies of its plot, *The Middle of the Journey* is a novel about the years immediately following the war. Like *The Liberal Imagination*, it scrutinizes middle-class expectations in the postwar period. With Nancy's count carrying the novel 27 years into the future, *The Middle of the Journey* is very much a book about the late '40s and '50s.

Laskell listens as Nancy counts off the next 27 years, arriving at the question the novel ultimately asks of its

middle-class intelligentsia, a question that exceeds the political reading of the novel to which most critics have treated it:

> Summer spoke of its end but did not go on to speak of new beginnings. It spoke only of the end of all other summers. Laskell, standing there while Nancy counted, had the sense -- and he wondered if it came eventually to every man and if it always came so early in life -- that there was really no future.(138-39)

The question of the future in *The Middle of the Journey* is key to understanding its critique of the middle class. Never mentioned outright, the bomb is nonetheless present as the force that demands an examination of a specific Cold War American future for people like the Crooms and John Laskell, people defined by an orientation towards the future. Just as Trilling's short stories and essays appraise middle-class prospects for the future according to their political sympathies, reading tastes and critical judgement, *The Middle of the Journey* takes stock of the middle-class American future. For John Laskell, the central character and Trilling's most complete fictional creation, the future takes on the weight of an obsession.

Though it is Trilling's only published novel, *The Middle of the Journey* rivals *The Liberal Imagination* for the title of Trilling's most discussed book. Trilling thought of himself as a novelist well into his career as a

successful critic. For an author whose greatest self-expression was realized in ambivalence, a novel is either an unusual choice of genre or an obvious one. The suggestion of indeterminacy is present from the book's first lines to its final paragraph, both of which take place in a railroad car with John Laskell heading somewhere, acutely aware that he is leaving something behind. Even the allussion to Dante in the title augurs this indeterminacy, suggesting a temporary position between two points. But *The Middle of the Journey* is finally the kind of novel Trilling the critic would have championed for its "capacity to manage complex and even contradictory truths."[26]

Critics have treated *The Middle of the Journey* largely as a political novel, placing it alongside *All the King's Men* and *Henderson the Rain King,* for depicting "the milieu...of the American literary and political intelligentsia at mid-century," and so classify it as a historical fiction.[27] Useful for illustrating a schism in leftist politics in the 1930s, it has remained of interest because of fortuitous circumstances. Whittaker Chambers, who accused State Department employee Alger Hiss of treason

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[26] Tom Samet, "Lionel Trilling and the Social Imagination," *Centennial Review* 23 (1979): 167.

[27] Nathan A. Scott, Jr., *Three American Moralists* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1973) 157.

and of membership in the Communist Party, was Trilling's inspiration for Gifford Maxim, the character who breaks with the party and spends much of the novel articulating his newly-found conservatism. Though they were never close friends, Trilling and Chambers were both undergraduates at Columbia University in the 1920s. When *The Middle of the Journey* was re-issued in 1975 a few months before Trilling's death, even he acknowledged Chambers' centrality to whatever popularity the novel held through the ensuing years. But its grander accomplishment, posing the question of the relationship between death or, in E.M. Forster's phrase "the idea of death" and the middle class during the Cold War, has gone unexamined.

When the novel opens, Laskell is aboard a train to Crannock, the New England village where he will spend a few weeks recuperating from scarlet fever. Taking his first journey since a lengthy quarantine, Laskell is eager to relate the thoughts of his near-death experience with his closest friends, Nancy and Arthur Croom. For the first time, Laskell can imagine his own death and he hopes to present this new consciousness to the people it can best serve. The way in which death has permeated Laskell's sensibility introduces one central theme of the novel, about which Trilling wrote:

> If Laskell's preoccupation were looked at closely and objectively...might it not be understood as actually an affirmation of death, which is, in practical outcome, a negation of the future and of the hope it holds out for a society of reason and virtue. Was there not a sense in which death might be called reactionary?(xii)

This consciousness is developed at length as we witness a division in the highly-educated middle class, but it is equally relevant to the kind of apocalyptic resignation of the postwar years. Laskell realizes that a spiritual chasm has opened between himself and the Crooms that has less to do with their fellow-traveller politics than the shiny opacity of their middle-class optimism. Given the novel's appearance two years after Hiroshima, Laskell's fixation, what one character describes as his "love affair with death," mirrors the new awareness among Trilling's readers of the potential for an untimely death that accompanied the start of the Cold War's political instability.

The Crooms' perspective on the future is informed by their sanguine expectations. Nancy Croom in particular will not abide the change in heart Laskell experienced as a result of his illness, and the rift that develops between the former friends resonates throughout the novel, exacerbating differences that might once have been described as political but must now be categorized as moral or philosophical. The change in the tenor of Laskell's

relationship with Nancy and Arthur is similar to the shift in postwar criticism from political categories of analysis to moral and social ones, enacted in this case by these fictional characters. The lengthy discussions of literary texts among Laskell, Maxim, the Crooms and their common friend Kermit Simpson, in particular on *Billy Budd* and the children's fable *Ferdinand the Bull*, are marked by questions of material circumstances, not political engagement. Given political alliances these people have shared, this is striking. For example, when Nancy Croom calls John a Ferdinand, this is her explanation:

> The moral is that if people just refused to fight there would be no more wars. I suppose Ferdinand is just simple human reason, the reason of simple human people refusing to cooperate in their own exploitation and slaughter. After all, Ferdinand wasn't killed, the way all the other bulls were. He lived to enjoy himself.(108)

Laskell's questioning of whether enjoying ourselves is necessarily a state to be desired is more resonant than Nancy's consideration of the Ferdinand story as an allegory for the Spanish Civil War. Trilling indicts the middle class epitomized by Nancy and Arthur not only for failing to grant any sympathy or understanding to the condition that is so close to Laskell's mind, but for ignoring it entirely. While not as conventional in their outright embrace of material goods as characters in John Cheever or Don DeLillo,

the Crooms are complacent. Their expectations for the future and insistence on continuity prevent them from seeing how their material and intellectual well-being is mingled with impermanence.

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John Laskell, the product of a loving family from suburban New York, is a representative of what will be referred to repeatedly as "the well-loved child of the middle class," a young American adult whose identity is characterized almost exclusively by the prospect of a bright future filled with opportunity.(139) Laskell is a liberal, not a Communist. But his fellow traveller sympathies support the existence of the Communist Party as a catalyst for the more moderate change that he himself would want. But political commitment is only a part of Laskell's life. This brief biography reveals his ambitions, which are not unlike those of the young Trilling:

> Until he was twenty-four he had planned a literary career. He wrote quite well and he had been in revolt against the culture of his affectionate and comfortable Larchmont family. He had wanted what young men of spirit usually want, freedom and experience, and literature was the way to get them. Literature was the means by which one became sentient and free. But the literary career did not develop...He knew that he would never be great, he was reconciled to being useful.(32-34)

Laskell is a respected author on public housing, considered

in the late 1930s a novel solution for the manifestations of urban poverty. Laskell's resignation to become useful in this way is typical of his optimism: "He had committed himself to the most hopeful and progressive aspects of modern life, planning their image in public housing developments, defending them in long dull meetings of liberals and radicals."(26) Laskell's expertise shows that his politics are guided by the kind of liberalism that believes social conditions can be ameliorated through systematic change. Laskell would envision a world slightly, not radically, better than this one. His relationship to the Communist Party is ambivalent; though he was never a member, Laskell supported his friend Maxim and did not feel the Party was without purpose:

> He had at Maxim's request endorsed a note and had even made outright a sizable cash contribution to a tottering periodical, all with the sense that, although he did not wholly agree with Maxim and Maxim's political party, he wanted them to exist because of their clear relation to the future. When he had said yes to Maxim's requests, he had a strong feeling of hope.(56)

Even Laskell's checkbook liberalism is constructed by his thoughts about the future. Laskell feels that the Communist Party is instrumental in bringing about this future, but that it will have outlived its usefulness once that future -- a moderate, progressive future -- has arrived.

His preoccupation with death is the result of the

lethargic reverie of his lengthy quarantine for scarlet fever. Though his doctor expected him to die, Laskell survives and experiences a kind of illumination. As he slowly regains sentience, his two nurses, Miss Debry and Miss Paine, pose alternating perspectives on life and recovery, finally questioning whether death can be admitted into the progressive consciousness that has characterized Laskell's career and his friendship with the Crooms. The cheerful and insipid Miss Debry is so uncomfortable talking about illness, she cannot even repeat the names of the multi-syllabic germs she has seen under a microscope. Though boorish and ignorant, Miss Debry foreshadows Arthur and Nancy Croom and their inability to face the painful truth of Laskell's illness. The self-deprecating Miss Paine, on the other hand, refers to herself as Paine and shares stories of ministering to English infantrymen injured during World War I. Paine has never been far from death; her dingy uniform, starkly contrasted with Miss Debry's well-bleached white cap, mirrors the connection she feels to mortal illness, the premature demise that nearly claims Laskell. Telling him that he has fallen in love with a cut flower, Paine becomes a mentor for Laskell's new consciousness: "Quite a love affair with that flower, quite a love affair with death! It was something for a man like John Laskell to have to face."(26) A man like John Laskell,

"a person for whom the world was a place to be familiarly at home in, for whom trains were run and timetables kept accurate" had been very much involved with the forward-looking aspects of modern life, at least until his illness.(6) But in recovery, Laskell has learned the serenity of a "desire that wanted nothing."

> It was not quite extinction that he had taken such a fancy to, but it was something just short of extinction. It was the removal of all the adverse conditions of the self, the personality living in nothing but delight in itself. It was what the philosophers used to suppose of the existence of God and of the union of the self with God, and it was much like what the psychologists now imagined of unborn children laid up in the encompassing heaven of the womb, unwilling to be dragged forth.(26)

In the abstruse terminology of Trilling's criticism, Laskell's new consciousness is the pure or "unconditioned spirit," so clearly delineated from the postwar "conditioned spirit" of middle-class affluence. Laskell's future, "just short of extinction" is diametrically opposed to the Crooms' future of promise. In the course of the novel, Laskell will put a great deal of thought into explaining this distinction to the Crooms.

Paine readies Laskell to spend the final weeks of the summer in Crannock where he hopes to share the ruminations of his recovery with the Crooms, friends he has regarded as spiritual and intellectual peers since the death of his

fiancée Elizabeth a few months earlier from pneumonia. Since the Crooms are central to Trilling's indictment of the middle class, it behooves us to examine them in detail. Though not minor characters, perhaps because they are less interesting than the former Communist Maxim and the liberal centrist Laskell they have not been the subject of much commentary. But as Laskell's hosts for the summer, they appear on virtually every page. Their leftist politics are similar, and Laskell describes Arthur, an economics professor, as "a man of the immediate future, one of the men who might effectually make a go of things for a while."(179) Nancy is a suitable mate for the future-oriented Arthur Croom. In fact she is described as representative of the middle class examined by the novel: "Laskell, watching Nancy absorbed, say, in the planning of a meal, her pencil in her mouth to help her think, was inclined to believe that the middle class, for all its failures, so many and so apparent, could yet produce the models for the human virtue of the future."(74) Nancy regards any dissent as a challenge to her unexamined future-orientation. The news of Gifford Maxim's break with the Party for instance, can barely co-exist with her complacent expectations for the future: "involved up to her ears, with a child here and a child to come, with husband and house, with her own trimness and efficiency, and then with her full generous hope that all she had and all

she was could be what the world had"(103). Quentin Anderson argues that Nancy differs from Laskell in her rendering of her own selfishness as the inevitable future, "mistak[ing] a deep need of her own for historical necessity."[28]

In this way, Nancy is a figure similar to Margaret Elwin in "The Other Margaret," whose deliberate self-fashioning as a member of a family with material traditions to maintain informs her behavior. Like Margaret, making her father a drink so it could be reported in later years to the next generation, Nancy sternly upholds family rituals like the Saturday outing the Crooms and Laskell take to a riverbank. "It became clear to Arthur as well as to Laskell that the picnic had a special meaning to Nancy. Perhaps she had an image of her mother sitting on a steamer rug, the basket by her side, urging sandwiches on the family around her."(168) Like many of Trilling's characters, Nancy's is a conditioned spirit.

In the provincial community where the Crooms are summer home-owners, Nancy is highly attuned to the signs that establish her greater wealth and sophistication. This becomes especially clear when she asks Laskell about her plan to build a rock garden, another family tradition she

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[28] Quentin Anderson, "On The Middle of the Journey," Art Politics and Will," *Essays in Honor of Lionel Trilling* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) 258.

recalls from childhood:

> "I've always associated rock-gardens with suburban homes, even estates. And this is such a simple community. It might look funny. You know -- affected." She was quite shy about it.
> "Oh, for Pete's sake, Nancy!"
> But Nancy seemed scarcely to notice the interruption, "I'd like to think of this as really our home - our *place*. I love the people here, but naturally they have their own ideas about things. And even small things that one does can make them uncomfortable." Then she added, "As it were," as if there would have been a disloyalty in her meaning it too literally.
> "In that case," Laskell said, "I should think you'd have to give up thinking of this as really your home."
> "I won't!" she said. The quick refusal, the stubbornly outthrust chin, made Laskell smile. She really was like an independent child.(104-105)

Nancy wants it both ways, a home which stands out from the ordinary, marking her superior taste and higher class status, and a home which will become part of the local scenery. Trilling suggests elsewhere that we can learn a lot about someone from the presence or absence of a rock garden. It is an expression of those social codes "hinted at by small actions, sometimes by the arts of dress or decoration, sometimes by tone, gesture, emphasis, or rhythm" to which he refers in "Manners, Morals and the Novel."[29]

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[29] Trilling, "Manners, Morals and the Novel," *The Liberal Imagination* (1950; New York: Anchor Books, 1953) 200.

Nancy realizes how aesthetic choices betray her social class, however unaware she is that her attitude and speech reveal even more.

Laskell has in many ways returned from the dead, a realm about which the young parents know little. His reformulation of life within a new frame troubles the Crooms into insensitivity and cruelty, uncomfortable as they are to disregard a necessary component of human consciousness. The characterization of the Crooms as irresponsibly optimistic about the future prevents Laskell from sharing with them his thoughts about death. "He wanted...to lay his near experience of death at the feet of life, to put it at the service of life, and life could have no better representative than the Crooms."(13) In spite of this, the Croom home is as impervious to speaking of death as it is to death itself.

Laskell has a vision of his friends' summer cottage fortress-like, made safe against any possible encroachment:

> They had made everything tight, seen to all the windows, looked in on their child to see that he was undisturbed, and now were the happier for what was going on outside. But Laskell could not share the shelter which they had together. He felt suddenly exposed to the whole force of the movement that was indicated by that ceaseless noise of time rushing away. He had a desire, not for shelter -- he could not hope for that much -- but for something he could hang on to as standing against the movement of time he now heard around him.

Nancy and Arthur do turn their home into a fortress: death as a topic of conversation, even as it deals with their close friend Laskell, is inadmissible. So is any discussion of Gifford Maxim's break with the Communist Party, at least as long as Nancy associates it with a breakdown in Maxim's mental capacity.

The Crooms' need to instill a kind of sanctity in their home, protect their son Micky from external forces, can be read as it might have been in 1947, as a kind of "containment narrative," but it is equally a continuity narrative.[30] It is as if the Crooms are living in a bomb shelter. The language Trilling uses to describe their happiness with these sterile surroundings contains all the suggestions of an affluent middle-class family shoring itself up against the ravages of an unknowable enemy, who may just as well be the future. The Crooms' way of life is safe in their summer home. It will be fortified there. Their son Micky will learn the habits of his class and form the memories that will become his childhood when he has grown.

Nancy and Arthur's greatest moral weakness is the way

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[30] Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) *passim*.

they valorize Duck Caldwell, Crannock's ne'er do well handyman who performs odd jobs for the Crooms and is married to Emily, a woman with whom Laskell becomes sexually involved. Though the Caldwells are destitute, Emily's genteel upbringing is cause for the Crooms' scorn while Duck's more proletarian ancestry brings him their admiration and occasional awe. Duck is dishonest, untrustworthy, and at one point in the novel, makes a display of his contempt for the Crooms before other local residents that Laskell observes from a distance. Emily reads Spengler, acknowledging a social decline invisible to her wealthier neighbors, but the Crooms ridicule Emily and esteem Duck as authentic: "She's as unreal as Duck is real," they tell Laskell.(78) Duck will eventually be implicated in the death of his daughter Susan, the young girl Laskell befriends and advises on a dramatic reading of William Blake's "Jerusalem" at a village fair at the denouement of the novel. Though Duck's shiftlessness is not directly responsible for Susan's death, it becomes clear that drunkenness and cruelty mar his paternal affection.

The Crooms are finally held accountable for their optimism with Susan Caldwell's death, but even after the little girl's funeral, Nancy will not hold Duck responsible for his behavior. Similarly, Laskell's longed-for discussion of death with the Crooms is revealed to be

impossible, precisely because the Crooms are so vigorous an illustration of life. Though their intellectual predilection is to discuss the minutiae of whatever interests them, they tacitly forbid Laskell from bringing up his illness or the death of his fiancée Elizabeth.

> [T]he Crooms would not talk about it. They withdrew themselves in a polite, intelligent, concerted way whenever Laskell mentioned it, as if they were the parents of a little boy and were following the line of giving no heed to the obscenities their son had picked up on the street and insisted on bringing to the dinner table.(75)

Nancy "had no language" for death,(13) and as Laskell uncovers why he and his friends differ so completely, he is led to a second reverie. It is the pivotal passage of the novel, one which characterizes the Crooms and Laskell, at least prior to his bout with scarlet fever and the kind of middle-class expectation around which Trilling's critique centers:

> The well-loved child of the middle class is taught about the future by means of promises made to him -- the birthday gifts will come and the Christmas gifts will come, and the performance at the Hippodrome, and camp and college and the trip to Europe. And all the promises and their fulfillment are symbolic of the great promise, made to him by everyone, that he will grow and change. This great promise he takes into himself in the form of a pledge -- made to himself and to everyone -- that he will grow and change for the better. He takes it into himself too in the particular form of his vision of time, in which the future is always brighter and more spacious than the present. How the mind of

> the fortunate young man of the middle class
> is presided over by the future.(139)

This passage presents a key factor in identifying Trilling's middle class, the people he addressed in his essays and the people about whom he wrote in his fiction for whom the future always contains real advantages. Like the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*, its irony speaks a well-known social fact that the novel itself considers but then disregards. The children of this affluent middle class are taught to greet the future with the welcome of new material advantages, those markers of class to which Nancy Croom, among others, is highly attuned. Under this formulation, every kind of opportunity has a material correlative, and if individual achievement is taken for granted, individual acquisitions are not. It is clear that the Crooms' son Micky will be raised this way, as were Nancy and John Laskell themselves.

But it would be virtually impossible for Trilling as for a contemporary reader to imagine a future "always brighter and more spacious than the present" without dwelling on the complex political reality of postwar America. Even John Cheever anticipated an American landscape where "the trout streams of youth...fill up with beer cans and the meadows [are] covered with houses." Trilling's middle class assumes a kind of progress distinct

from the Cold War weariness Tom Engelhardt characterizes as being "one not of triumph, but of triumphalist despair."[31] The passage applies to John Laskell with more cynicism than resonance. Laskell understands that there is something wrong with rearing the well-loved child of the middle class like this. On the other hand, Nancy will raise her children precisely in this way. Nancy's attachment to her unborn child distances her from Laskell and makes her think of Gifford Maxim as a kind of contagion ready to inflict itself on her fetus and on her company.

In *The Middle of the Journey*, death, in fact any interruption of continuity, is irreconcilable with middle-class identity, "a negation of the future" to which the middle class is inextricably linked. The Crooms' inability to entertain the subject of Laskell's or his fiancée Elizabeth's death, or even to reflect appropriately on the death of Susan Caldwell as anything other than the unfortunate result of an unjust system of social stratification that transformed her father into a violent monster, is among Trilling's strongest critiques of the postwar middle class. It is worth reiterating that for Trilling, this death is not directly associated with a

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[31] Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) 9.

literal threat of atomic destruction. Instead the middle class Trilling writes about in his fiction and addresses in his criticism is eager to take up residence in the postwar U.S. For Margaret Elwin, Nancy Croom and Theodore Blackburn, its well-loved children, the future's boundless capacity is an invitation. As Trilling is tolerant of the critical shift toward examining these middle-class lives, he also cautions us to judge them carefully. This ambivalence returns to the critics of the middle class with John Cheever.

"A man in a quagmire, a tear in the sky": John Cheever and the end of continuity

> The high, slender posts of her bed support a bare wooden frame that is meant to hold a canopy. The family has urged her to have this removed because it has fallen several times and might crash down in the middle of the night and brain the old lady while she dreams. She has not heeded these warnings and sleeps peacefully in this Damoclean antique.[1]

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Joan Didion said of John Cheever in 1964, "I can think of no other writer today who tells us as much about the way we live now."[2] Cheever's fiction takes as its chief concern contemporary American society and the growing gap between the past and the present, revealed in prefabrication, automation, and a loss of human control. In stories and novels Cheever investigates the disturbing visions which attend the mundane moments in the lives of postwar Americans and the ways in which we accommodate our lives to those visions. His first book of short stories has the title *The Way Some People Live*; Didion calls her essay on *The Wapshot*

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[1] John Cheever, *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957; New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 37. Subsequent references to Cheever's novels will be noted with an abbreviation and page number.

[2] Joan Didion, "The Way We Live Now," *National Review* March 24, 1964: 237.

Scandal "The Way We Live Now," and it is no surprise that this 1964 novel moves from a small New England village to a landscape of tract housing developments, supermarkets, a U.S. missile launching site, a congressional hearing on nuclear capability, and a plea for humanity from a U.S. Senator in an era of Cold War militarism. With a nostalgic eye towards the past, Cheever chronicles the present. As we move from small towns to suburbs, from conventional to atomic weapons, and from certainty to disquietude, Cheever visits the sites of postwar consciousness where the anxiety of the nuclear age meets the everyday.

With the exception of a few short stories, Cheever's fiction was written entirely after World War II and addresses several issues of concern from the Cold War era, including affluence and the growth of the American middle class. More than the others considered, Cheever's fiction imagines nuclear destruction to be a genuine possibility. In one story, a character has a recurring nightmare of nuclear war turning her neighbors into vicious beasts. In another, a suburban bomb shelter inspires marital infidelity and community hatred. In spite of these recognizable threats to their safety, Cheever always links his characters' nuclear fear to the commodity culture that surrounds them and their insistence on preserving their

quality of life. Time after time in Cheever's stories, fear of mass destruction appears alongside a commitment to improving external appearances, through the suppression of real emotion, blind advocacy of progress, or simple acts of consumer obedience. For many of his characters, material wealth placates the anxiety associated with the bomb.

Of course, Cheever's characters are rarely able to identify the source of their anxiety. Even when there are excellent reasons to lament their loss of control to the outside world, they construct their lives to be free of worry. The failure of Cheever's critics to examine the pervasive - if not wholly conscious - awareness of the bomb in his work might in some way be attributed to the reluctance of his characters to examine it as well.[3] But a looming sense of despair pervades his stories, novels and even his celebrated journal that must be identified as a threat to the continuing bliss of postwar middle-class life. It is evident that in John Cheever's work, particularly in the short stories and two Wapshot novels, there is an immediate relationship between anxiety about nuclear destruction and the quality of life concerns of the affluent

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[3] An exception is George Hunt whose full-length study *The Hobgoblin Company of Love* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983) considers Cheever's use of the bomb to discuss Christian apocalypse and Revelations, not "the way we live now."

middle class.

What is perhaps more significant in Cheever's body of writing, including his own journals and correspondence, are the questions Cheever asks about a writer's responsibilities in the nuclear age. Echoing Faulkner's Nobel speech, this is the greater concern, for its impact extends beyond the sphere of the middle-class fiction that is the mainstay of this project. In a world where massive destruction is a familiar thought, what price must human beings pay? For the middle-class audience, the people who create and consume most postwar American culture, this question has special resonance. The kind of art that is produced, the manner in which humans communicate with each other, and the expectations people have for the future and the future of their children reverberate throughout Cheever's work. He reprimands us for our lack of reverence for life, recognizing that the postwar generation is the first one that cannot take continuity for granted. The nuclear landscape that appears with frequency in his fiction makes evident the failure of postwar Americans to cherish, among other things, the natural environment, the small acts of human kindness which comprise genuine happiness, and even other human beings. It is a critique best put by a character in his short story "The Death of Justina" who asks, "How can a people who do not mean to understand death

hope to understand love, and who will sound the alarm?"[4] Cheever is unequivocal that it is the novelist's responsibility to sound the alarm. In remarks delivered at Carnegie Hall upon receiving the National Medal for Literature, Cheever said that literature has the power to save the world, that fiction is humanity's best chance for survival.

Didion's assessment of Cheever's sensibility in *The Wapshot Scandal* directly involves the expectations of the postwar middle class. "Cheever's children," Didion says, "count their sins, try for goodness in a world they fail to understand, and love life the more because they so fear death."[5] While seldom attributed directly to nuclear destruction, the fear of death is a recurrent motif in Cheever's work. "If we do not taste death," Cheever asked in his journal, "how will we know the winter from the spring?"[6] His characters do not like to talk about it, but in anticipation of DeLillo's perspective in *Underworld*, nuclear weapons make death part of the national experience.

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[4] John Cheever, *The Stories of John Cheever* (New York: Knopf, 1978) 437. Subsequent references to the short fiction of John Cheever will be noted with a page number alone.

[5] Didion 238.

[6] John Cheever, *The Journals of John Cheever* (New York: Random House, 1991) 151.

In his fiction, Cheever tells us that a society that will not look at death is guilty of considerable hubris.

The idea that humanity has reached a kind of limit becomes more and more dominant as Cheever matures, and there is an obvious delineation between past and present in nearly all of his fiction. This sensibility is exemplified by a journal entry: "floating around in my own melancholy, I recall my claim that my life was brightly lighted by the sun until my adolescence."[7] In 1959, Cheever was one of the authors included in Herbert Gold's anthology *Fiction of the Fifties*. "In what way, if any," each participant was asked, "do you feel that the problem of writing for the Fifties has differed from the problems of writing in other times? Do you believe that this age makes special demands on you as a writer?" This is Cheever's response:

> The decade began for me with more promise than I can remember since my earliest youth. The war was over. Most of its reverberations were (for me) ended. I had done some work during the war but I had done it in holes in the ground and on ping-pong tables. Now this was over and I could work in peace. However, halfway through the decade, something went terribly wrong. The most useful image I have today is of a man in a quagmire, looking into a tear in the sky. I am not speaking here of despair, but of confusion. I fully expected the trout streams of my youth to fill up with beer cans and the meadows to be covered with houses. I may even have expected to be

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[7] Cheever, *Journals* 342.

> separated from most of my moral and ethical heritage; but the forceful absurdities of life today find me unprepared. Something has gone very wrong and I do not have the language, the imagery, or the concepts to describe my apprehensions.[8]

The image of "a tear in the sky" is powerful. Either pronunciation of the word 'tear' is chilling in this context, one suggesting a puncture in the sky as by the hand of God, the other a sentimental lament to the postwar situation, as if God is crying. When the word is read, both meanings are superimposed on each other. Cheever's characters often find themselves in such a quagmire, looking upward at the sky in vain search for an explanation that does not come. While the characters of classic American fiction have always been able to take advantage of a limitless supply of land and resources, "a tear in the sky" brings us into a new era. "[L]ighting out for the territories" and seeing "the watery part of the world" are not options in Cheever's fiction. Once despair strikes inland, there is no where else to go because the physical environment has been exhausted. The passage indicates that, at least in 1959, Cheever lacked even the language to express his fear. To portray the present age appropriately is a challenge. We live in a society where sudden and

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[8] Herbert Gold, *Fiction of the Fifties: A Decade of American Writing* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959) 21.

immense destruction is possible, imagined daily by many members of society. It is a moral challenge, that a writer's ethics must be probed to find a tenable way of rendering artistic what is plainly horrific, and it is also an aesthetic challenge, for a writer present the unthinkable as art.

In *The Wapshot Scandal*, which I will consider in depth, Cheever visits for the second and final time a small New England village, St. Botolphs, supplanted in the novel by the growth of new suburbs that draw both Wapshot children away from their family's Puritan roots in the eighteenth-century sea village. The novel presents a transition in the lives of the middle-class Wapshots, which Didion describes in this way:

> The twilight world of the old American middle class is indeed a lost world, as lost as Czarist Russia or the antebellum South, and like both those countries of the mind it has become a dream that in some respects, never was, an imagined territory capable of paralyzing its exiles.[9]

She sees in Cheever's fiction evidence of what he alluded to in the passage about the 1950s, that he "fully expected the trout streams of my youth to fill up with beer cans and the meadows be covered with houses." Over the course of the two Wapshot novels, St. Botolphs dissipates into a wasted

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[9] Didion 239.

backwater. But Cheever also notes changes beyond demographics far more dangerous than the air pollution and overdevelopment he expected. In this chapter, I will show Cheever working to identify this problem and to find its solution for his entire career as a writer. I suggest that he did not find a satisfactory answer until short weeks before his death in 1982.

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In 1948, Cheever wrote in his journal, "it was my decision, early in life, to insinuate myself into the middle class, like a spy, so that I would have an advantageous position of attack."[10] The life of the new middle class is the material of Cheever's 180 short stories. Most were published first in magazines, *The New Yorker* chief among them, and reveal the short-hand sensibility of that magazine. For instance, Cheever can set a story "in the eastern United States...the kind of place where most of us live" with full confidence that he is not misrepresenting the world of his middle-class audience.(359) The 1978 collection of 61 of his best stories earned the Pulitzer Prize. These stories return with frequency to the same affluent suburban locales of the New York metropolitan area which mushroomed in growth after World War II. The

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[10] Cheever, *Journals* 16.

frequency with which Cheever sets his stories in the same locations indicates that the suburbs are at the root of Cheever's most intense critique of American life.

The American suburb resonates with middle-class values. It grew with the middle-class population. Many of its signature institutions - and all of its architectural ones - support the needs and comforts of families. Suburbanites raise children, normally with the hope that a childhood marked by tranquility is a foundation for a prosperous future. The fear of death has a great impact in Cheever suburbs, because characters who raise children there do so as a way to guarantee their own permanence in an increasingly impermanent world. In *Bullet Park* [1968] for example, Eliot Nailles recoils at any idea that would harm his son, but links this instantly to his future, not his son's: "Without his son he could not live. He was afraid of his own death."(*BP* 91) Nailles' hope that everything will stay the same in Bullet Park is a function of his expectations that his son Tony will somehow recreate Nailles' own life, and that an attractive community like Bullet Park will provide the social and material resources necessary for that rebirth.

The suburb is the breeding ground for future-orientation in the professional middle class. Fiction set

in the American suburb has had a brief but busy life. In *Dwelling in the Text*, Marilyn Chandler says of postwar suburban fiction, "[t]he question of to what extent the random communities formed as suburbs contribute to those things that destroy the soul is definitely raised but left to the reader to judge."[11] Cheever's stories are never ambivalent about their suburban locales. The suburb is Cheever's Salem, and as was the case with Hawthorne's favored setting, the author cannot separate himself from the community of which he is so critical. In their suburban estates, Cheever's characters desire a life of privilege and respectability. They are motivated by the search for ease and convenience, but are regularly under siege by external forces bent on destroying their stability. As in Salem, a macabre uncertainty touches everything in these suburbs. Commuters are mysteriously swept away by the morning local, housewives are tormented by broken appliances, and homeowners are driven insane by the frantic desire to keep the house more freshly painted than the neighbor's. Beneath the glib entertainment of these and other domestic disasters however, lies a more somber theme. Death is everywhere, and Cheever's characters are terrified by it.

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[11] Marilyn Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Literature* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991) 288.

In stories like "The Death of Justina," the fear of death is manifest in an obvious way: Cousin Justina's body cannot be removed from the house because death is illegal in prosperous Proxmire Manor. More often however, this fear is represented by a horror that the peacefully affluent suburban life will not continue, that it will be brutally cut short by mysterious forces. Perhaps a physical or metaphysical phenomenon will occur. One might make a grave social error that will end in expulsion. The product of these fears is in each case, denial. An unspoken agreement exists in Shady Hill and Cheever's other suburbs that no one must ever give voice to the anxiety or feeling of foreboding.

The story "The Scarlet Moving Van" [1959] is a case in point. In the township of B_____, this tacit agreement is described this way:

> Life was unprecedentedly comfortable and tranquil. B_____ was exclusively for the felicitous. The housewives kissed their husbands tenderly in the morning and passionately at nightfall. In nearly every house there were love, graciousness, and high hopes. The schools were excellent, the roads were smooth, the drains and other services were ideal..(359)

This passage could describe at least the surface of Cheever's suburban settings. In the same story, it is revealed that "the moment any of the inhabitants became infected with unhappiness or discontent, they sensed the

hopelessness of existing on such a high spiritual altitude, and went to live in the plain."(359) Into this peculiar Brigadoon, the home-owners of B_____ welcome Peaches and Gee-Gee. To outward appearances they are an attractive couple. After a few drinks however, Gee-Gee turns derisive and violent, shattering cocktail parties and barbecues, insisting repeatedly, "I've got to teach them." After serving several times as witness to this disruptive behavior, Charlie Folkestone deciphers Gee-Gee's creed.

> He felt he understood the drunken man's message; he had always sensed it. It was at the bottom of their friendship. Gee-Gee was an advocate for the lame, the diseased, the poor, for those who through no fault of their own live out their lives in misery and pain. To the happy and the wellborn and the rich he had this to say--that for all their affection, their comforts, and their privileges, they would not be spared the pangs of anger and lust and the agonies of death. He only meant for them to be prepared for the blow when the blow fell.(363)

Time after time in Cheever's stories, characters are shown the signs of imminent doom, but allow themselves to be anaesthetized by a gracious quality of life. "The Scarlet Moving Van" is unusual among the suburban stories because of this explicit interpretation of the suburbanites' inability to address a threat to their lives, yet this dynamic is prevalent in most of Cheever's stories even when it is not labeled.

Except in a few cases, this anxiety is not directly

related to nuclear consciousness. The pall that circulates in Bullet Park, Proxmire Manor, and Shady Hill, three suburbs Cheever names in his fiction, dredges up a fear of the unknown future, a loss of control, and the failure of material goods to assuage trepidations of impending disaster. Because it traffics in anticipating catastrophe, this is a brand of anxiety that is easy to relate to nuclear awareness even if the bomb is rarely mentioned. When it is not set in a suburban environment, like the city stories in his first two collections *The Way Some People Live* [1942] and *The Enormous Radio* [1953] or the Italian stories Cheever wrote during a year living abroad, his fiction still details the lives of people at either end of the middle class who have spent a good portion of their lives surrounded by substantial material wealth, but who seldom find stability in their day-to-day lives. There is an assumption about the kind of life that should accompany the social and economic position of Cheever's characters which instead proves not only elusive but dangerous. More than any author considered here, Cheever's is a fictional temperament into which nuclear anxiety fits logically and unobtrusively.

There is a clear "type" of Cheever short story, and in another similarity with Hawthorne, a classic "type" of hero. A typical story is "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" [1956]

whose narrator, Johnny Hake, is a suburban Everyman.

> We have a nice house with a garden and a place outside for cooking meat, and on summer nights, sitting there with the kids and looking into the front of Christina's dress as she bends over to salt the steaks, or just gazing at the lights in heaven, I am as thrilled as I am thrilled by more hardy and dangerous pursuits, and I guess this is what is meant by the pain and sweetness of life.(253)

The trappings of affluent middle-class life surround him and it is virtually impossible to break free from its conventions. When Hake loses his job, he goes berserk for a brief period of time during which he breaks into a neighbor's home to steal a wallet and quarrels with his wife. By the story's conclusion, however, Hake is re-hired to his old position and makes anonymous restitution for the stolen money. During his dalliance with burglary, a brief glimpse of the real nature of his life was possible for Hake. He was critical of his wife and children, suspicious of his friends, and generally at odds with his pleasant suburban fortunes. By the story's end though, Hake has returned to the fold of his community without having changed much. Hake is one of many Cheever characters whose peace of mind is interrupted by a superior consciousness, a peek into another life, before complacency is restored.

One of Cheever's best-known stories, "The Country Husband" [1954], is remarkably like "The Housebreaker," and

it too neatly packages many of the themes of Cheever's work into a tidy narrative. The plot is predictable enough to appear almost a satire of suburban comedy: a middle-class patriarch yearns for his teenage babysitter, finds his serene existence temporarily upset by salacious thoughts, and visits a therapist before things return to normal, at least for Shady Hill. "The Country Husband" is a domestic comedy, and it presents no vision more frightening than an aging middle-aged man. But through this simple story, Cheever demonstrates the nameless fear that lies beneath suburban complacency.

The story opens with an air disaster. Francis Weed is almost killed as his plane makes an emergency landing outside Philadelphia. In spite of the accident, he gets to Grand Central in time to meet his regular train so that nothing appears out of the ordinary. Eager to share his adventure, he tries to relate it to his friend Trace Bearden on the trip back to Shady Hill, but to little effect. "Trace listened to the story, but how could he get excited? Francis had no powers that would let him re-create a brush with death--particularly in the atmosphere of a commuting train, journeying through a sunny countryside..."(326). Bearden's is a typical Shady Hill reaction, as it is virtually impossible for its residents to reconcile death or anything unpleasant with the rites of the afternoon commute

home.

At home, Francis finds his wife and children equally unable to heed the details of the plane crash. The Weed home is exceptionally clean, a compound well-prepared to raise the four Weed children. "It was not the kind of household where, after prying open a stuck cigarette box, you would find an old shirt button and a tarnished nickel."(326) The younger children are fighting with each other; the oldest daughter is upstairs reading a romance magazine her father has forbidden her to buy.

Later that week, at a cocktail party at the Farquaharson home, Francis is struck by a sense of foreboding as he watches a new maid serve drinks. Certain that she is a familiar face, he traces her back to a memory from his days as a solider in France. He finally remembers that she was the woman he witnessed at a public chastisement for having lived with a German commandant during the Occupation of Trenon. Francis stood by while this woman was shorn, stripped, ridiculed, and sent from the village. It is a piercing memory, but Francis recognizes that it does not belong in Shady Hill.

> The people in the Farquaharson's living room seemed united in their tacit claim that there had been no past, no war--that there was no danger or trouble in the world. In the recorded history of human arrangements, this extraordinary meeting would have fallen into place, but the atmosphere of Shady Hill made

the memory seem unseemly and impolite.(331)

The vision of this naked woman departing her home would be a disturbing reminder of the war, to say the least. More pointedly, her sexual perfidy suggests the presence of a threat to the harmony of the community. Shady Hill does not accommodate the disloyal or even mildly inappropriate, as Francis Weed is soon to learn. Like his amazing ability to catch his usual train after surviving an airplane crash, the silent presence of this French traitor at a dinner party renders as innocuous the dangerous and the unsafe.

Francis' interest in Anne Murchison, the new babysitter, jeopardizes neither his marriage nor her virtue. He fantasizes about the teenager, buys her a piece of jewelry which he never gives her, and fights with his wife Julia when she threatens to leave him. The situation is resolved by a visit to a psychiatrist who recommends woodwork. The only impact of his attraction for Anne Murchison is that Francis is temporarily off-kilter. For a few days, he is the only person in Shady Hill who notices how the unpleasant can penetrate the unblemished social surface--even if it only causes a comic ripple. For example, he is rude to Mrs. Wrightson, a suburban matriarch of some eminence whom he finds waiting for a New York-bound train to return a set of curtains.

'Now I'm praying to high heaven that the

> decorator will have them in the right length, because you know my house, you *know* my living-room windows, and you can imagine what a problem they present. I don't know what to do with them.'
>
> 'I know what to do with them,' Francis said.
>
> 'What?'
>
> 'Paint them black on the inside and shut up.'(334)

Like Gee-Gee in "The Scarlet Moving Van," Francis pays a price for this infraction, even so mild a transgression as having insulted a neighbor. At home his wife indicts him: "I don't know what makes you think that in a community like this you can indulge every impulse you have to be insulting, vulgar, and offensive."(340) The denouement for Francis Weed comes even before his visit to the psychiatrist.

> There was nothing to mitigate his feeling--nothing that laughter or a game of softball with the children would change--and, thinking back over the plane crash, the Farquaharsons' new maid, and Anne Murchison's difficulties with her drunken father, he wondered how he could have avoided arriving at just where he was. He was in trouble. He had been lost once in his life, coming back from a trout stream in the north woods, and he had now the same bleak realization that no amount of cheerfulness or hopefulness or valor or perseverance could help him find, in the gathering dark, the path that he'd lost. He smelled the forest. The feeling of bleakness was intolerable, and he saw clearly that he had reached the point where he would have to make a choice.(343-44)

Francis gives himself several options: a psychiatrist, a church, a massage parlor, a bar, or "he could rape the girl

or trust that he would somehow be prevented from doing this."(344) But the resolution of the story indicates that the status quo of Shady Hill is hard to alter, and when the narrator brings us back to Shady Hill "a week or ten days later," Francis is quietly building a coffee table in the cellar while the conventional behavior of others continues around him. The strictures of his affluence have returned for Francis and his moment of greater consciousness has gone.

It would be hard to deny that Shady Hill is a nice place to live, even in "The Country Husband." Whether the characters' concerns for their quality of life obscure any genuine fear does not reduce the pleasant breezes, convenience or neighborliness most of its characters enjoy. The story does present one disparaging diagnosis of Shady Hill, as one disenfranchised character rails against his community:

> I've thought about it a lot, and what seems to me to be really wrong with Shady Hill is that it doesn't have any future. So much energy is spent in perpetuating the place--in keeping out undesirables, and so forth--that the only idea of the future anyone has is just more and more commuting trains and more parties. I don't think that's healthy. I think people ought to be able to dream big dreams about the future. I think people ought to be able to dream great dreams.(338)

While Francis thinks the dinner guests at the Farquaharson's might have denied the past, this diagnosis claims that the

same people imagine a future that merely maintains the present. It is worth mentioning that the speaker, Clayton Thomas, lost his father in the war, and "the young man's fatherlessness surrounded him like an element."(338) The continuity from generation to generation is strong in Shady Hill. The child is a guarantee each parent expects to recreate a society identical to contemporary Shady Hill. Yet while "all the other marriages were intact and productive," Clayton Thomas' family is described as "lack[ing] a piece."(338) It takes a fatherless individual, one whose expectations about the future have not been encoded by a member of the local gentry, to criticize Shady Hill's communal understanding of the future. Only Thomas recognizes the effort put into re-inventing the status quo in Shady Hill. He concludes that his neighbors' interest in material goods prevents them from examining the great potential of the future.

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Although Cheever does not write "about" the bomb, middle-class nuclear anxiety appears with great frequency in his work. "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow" begins:

> I would not want to be one of those writers who begin each morning by exclaiming, O Gogol, O Chekhov, O Thackeray and Dickens, what would you have made of a bomb shelter ornamented with four plaster-of-Paris ducks, a birdbath, and three composition gnomes with long beards and red mobcaps?...But the

> shelter is as much a part of my landscape as the beech and horse-chestnut trees that grow on the ridge. I can see it from this window where I write.(558)

The narrator is saluting the kind of currency that is John Cheever's specialty. By 1961 when the story was published, a bomb shelter could be described as a mundane feature of the suburban scene, integrated into this suburban idyll with the birdbath and plastic gnomes. The narrator asks himself not to draw attention to it as something out of the ordinary. Although Cheever claimed in an interview, the "the bomb shelter story is about a level of basic anxiety, and the bomb shelter...just a metaphor," he places the shelter both in his fictional frame and the room from which he is telling the story.[12] In spite of his protests to the contrary, "basic anxiety" represented by a bomb shelter is quite specific, implying at the very least the threat of a bomb. Unacknowledged but close to the surface, nuclear consciousness is a regular part of the anxiety of John Cheever's fiction, even when it is not mentioned by name.

"The Brigadier and the Golf Widow," "The Wrysons," and "The Death of Justina" are three of Cheever's stories that address nuclear terror explicitly. In many ways these stories cover the same nervous ground. All are set in the

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[12] Annette Grant, "An Interview with John Cheever," *Conversations with John Cheever*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Oxford: U of Mississippi P, 1987) 106.

suburbs, the latter two in Shady Hill and Proxmire Manor, towns that appear most often in Cheever's work. All glimpse into the lives of one married couple, and all present a darkly comic vision of middle-class expectations for a bright future amid the landscape of nuclear consciousness. Significantly, these three often-discussed stories have never been examined in terms of nuclear anxiety. Critics have evidently joined the author in desisting from seeing the bomb as anything other than a symbol of contemporary uneasiness.

"The Wrysons" [1958] is the simplest of the three. It proceeds largely through the narrator's explanation of how odd and frankly unpleasant a pair the Wrysons are. Their "field" is upzoning, which means nothing unless material conditions in Shady Hill remain as they are. Irene and Donald Wryson are content. With narrow interests and few friends, the Wrysons cling to the sanctity of their upper-class home and rail against any incursion:

> They seemed to sense that there was a stranger at the gates--unwashed, tirelessly scheming, foreign, the father of disorderly children who would ruin their rose garden and depreciate their real estate investment, a man with a beard, a garlic breath, and a book.(319)

There is no war in Shady Hill, but the Wryson home is like a well-fortified compound, kept free of the surrounding malignancy in a carefully controlled environment that admits

neither the unpleasant nor the thought-provoking.

But the Wrysons do not enjoy much privacy; a thoroughly obtrusive narrator besieges them with hypothetical scenarios characteristic of Cheever that direct the action of the story. Cheever's narrators often present hypothetical circumstances only to dismantle them and tell us "what really happened." This speculation itself is appropriate to a nuclear temperament. A knowingly conjectural narrator suggests the hypothetical situations we might routinely envision in the nuclear age: "Where will I be when the bomb hits? What will I do first?" In "The Wrysons," these "what ifs" involve sudden and miserable death. The narrator asks what fate would befall their daughter Dolly if Donald and Irene should die unexpectedly. The narrator predicts Dolly's future with distant relatives when each December a trickle of Christmas cards arrives, forwarded from her parents' acquaintances who never learned of their demise. This bizarre speculation sets the story's tone of sudden mortality and anxiety:

> Year after year, it will be this little girl's responsibility to throw into the wastebasket these cheerful holiday greetings that have followed her parents to and beyond the grave.(323)

But the Wrysons' death is merely speculative, and, we are then told, "this did not happen and if it had, it would have thrown no light on what we know," suggesting somehow that

their true fate will clear up some of the mysteries of the Wrysons.(323) But it is just Cheever playing a game of narration. At the story's conclusion, we know only one thing more about the Wrysons, after one moment of enlightenment, explicitly about the bomb. Irene Wryson has a recurring dream of nuclear war which, the narrator tells us, accounts for her oddness. The dream, the only account of nuclear detonation in Cheever's work, is quoted in its entirety:

> The dream was set in Shady Hill -- she dreamed that she woke in her own bed. Donald was always gone. She was at once aware of the fact that the bomb had exploded. Mattress stuffing and a trickle of brown water were coming through a big hole in the ceiling. The sky was gray -- lightless -- although there were in the west a few threads of red light, like those charming vapor trails we see in the air after the sun has set. She didn't know if these were vapor trails or some part of that force that would destroy the marrow in her bones. The gray air seemed final. The sky would never shine with light again. From her window she could see a river, and now, as she watched, boats began to come upstream. At first, there were only two or three. Then there were tens, and then there were hundreds. There were outboards, excursion boats, yachts, schooners, with auxiliary motors; there were even rowboats. The number of boats grew until the water was covered with them, and the noise of motors rose to a loud din. The jockeying for position in this retreat up the river became aggressive and then savage. She saw men firing pistols at one another, and a rowboat, in which there was a family with little children, smashed and sunk by a cruiser. She cried, in her dream, to see this inhumanity as the world was ending. She cried, and she went on

> watching, as if some truth was being revealed to her -- as if she had always known this to be the human condition, as if she had always known the world to be dangerous and the comforts of her life in Shady Hill to be the merest palliative.(320)[13]

Unlike the narrator at the beginning of "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow," Mrs. Wryson cannot reconcile this vision with her luxurious surroundings: "she could not relate it to her garden, her interest in upzoning, her comfortable way of life."(320) Although death is inadmissible to the waking mind of Irene Wryson, it shows itself at night. "The Wrysons" is a comic story, yet it has this terrifying vision. Irene's revelation of the potential for abject cruelty in humankind comes after she watches in her dream a mass of people escaping by water. The passage concludes with the affirmation that the material nature of her life has not guarded her against real human nature. Shady Hill, itself a kind of fallout shelter, cannot protect her from the ultimate peril of her age.

As the dream continues, Mrs. Wryson responds by waking her daughter Dolly and taking her to the bathroom to poison

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[13] Mrs. Wryson's dream compares with this entry from Cheever's journal: "I dream that the atomic bomb is exploded somewhere off the Battery. Whose? Ours? I hear the hellish noise and see the mushroom cloud. Many men throw themselves into the harbor, shouting, 'Let's get the hell out of this world.' Mary wants to do this, but I say, 'No, no we will stay alive, we will do something with our lives.' But my skin has begun to burn, and I realize it is too late."(142)

her. She imagines the potential for the future, represented by Dolly, to be amputated by the threat of nuclear destruction. By preventing the conjectural survival of Dolly as an orphan which the narrator has already envisioned, Mrs. Wryson takes control of her daughter's destiny.

The story concludes on a broadly comic note that undermines Irene's enlightening revelation. Donald Wryson, who does not figure in his wife's nightmare, is given to soothing himself on sleepless nights by secretly baking Lady Baltimore cake. This practice evokes memories of secure evenings from his childhood with his lonely mother. For a man who is bound up entirely in improving the future, it is a guilty secret that a taste for nostalgia has a powerful hold on him. On one of the nights Irene has had her nightmare, Donald is in the kitchen baking. When the cake begins burning, Irene awakens in fright. Instead of waking her daughter to complete the tragic vision however, she rushes to the kitchen.

> "I burned it," he said when he saw the smoke pouring from the oven. "I burned the damned thing."
> "I thought it was the hydrogen bomb," she said.
> "It's a cake," he said. "I burned it. What made you think it was the hydrogen bomb?"(323)

This burlesque concluded, the Wrysons resume their

uninteresting life, but not before they encounter an ephemeral glimpse of their lives in the context of the age:

> ...what would the stranger at the gates -- that intruder with his beard and his book -- have made of this couple, in their nightclothes, in the smoke-filled kitchen at half past four in the morning? Some comprehension -- perhaps momentary -- of the complexity of life must have come to them, but it was only momentary. There were no further explanations.(324)

The story takes the threat of nuclear war far more seriously than its characters do. In spite of their moment of clarity, the Wrysons return to their life of material ease. They do not investigate or even discuss the apprehensions of the age; these might interfere with upzoning. Cheever's preternaturally dull couple cannot be deflected from the complacency that saturates their home and material possessions, however frightening Irene's vision of destruction.

In "The Death of Justina [1961]," the fear of death is so great, dying is illegal. That is, in Zone B of the suburban town of Proxmire Manor, both death and burial are forbidden. "People don't like to live in a neighborhood where this sort of thing goes on all the time," the Mayor informs Moses, whose cousin has expired quietly on the living room sofa.(435) The Wrysons' dedication to upzoning is maintained in Proxmire Manor. (The central character may be Moses Wapshot from the Wapshot novels, also of Proxmire

Manor, though many details of their lives are different). The mundane nature of this bizarre situation however, is familiar territory to Cheever readers:

> Justina's life had been exemplary, but by ending it she seemed to have disgraced us all. The priest was a friend and a cheerful sight, but the undertaker and his helpers, hiding behind their limousines, were not; and aren't they at the root of most of our troubles, with their claim that death is a violet-flavored kiss? How can a people who do not mean to understand death hope to understand love, and who will sound the alarm?"(437)

If the final question appears rhetorical at first, "The Death of Justina" eventually provides us with someone to sound the alarm. Moses works as a speechwriter for an advertising firm in New York. Just as he must depart the office for an early train to the suburbs to console his wife about Justina's death, he is assigned to write a commercial for Elixircol, a tonic of unspecified property. During the course of the story, Moses writes three versions of an Elixircol commercial. The first one, which Moses must write in a hurry to meet his train, is a satire of the familiar sales pitches that intimidate us by exploiting our insecurities:

> *Are you growing old?* I wrote. *Are you falling out of love with your image in the looking glass? Does your face in the morning seem rucked and seamed with alcoholic and sexual excesses and does the rest of you appear to be a grayish-pink lump, covered all over with*

> *brindle hair?...Have you drafted your obituary?...If this or any of this is true you need Elixircol, the true juice of youth. The small economy size (business with the bottle) costs seventy-five dollars and the giant family bottle comes at two hundred and fifty. It's a lot of scratch, God knows, but these are inflationary times and who can put a price on youth? If you don't have the cash borrow it from your neighborhood loan shark or hold up the local bank. The odds are three to one that with a ten-cent water pistol and a slip of paper you can shake ten thousand out of any fainthearted teller. Everybody's doing it. (Music up and out.)*(431-32)

When Justina has finally been buried, Moses recognizes in the absurdity of the situation the spirit of the age. He returns to the office to write a second Elixircol ad, and is far more direct:

> Don't lose your loved ones, I wrote, *because of excessive radioactivity. Don't be a wallflower at the dance because of strontium 90 in your bones. Don't be a victim of fallout. When the tart on Thirty-sixth Street gives you the big eye does your body stride off in one direction and your imagination in another? Does your mind follow her up the stairs and taste her wares in revolting detail while your flesh goes off to Brooks Brothers or the foreign exchange desk of the Chase Manhattan Bank? Haven't you noticed the size of the ferns, the lushness of the grass, the bitterness of the string beans, and the brilliant markings on the new breeds of butterflies? You have been inhaling lethal atomic waste for the last twenty-five years and only Elixircol can save you.*(437)

This copy is returned summarily to Moses with the comment, "*Do*, he wrote, *or you'll be dead.*" His boss's curt response

suggests that Moses' efforts at explicating life's mysteries have not been in vain: we will all be dead at some point, the ad copy implies. The third and final attempt at a commercial for the tonic is the 23rd Psalm which Moses submits in its entirety to the office messenger and departs. The 23rd Psalm is a liturgical refutation of the entire profession of advertising. It is Moses' rejection of the values of his affluent neighbors, and his final attempt to waken them from their apathy and complacency. Every citizen in Proxmire Manor walks daily through the valley of the shadow of death, however firm their denial.

This denial in "The Death of Justina" concludes with a nightmare vision bound in the anxieties of the day. Moses dreams, not of a nuclear bomb like Irene Wryson, but of a crowded modern supermarket flooded with fluorescent light. The shoppers represent a range of American ethnicities, described as "anyone who had heeded the voice of liberty." They are dressed garishly, in a way that appears to be grotesquely American--even Moses, who says, "I was wearing buckskin jump boots, chino pants cut so tight that my sexual organs were discernible, and a rayon-acetate pajama top printed with representations of the Pinta, the Nina, and the Santa Maria in full sail."(436) Although the shoppers take their time making selections, none of the groceries are marked other than in brown wordless paper, and even the

shapes of items give no clue as to what they are. As each customer moves to the checkout counter, their packages are opened. Everyone recoils in shame for their choices and each customer is thrown to the door to await some further humiliation.

In this nightmare is Cheever's most brutal critique of the consumer society that dictates life in the suburbs.[14] There is a kind of bounty on display in a suburban supermarket that appeals to the foreign-born who people this nightmare. They are "Finns, Jews, Negroes, Shropshiremen, Cubans" and they have come to this supermarket at night for choices that were not available in other lands. In the U.S., there is liberty and many supermarkets. A dazzling array of choices is available, the store is open late, it is fully staffed, and all of the consumers are served one-by-one when they are through making the selections that define their tastes.[15] These aspects of the suburban supermarket apply in Moses' dream, though each characteristic is

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[14] Scott Donaldson, "Supermarket and Superhighway: John Cheever's America," *Virginia Quarterly Review*. 62 (Autumn 1986): 654-58 discusses the prevalence of these particularly American settings in all of Cheever's work.

[15] A journal entry describes a late-night trip Cheever makes to a supermarket. "The sight of this place without lights, without delivery trucks, and without a full parking lot is like some apocalyptic vision. In this society, in this world, at this time of day, finding the supermarket closed is an upheaval." (393)

filtered through a dystopian vision that undermines the attractiveness of this kind of consumption. Instead of being rewarded because of their purchases with the acclaim ritually bestowed by the advertiser, these consumers are reviled. American advertising is wholly concerned with drawing connections between products and the kind of life enjoyed by the particular consumer, but in Moses' nightmare, the shoppers are humiliated because of their purchases, no matter how carefully they have selected from among the unlabeled goods. In Moses' unconscious mind, no amount of consumption brings salvation.

It tells us much that this is the nightmare of an advertising executive, one of few suburban men in Cheever's stories whose commute ends at a specific job. Moses' berth in Proxmire Manor is the product of his professional skill as a manipulator. For his efforts he is able to settle his family in a town where he will live among those whom he has manipulated. His neighbors' ceaseless crusade for the right goods "magnif[ies] that confrontation between suburbia and death, between the carefully zoned comforts of the material life and the terrifyingly limitless circumference of death."[16]

The third short story that refers directly to nuclear

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[16] Samuel Coale, *John Cheever* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1977) 28.

anxiety by name is "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow." [1961] Again a married couple, faintly dislikeable for their pretenses, negotiates their expectations of the future in the nuclear age. Set in an unnamed suburb, this story is more explicit in dealing with surviving nuclear attack. After the opening bomb shelter pastoral, described above, we learn that the Pasterns live with an everyday awareness of nuclear destruction. But their awareness has the opposite effect the bomb had on the Wrysons: the Pasterns are empowered by it. Mr. Pastern is described first "marching up and down the locker room of the Grassy Brae Gold Club shouting, 'Bomb Cuba! Bomb Berlin! Let's throw a little nuclear hardware at them and show them who's boss.'" The hawkish Mr. Pastern, "brigadier of the club's locker-room light infantry...at one time or another declared war on Russia, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and China."(498) His willing command of the U.S. nuclear arsenal comes up frequently. The bomb shelter he has had built in the backyard gives him confidence to unleash the nation's destructive nuclear power to defeat even minor foes.

The Pasterns are unlike the residents of Shady Hill: "urged to build bomb shelters, they plant trees and roses,"(258) and instead revel in the power their shelter affords:

The Pasterns' bomb shelter had been completed

> that spring. They would have liked to keep it a secret; would have liked at least to soft-pedal its existence; but the trucks and bulldozers going in and out of their driveway had informed everyone. It had cost thirty-two thousand dollars, and it had two chemical toilets, an oxygen supply, and a library compiled by a Columbia professor, consisting of books meant to inspire hopefulness, humor, and tranquility. There were stores of survival food to last three months, and several cases of hard liquor. Mrs. Pastern had bought the plaster-of-Paris ducks, the birdbath, and the gnomes in an attempt to give the lump in her garden a look of innocence; to make it acceptable--at least to herself. For, bulking as it did in so pretty and domestic a scene and signifying as it must the death of at least half the world's population, she had found it, with its grassy cover, impossible to reconcile with the blue sky and the white clouds.(505)

The shelter will permit the Pasterns to live underground without sacrifice, exactly the way they live in mere anticipation of nuclear holocaust, as the only surviving members of the affluent middle class. The Columbia professor who procured their library may well be modeled on Trilling, himself the architect of Columbia's "Great Books" curriculum that sought to bring undergraduates maximum exposure to literature in a limited period of time. Mr. and Mrs. Pastern expect that they will someday avail themselves of the shelter. So does the Bishop who pays Mrs. Pastern an unanticipated visit, and Mrs. Flanagan, a neighbor who becomes sexually involved with Mr. Pastern so she can manipulate him into giving her a key to the shelter. They

have established their shelter to resemble a well-appointed suburban home, down to the liquor and middle-brow reading material. But the plot of the story eventually denies the practicality of a bomb shelter. By suggesting the impossibility of Mr. Pastern spending eternity with his wife and mistress, "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow" effectively suggests that shelter survival is an impossibility as well, "hopefulness, humor and tranquility" notwithstanding.[17]

Of the three stories which mention the bomb, this is the most brutal. Cheever's critique of the Pasterns is harsh, largely because their expectations to survive a nuclear war obscure from them most other thoughts of life. Once the shelter was built, the Pasterns played God, holding a "night of judgment--when they had agreed to let Aunt Ida and Uncle Ralph burn, when she had sacrificed her three-year-old niece and he his five-year-old nephew; when they had conspired like murderers and had decided to deny mercy

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[17] In his journal, Cheever writes further of the moral questions involved in perfecting life in a shelter: "Mrs. Vanderlip is having her bomb shelter, constructed for the First World War, made hydrogenproof. Inquiries on bomb shelters have increased two hundred percent. The general feeling is that they should be secret, that if their existence is known they will only be small battlefields. 'I,' says a woman in Cambridge, 'wish to be part of that ten percent that will survive and reestablish the wold.' 'The sooner we are killed the better,' says another. But this is it; this has never been seen before - the population of this mighty nation in utter confusion about the enduring nature of their sense of good and evil, about whether they should be prepared to live underground.(153)

even to his old mother."(508) When Mrs. Pastern learns of her husband's infidelity, she admits that she could not even return to her mother's house: "Mother didn't have a shelter."(508)

The narrator of "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow" is able to relate the Pastern's bomb shelter to his idea of the present; Mrs. Wryson would be unable to. Moses, in "Death of Justina" seems to be aware of these two responses to thinking about the bomb. But in "sounding the alarm" he picks neither. It is death that should be part of our landscape, Moses argues, not the pretend promise of a bomb shelter. Regardless of whether the bomb is central or marginal to these short stories, Cheever is expert in depicting a class of people unwilling to attend any idea that suggests the cessation of their carefully-controlled lives. The same reluctance to look at the future and its potential for destruction will form part of Cheever's critique of the middle class in his novels.

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Cheever's stories may have received the lion's share of both the popular and critical attention given his writing, but in his novels we discover a more sustained critique of contemporary sensibilities. Though critics have denigrated their episodic quality, Cheever's first two novels, which comprise his Wapshot saga, address nuclear anxiety in the

contemporary landscape of postwar America more soberly than his short stories. Questions of an attenuated future are central to the erosion of the venerable New England society represented by St. Botolphs, the Wapshots' home town.

The Wapshot books are not exclusively about the bomb. But in their illustration of postwar American lives, instability rides roughshod over permanence so completely, it is hard to ignore this eschatological terror. The decline of the past is rendered severally as moral degeneration, spiritual corruption, or outright destruction as a result of atomic technology. In spite of the potential threat built into the atomic age, the Wapshot family is devoted to continuity, tradition, and permanence. A strong family legacy dictates that each generation honor the expectations of prior Wapshots (a family matriarch is Cousin Honora) however impossible it becomes to meet the proscriptions of ancestral lore.

Wapshots are enmeshed in tradition. *The Wapshot Chronicle* [1957] opens on the fourth of July when each year, Moses and Coverly Wapshot break into Christ Church to ring the bell and herald the national holiday for everyone in St. Botolphs. Following this annual reveille, Moses and Coverly await their mother's annual appearance on the Independence Day parade Women's Club float. Each Wapshot male must go on

a fishing trip with his father when he comes of age; each Wapshot male must leave St. Botolphs to establish himself and bring to the world a male heir. These are among the time-honored conventions that have become the basis for the family name. But the current Wapshot descendants, whose ancestors arrived on the Arbella, the boat that came *after* the Mayflower (like the legend of Cheever's own patriarch, Ezekiel Cheever), cannot satisfy these traditions. The instability of the atomic age cannot accommodate this level of continuity.[18] Though the Wapshot sons must produce a male heir to receive their inheritance, it becomes clear that life in postwar America renders unlikely the continuation of the Wapshot line.

Even the novels themselves represent a tradition that is eventually discontinued. Though Cheever frequently re-used character names and settings in his fiction, these books represent the only time he wrote a story and its sequel. Yet in spite of the apparent continuation in *The Wapshot Scandal*, this pair of novels is filled with endings, places where a narrative terminates abruptly. The novels' ultimate sense of closure is in the end of St. Botolphs altogether, summed up by the narrator's pledge in *The*

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[18] Scott Donaldson, *John Cheever: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1988) 4-5.

Wapshot Scandal's final paragraph: "I will never come back, and if I do there will be nothing left, there will be nothing left but the headstones to record what has happened; there will really be nothing at all."(*WS* 309) The fervent nihilism of the phrase "there will be nothing" is repeated three times. If this is not denial enough, the narrator doubts that even the markers of the dead will remain to remind anyone of the Wapshot story. These two novels then, will disappear in time with every other piece of evidence of the Wapshots and St. Botolphs' final days.

The bomb is introduced outright in the Wapshot series; *The Wapshot Scandal* takes us from a U.S. missile station to a congressional hearing about nuclear destruction. There is a plea for pacifism from a U.S. senator, a comic children's song about nuclear fallout, and a town that exists exclusively to support U.S. missile research and development where everyday life is colored by brinkmanship. There are also affluent suburban settings familiar from Cheever's short stories where everyday activities are met with bizarre accidents and inexplicable danger. Even without the overt nuclear sensibilities of the second novel, anxiety over sudden destruction appears in both books. Cheever's Wapshot novels present a society that needs continuity in order to survive as it grapples with the idea of absolute finality.

On the surface, both novels begin far away from nuclear consciousness; a closer look demonstrates that one can never move very far from the bomb, and that the garden has already been lost. In the opening passage of *The Wapshot Chronicle*, Cheever describes the town of St. Botolphs, the point of origin for the both books as well as the Wapshot family. St. Botolphs is in decline, but the town actively cultivates its past glory for present-day nostalgia. The names of soldiers St. Botolphs sent to fight the Civil War are proudly displayed in the town square on a war memorial. But the narrator tells us, "St. Botolphs would never muster as many soldiers again."(*WC* 3) At one level, this suggests St. Botolphs' dwindling population. The young eventually disappear from St. Botolphs, and leave behind a graying population. The once-important New England port now supports itself through a table-silver factory and a tourist industry which relies on an American fascination with New England quaintness. But the indication that St. Botolphs has stopped producing soldiers might also be read in terms of the age of nuclear anxiety. No town in America, regardless of size, will muster as many soldiers as St. Botolphs sent to the Civil War because the days of a human army are over. Thus St. Botolphs, however antiquated and time-honored its rituals, is merely an eccentric version of

the insipid suburban locations that comprise the world outside. St. Botolphs' age, charm and former importance to the regional economy will not protect it from the same fate that will befall Proxmire Valley, Talifer, Remsen Park or, for that matter, Rome, to cover the better portion of the Wapshot geography.

In spite of the nostalgia for the past that is central to these novels, the corrosive effects of the nuclear age have the same impact here as they do anywhere else. Critical reading of the Wapshot novels, which has not been extensive, is remarkable for its romanticization of the town of St. Botolphs, a charming but exceptionally dangerous place. Carlos Baker called the novel "an antique bureau filled with everything and apparently everybody under the sun."[19] Baker's metaphor is true to the spirit of the novel, and it could be argued that St. Botolphs presents Moses and Coverly Wapshot with the only stability they will find in their lives. But there is a pernicious quality to life in St. Botolphs that owes its danger to a concentrated version of the anxiety prevalent in Cheever's short stories. St. Botolphs is not safe from the freakish accidents and bizarre deaths that are commonplace in Cheever's suburbs; in

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[19] Carlos Baker, "Yankee Gallimaufry," *The Critical Response to John Cheever*, ed. Francis J. Bosha (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994) 19.

the Christmas eve opening scene of *The Wapshot Scandal*, a neighbor busy drowning some unwanted kittens is accidentally swept into the river and killed. A car driven by a pair of young lovers' swerves into a field, killing the man instantly in front of the Wapshot home. Leander Wapshot and Cousin Honora suffer bizarre deaths of drowning and self-starvation.

There is little innocence in present day St. Botolphs. Even the Independence Day Parade that opens *The Wapshot Chronicle* is more promotion than patriotism. Behind the Historical Society float, with a descendant of Priscilla Alden wearing an authentic wig, came "a truckful of light-hearted girls from the table-silver company who scattered coupons into the crowd."(*WC* 7) Like other Cheever settings, St. Botolphs has its anti-social behavior, "its brutes and its shrews, its thieves and its perverts, but like any other it meant to conceal these facts under a shine of decorum."(*WS* 4-5) Samuel Coale calls his chapter on *The Wapshot Chronicle* "Paradise Lost" to connote a loss of innocence that, like Milton's, is global, not local.[20]

The Wapshot novels are not *bildungsromans* within which two provincial boys leave a quiet home for the exciting and corrupting influences of the city. St. Botolphs is already

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[20] Coale 65-80.

corrupt. George Garrett says that "it is as if Cheever divided American history into two periods--the Quaint Period, from the Mayflower to the middle thirties, and the Vulgar Now, the time of guided missiles and frozen food."[21] Though only vestiges of its former glory can be detected, the desire for tourism keeps enough sepia-tinted traces visible in St. Botolphs to attract those seeking American nostalgia. But in important ways, St. Botolphs is no different from any other place on earth. The spirit of atrophy is everywhere:

> Our friend from Cleveland might observe, passing through the square at dusk, that this decline or change in spirit had not altered his own humanity and that whatever he was--a man come for a legacy or a drunken sailor looking for a whore--it did not matter whether or not his way was lighted by the twinkling candles in tearooms; it did not change what he was. (*WC* 17-18)

It is important to de-mythologize this New England town to understand that the changes which have come to American society after the war are not regional. In spite of the superficiality that pervades the economy in St. Botolphs, our humanity remains the same there or anywhere else. The only significant difference between childhood in the outside

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[21] George Garrett, "John Cheever and the Charms of Innocence: The Craft of *The Wapshot Scandal*," *The Sounder Few*, eds. R.H.W. Dillard, George Garrett, John R. Moore (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1971) 31.

world and Moses and Coverly's upbringing is the legacy handed to them by the most distinctive character John Cheever ever created, their father Leander Wapshot.

Leander is the embodiment of the St. Botolphs passion for tradition. Though he will die in *The Wapshot Chronicle*, his teachings recur throughout both books. He is, in many ways, a stand-in for the *S.S. Topaze*, the ancient launch he ferries from the mainland to the beach and amusement park at Nangasakit: old, charming, loved by leisure-seeking people, and, as the novel will ultimately reveal Leander to be, not entirely seaworthy. Of this decrepit vessel and its commander, "she seemed to mirror his taste for romance and nonsense, his love of the seaside girls and the long, foolish, brine-smelling days of summer."(*WC* 5) His wife Sarah eventually turns the *Topaze* into "THE ONLY FLOATING GIFT SHOPPE IN NEW ENGLAND," and Leander takes it upon himself to inculcate into his sons the historic truths that are hourly being obscured by the rest of the world. This is the Wapshot legacy:

> He would like them to grasp that the unobserved ceremoniousness of his life was a gesture or sacrament toward the excellence and the continuousness of things. He went skating on Christmas Day - drunk or sober, ill or well - feeling that it was his responsibility to the village to appear on Parson's Pond. "There goes old Leander Wapshot," people said - he could hear them - a splendid figure of continuous and innocent

> sport that he hoped his sons would carry on. The cold bath that he took each morning was ceremonious--it was sometimes nothing else since he almost never used soap and got out of the tub smelling powerfully of the sea salts in the old sponges that he used. The coat he wore at dinner, the grace he said at table, the fishing trip he took each spring, the bourbon he drank at dark and the flower in his buttonhole were all forms that he hoped his sons might understand and perhaps copy. (*WC* 54)

Leander's attempt to instill in his sons an understanding of this legacy is the source of much of his pride and motivation. His menu of small personal rituals that exemplify "the excellence and continuousness of things" is indicative of humanity's innate desire to see a familiar life continue. Though the obvious manifestation of this is the expectation that Moses and Coverly produce male heirs, the theme recurs frequently in the Wapshot novels. When it is related to nuclear destruction, as it often is in *The Wapshot Scandal*, it becomes clear that even the simplest products of human continuity will not survive the atomic age.

The most important of Leander Wapshot's traditions is journal writing, which he learned from his ancestor Lorenzo Wapshot. Hidden in the attic with other family treasures are bound volumes of family writing.

> [A]ll of the Wapshots were copious journalists. There was hardly a man of the family who had doctored a sick horse or

> bought a sailboat or heard, late at night, the noise of train on the roof without making a record of these facts. They chronicled the changes in the wind, the arrival and departure of ships, the price of tea and jute and the death of kinds. (*WC* 11)

To the Wapshot diarists, these are the details of life that contain meaning. They are responsible for what Coale calls "that state of mind wherein the past lingers on into the present as a reminder of the continuity of all things, of the connections between the present moment and the habits and customs of the past."[22] And, perhaps not surprisingly, the journals of Leander Wapshot are much like the journals of John Cheever. Filled with details of the breeze, the warmth of an otherwise random morning, or a particular slant of sunlight, journal writing gives the novelist the opportunity to record for the future some sense of "the unobserved ceremoniousness of life."

In this respect Leander's journals are also analogous to the Wapshot novels themselves. As rendered in the text of *The Wapshot Chronicle*, Leander's journals are a genre of autobiographical writing like no other. They omit pronouns, use run-on sentences and fragments, and often describe base or outright sexual subject matter.

> There's nothing but the blood of shipmasters and schoolteachers in writers' veins. All

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[22] Coale 73.

> grand men! A true pork and beaner and something of a curiosity these days. Memories important or unimportant as the case may be but try in retrospect to make sense of what is done. Many skeletons in family closet. Dark secrets, mostly carnal. Cruelty, illict [*sic*] love, candor, but no dirty linen. Decisions of taste involved. Voided bladder so many times; brushed teeth so many times; visited Chardon Street fancy house so many times.(*WC* 99)

But Leander's journals, which occupy much of Book Two of *The Wapshot Chronicle*, also give Cheever the opportunity to comment on the burdens placed on contemporary fiction. These journals take as their chief premise a regard for continuity. Lorenzo Wapshot established this tradition, himself writing, "By a retrospective view of the past may I find wisdom to govern and improve the future more profitably."(*WC* 33) Leander writes with this in mind as well, but *The Wapshot Chronicle* illustrates the impossible burden it is for a postwar American writer to imagine the future by studying the past. Anticipating Don DeLillo, whose novels often depict crowds, Cheever suggests that a novelist should chronicle readily identifiable feelings, the blunt, familiar emotions people experience under communal circumstances. In his own journal, Cheever describes an "apocalyptic" ceremony in Shea Stadium:

> I think that the task of an American writer is not to describe the misgivings of a woman taken in adultery as she looks out the window at the rain but to describe four hundred

> people under the lights reaching for a foul ball.[23]

The Wapshot diarists attempt this, but the age itself threatens the recording of everyday events for posterity, an activity comparable to the responsibilities of a novelist. The obstacles the present age presents for journal-writing are made obvious by the physical location of the Wapshots' texts. An archive lies in the attic in St. Botolphs among the detritus of prior years:

> The attic was a fitting place for these papers, for this barny summit of the house--as big as a hayloft--with its trunks and oars and tillers and torn sails and broken furniture and crooked chimneys and hornets and wasps and obsolete lamps spread out at one's feet like the ruins of a vanished civilization and with an extraordinary spiciness in the air as if some eighteenth-century Wapshot, drinking Madeira and eating nuts on a sunny beach and thinking about the passing of the season, had tried to capture the heat and light in a flask or hamper and had released his treasure in the attic, for here was the smell of summer without its vitality; here seemed to be the lights and sounds of a summer preserved. (*WC* 11)

In this remarkable passage, Cheever catalogs antique sounds and smells--characteristics, in fact, of Leander's journals. Still, these family records are gathering dust among "the ruins of a vanished civilization." They are not read by current Wapshots, so their talismanic virtues and their details of the past are unknown to Moses and Coverly.

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[23] Cheever, *Journals* 185.

Leander Wapshot seeks to cultivate in his sons an understanding that they must carry on this Wapshot tradition, but by letting these journals gather dust in the attic, Cheever makes a pointed comment on the novel itself, and questions whether the present age still can still produce an audience for these details of the human past.

In addition to the journals, the idea of continuity is reflected in the Wapshot burden to carry on the family name. Because Honora Wapshot's will demands that Moses and Coverly produce male sons, Moses is sent from St. Botolphs after Honora witnesses him in an act of recreational intercourse. Coverly, who departs St. Botolphs with his brother, has long been concerned with his ability to demonstrate his procreative ability to Cousin Honora and the rest of the family. The stipulation in Honora's will becomes an obsession. He views every episode in his life in terms of his likelihood to produce a male heir. Each minor failure reminds him of his remote chances. Coverly heeds his mother's advice to take a cookbook with him on his fishing trip with Leander because, she argues, "your father doesn't know how to cook." When Leander sees Coverly reading the cookbook and tosses it from the camp, Coverly feels that "he had profaned the mysterious rites of virility and had failed whole generations of future Wapshots as well as the

beneficiaries of Honora's largess."(*WC* 60) When Leander takes his son to a burlesque show, Coverly witnesses a dancer perform a lewd gesture with a farm boy's hat and walks out. Coverly feels he has again placed "generations of unborn Wapshots...in jeopardy as well as the aged and the blind," the beneficiaries of Cousin Honora's charity.(*WC* 65) This anxiety resurfaces when Coverly is tempted by homosexual desires and each time he fights with his wife. He imagines himself unable to reproduce. If Coverly fails to present Honora with a Wapshot heir, he will be denied his inheritance, linking the promise of material wealth with a future of paternity that seems, at least for Coverly, quite unlikely.

Once Moses and Coverly have left St. Botolphs, *The Wapshot Chronicle* proceeds without much plot, but is filled with dispiriting signs of the age. Coverly takes and fails a personnel department personality test. Moses goes to Washington to perform work so classified, "it cannot be discussed here."(*WC* 131) Both Moses and Coverly find wives and have children. Coverly and his wife Betsey move to Remsen Park, an unfriendly military town where they cannot recruit enough acquaintances for a cocktail party. In spite of her husband's means, Betsey is an avid materialist: "Every suit, dress, fur coat and piece of furniture in the

store windows had to be judged, its price and way of life guessed at and some judgment passed as to whether or not it should enter Betsey's vision of happiness."(*WC* 233) Betsey imagines herself outfitting the future with material goods to compensate for the lack of society she finds in Remsen Park.

In St. Botolphs, Leander endures his wife's appropriation of the Topaze and a brief stint at the table-silver factory. But fairly happy near the end of his life, he reflects on the past:

> [H]e thought about his sons; about how they had gone out in the world and proved themselves and found wives and would now be rich and modest and concerned with the welfare of the blind and retired seamen and would have many sons to carry on their name.(*WC* 304)

Unlike most Cheever characters, Leander is not uncomfortable with the idea of his own death (some critics believe Leander to be a suicide), but this can be attributed to his expectation that his future life will be carried on by his sons. Critic Richard Rupp says "Only by recovering the past can each new generation of Wapshots live in the present."[24] But it is clear, despite Leander's reverie, the current generation of Wapshots emphatically does not recover the

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[24] Richard Rupp, *Celebration in Postwar American Fiction* (Coral Gables: U of Miami P, 1970) 31.

past. Such a recovery is no longer possible outside of the romantic notions of the St. Botolphs tourist attractions like Sarah's floating gift shop. Leander is given the last word in the novel. On a leaflet left in a copy of Shakespeare, "Advice to my sons" appears, a long paragraph of idiosyncratic reflections ("Never put whisky into hot water bottle crossing borders of dry states or counties. Rubber will spoil taste. Never make love with pants on.") The last words are "Trust in the Lord."(*WC* 309-10))

The Wapshot Scandal [1964] is a thematic supplement to *The Wapshot Chronicle*, not a sequel that continues the narrative. As Cheever himself might have feared, we have moved from a narrative "chronicle" to a narrated "scandal." The novel has almost no plot, and the scandal that gives the novel its title, Cousin Honora's lifelong refusal to pay income tax, is far from central to the story. While most major characters reappear, several, including Sarah Wapshot, are dismissed immediately, and both Moses and Leander, who dies at the end of *The Wapshot Chronicle*, appear far less. Moses' wife Melissa, her young lover Emile Cranmer, and Coverly's dictatorial boss at the missile research and development site Dr. Lemuel Cameron, take their places. Coverly remains a pivotal figure, but none of the other characters are Wapshots. Leander's expectations that his

sons might carry on some of his traditions have clearly failed, and although both Moses and Coverly have sons, neither child is mentioned more than a few times. But in spite of this novel's new direction and its far more caustic tone, *The Wapshot Scandal* covers the same ground as its predecessor. The comparison between old and new continues, and almost every character has a momentary revelation where the present age is revealed to be insufficient in its respect for the fine and simple. America is a commercial enterprise where an unsteady future distracts human attentions from the things which should matter most. Unlike *The Wapshot Chronicle*, there are recurrent references to nuclear war and imagery that propose an apocalypse. The sun revealed through a train window for example, suggests "the last hours of life on the planet."(*WS* 271) A liquor store closes down during an air alert, prompting many to head for their fallout shelters and get drunk. Through a computer error, Coverly is re-assigned to a nuclear missile development site and becomes familiar with many of the nation's top scientists. He asks of his new co-workers:

> They were men born of women and subject to all the ravening caprices of the flesh. They could destroy a great city inexpensively, but had they made any progress in solving the clash between night and day, between the head and the groin? Were the persuasions of lust, anger and pain any less in their case? Were they spared toothaches, nagging erections and

fatigue?(*WS* 178)

This question is the theme of *The Wapshot Scandal* and it restates Cheever's critique of the professional middle class in a new way. In spite of (or because of) material progress, postwar America is moving too quickly through the ethical dilemmas posed by nuclear war. Of course, Leander Wapshot had solved a number of his problems, or so he wrote to his sons in his final journal entry in *The Wapshot Chronicle*: "Bathe in cold water every morning. Painful but exhilarating. Also reduces horniness."(*WC* 310) But in *The Wapshot Scandal*, there is far less of Leander's journal. Coverly recognizes that certain universal mysteries remain unresolved however acute our growing knowledge of the means to destroy ourselves has become.

The younger characters now live in new, antiseptic towns, Moses and his wife Melissa in Proxmire Manor, the affluent suburb that was the setting for "The Death of Justina." An emblematic moment in *The Wapshot Scandal* comes in Chapter 9 when Melissa learns the story of Gertrude Lockhart, a neighbor whom she knew only slightly. Standing on the train platform, Melissa sees Gertrude Lockhart's coffin waiting to be loaded onto the train. The deceased succumbs to a series of domestic mishaps when her plumbing, oil burner, and washing machine fail to function and she is

unable to find anyone to repair them. This leads Lockhart to a cycle of alternating promiscuity and despair at the end of which she takes her life in the garage.

> She cried for her discomforts but she cried more bitterly for their ephemeralness, for the mysterious harm a transparent bacon wrapper and an oil burner could do to the finest part of her spirit; cried for a world that seemed to be without laws and prophets.(*WS* 107)

Gertrude Lockhart's demise is a concise illustration that rather than lull us into a state of complacency, material comforts can be the means of our destruction. News of Lockhart's fate returns Melissa to her own obsession with death. In spite of the prosperity that surrounds her, the suburban landscape suggests only abandonment and loss. At the florist's, Melissa overhears a man buying flowers to mourn his sister.

> ...Melissa, waiting for her roses, felt a premonition of death. She must die--she must be the subject of some such discussion in a flower shop, and close her eyes forever on a world that distracted her with its beauty. The image, hackneyed and poignant, that came to her was of life as a diversion, a festival from which she was summoned by the secret police of extinction, when the dancing and the music were at their best. I do not want to leave, she thought.(*WS* 112)

It is a rare moment of mental health for the Wapshot novels because Melissa articulates a genuine desire for human experiences she knows must end. Ironically, Melissa's

realization about death is the novel's most hopeful moment. The lessons of Leander Wapshot, which eluded his sons, have shifted to the consciousness of his daughter-in-law. What was impossible in for Francis Weed and Mrs. Wryson in Shady Hill, and for everyone in "The Death of Justina," enable Melissa to combine an image of life as a diversion with thoughts of her own death.

Coverly and his wife Betsey live in Talifer, a town where nuclear weapons are developed. Talifer has such great security, its existence is all but unknown to the outside world. A nuclear culture pervades the tract house community overtly, which separates it from similar Cheever towns (Proxmire Manor and Shady Hill) where nuclear anxiety is more veiled. In Talifer, "[t]otal disaster seemed to be some part of the universal imagination."(*WS* 245) While Coverly argues with a neighbor about a stolen garbage pail, a test missile is launched over his head, momentarily turning the evening air bright with fire. Betsey Wapshot would like her home to have a fallout shelter, but her husband's position in the public relations department does not earn them one according to Talifer's unspoken hierarchy of salvation: "Most of the aristocracy had been given underground shelters and while this fact had never been publicized it was well known that in the case of a cataclysm

the proletariat would be left to scald. This made for some hard feeling."(*WS* 32) At a coffee shop in Talifer, Coverly and Betsey hear this ballad:

> "Oh Mother, dear Mother, oh Mother,
> Why is the sky so dark?
> Why does the air smell of roach powder?
> Why is there no one in the park?
>
> "It's nothing, my darling daughter,
> This isn't the way the world ends,
> The washing machine is on spinner,
> And I'm waiting to entertain friends."
>
> "But Mother, dear Mother, please tell me,
> Why does you Geiger counter tick?
> And why are all those nice people
> Jumping into the creek?"
>
> "It's nothing, it's nothing, my darling,
> It's really nothing to all,
> My Geiger counter simply records
> An increase in radioactive fall."
>
> "But Mother, dear Mother, please tell me,
> Before I go up to bed,
> Why are my yellow curls falling,
> Falling off of my head?
> And why is the sky so red?
> Why is the sky so red..."(*WS* 43)

This is one of the few explicitly critical voices about the bomb in *The Wapshot Scandal*. The mother's denial mirrors most of the characters' attitudes towards sudden destruction and the impact of nuclear technology on their lives. The second stanza presents a classic Cheever relationship that mirrors Gertrude Lockhart's story, that the world cannot come to any significant harm while the material and social aspects of middle-class life -- once again a washing machine

-- are so firmly established. Schubert's Erlköönig, the German lied on which this ballad is modeled, ends with the child dead in its father's arms. That the song records a conversation between a parent and a child should not be a surprise when we consider this to be the fundamental relationship through which humanity reconstitutes itself. The chapter that ends with this ballad is punctuated with Coverly's refrain to his now-deceased father, "Father, Father, why have you come back?," further reminding us of the new generation's inability to propagate and Leander's failed hopes for his sons.

The Wapshot Scandal also introduces us to Cheever's only character who not only admits the possibility of nuclear destruction, but seems to embrace it as a certainty while disallowing life itself. For Cheever, this is the ultimate villainy. Dr. Lemuel Cameron, Coverly's supervisor, has a personality that moves from mildness to rage with little provocation. He is a successful scientist who operates without conscience or morality. But it is perhaps most significant to note that as a father, Dr. Cameron has been violent, cruel and abusive. His son lives in lonely obscurity in a mental institution. Cameron is a figure diametrically opposite Leander Wapshot who was so concerned that he equip his sons with everything they would

need to navigate the world outside of St. Botolphs. Cameron's son is completely incapacitated. His father pays his bills, but ignores his letters and has not visited for at least a decade. But it is Cameron's legacy, not Leander's, that has the greater impact in this novel. Through Cameron, we find Cheever's greatest critique of nuclear weapons and the failure of humanity to respond adequately to the potential horror that accompanies them.

Coverly first meets Cameron when the former secretly uses a computer to generate a concordance of the poetry of John Keats. The computer print-out listing Keats' preferred vocabulary is quixotically enough, itself a poem:

> Silence blendeth grief's awakened fall
> The golden realms of death take all
> Love's bitterness exceeds its grace
> That bestial scar on the angelic face
> Marks heaven with gall.(*WS* 132)

Dr. Cameron discovers this covert computer use and, acknowledging a love for poetry, recites a poem himself, one that can be read as an aloof response to Coverly's Keats concordance:

> How many worlds around their suns
> Have woven night and day,
> For countless thinking things like men,
> Now deep in stone or clay!
> Their story caught in light now comes
> To us, unskilled to know
> The comedy, the tragedy, the glint of friend or foe,
> In that faint and cryptic message
> From afar and long ago.(*WS* 133)

Cameron's poem, like Shelley's "Ozymandias," recognizes the transience of other civilizations. Unlike Coverly's stanza, Cameron's poem does not indicate any pain or problem with the loss of planetary life. Because he is a scientist involved in producing bombs during an age of heightened awareness about destruction, it may appear cavalier for him to find inspiration in the destruction of other worlds. But it is only a prelude to his dispassionate understanding of the capability of nuclear weapons.

When Cameron is called before a congressional committee, his failure to recognize the value of human achievements gives Cheever another opportunity to celebrate them. There is this exchange between Cameron and a senator:

> "Is it true, Dr. Cameron, that you believe in the inevitability of hydrogen warfare?"
> "Yes."
> "Would you give us an estimate of the number of survivors?"
> "I'm sorry, but I can't. It would be the roughest guesswork. I think there will be a substantial number of survivors."
> "In the case of reverses, Dr. Cameron, would you be in favor of destroying the planet?"
> "Yes," he said. "Yes, I would. If we cannot survive, then we are entitled to destroy the planet."
> "Who would decide that we had reached the ultimate point of survival?"
> "I do not know."(*WS* 216)

Cameron presents at the Congressional hearing a set of scientific circumstances which, as the novel's caveat makes

clear, is fictional.[25] When an elderly senator questions Cameron, it is hard to read the passage without recalling Cheever and the kind of place St. Botolphs must have been once.

> "I was born in a small town, Dr. Cameron," the old man said. "I think the difference between this noisy and public world in which we now live and the world I remember is quite real, quite real....Men of my age, I know, are inclined to think sentimentally of the past and yet even after discounting these deplorable sentiments I think I can find much in the past that is genuinely praiseworthy....However, I have lived through five wars, all of them bloody, crushing, costly and unjust, and I think inescapable, but in spite of this evidence of man's inability to live peacefully with his kind I do hope that the world, with all its manifest imperfections, will be preserved."(*WS* 215)

The "Nuclear Revolution" as the novel puts it, is so mired in progress that a desire to see life continue must be mentioned outright.(*WS* 163) However imperfect the world is, the men at this hearing do not take it for granted that life should go on. The elderly senator continues:

> "I am told that you are famous, that you are great, that you are esteemed and honored everywhere and I respect your honors unequivocally but at the same time I find in your thinking some narrowness, some unwillingness, I should say, to acknowledge those simple ties that bind us to one another and to the gardens of the earth." He dried his tears again and his old shoulders shook

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[25] "All of the characters in this work are fictional, as is much of the science."

> with a sob. "We possess Promethean powers but don't we lack the awe, the humility, that primitive man brought to the sacred fire? Isn't this a time for uncommon awe, supreme humility? If I should have to make some final statement, and I shall very soon for I am nearing the end of my journey, it would be in the nature of a thanksgiving for stout-hearted friends, lovely women, blue skies, the bread and wine of life. Please don't destroy the earth, Dr. Cameron, he sobbed, Please, please don't destroy the earth."(*WS* 215)

No one in the novel has enjoyed "the simple ties that bind us to one another and to the gardens of the earth." To locate someone who has, we must return to Leander Wapshot in *The Wapshot Chronicle*. Betsey learns to distrust stout-hearted friends. Moses finds that lovely women are unfaithful. In spite of the bread and wine of life, Honora starves herself to death. The skies remain blue of course, but at a hearing to discuss Dr. Cameron's administration of the Talifer Missile Research and Development Site, no one can ignore the lethal terror that can radiate from the sky at any moment. This speech contains much that Cheever wants to impart to the reader, though its message is summarily dismissed by Cameron and the other senators as an unmeasured outburst. The elderly senator again addresses Cameron, questioning whether he has had any training in the humanities. Cameron protests:

> You seem to have suggested that my lack of familiarity in the humanities would account

> for my cool-headedness about the demolition of the planet. This is not true. I love music and music is surely one of the most exalted of the arts.(*WS* 217)

Cameron then plays a simple Bach air, to which the senator responds:

> Your music was charming and reminded me of a reverie I often enjoy when some man from another planet who has seen our earth says to his friends: 'Come, come, let us rush to the earth. It is shaped like an egg, covered with fertile seas and continents, warmed and lighted by the sun. It has churches of indescribably beauty raised to gods that have never been seen, cities whose distant roofs and smokestacks will make your heart leap, auditoriums in which people listen to music of the most serious import and thousand of museums where man's drive to celebrate his life is recorded and preserved. Oh, let us rush to see this world! They have invented musical instruments to stir the finest aspirations. They have invented games to catch the hearts of the young. They have invented ceremonies to exalt the love of men and women. Oh, let us rush to see this world.'(*WS* 217)

The intellectual and artistic products of humanity would be recognized even by alien visitors. Each of the accomplishments the senator lauds is measured for its capacity to instruct and elicit human emotions. The obvious point the senator is trying to make must be repeated three times, but it remains unheeded, even by the other senators. In fact, it is not until they learn from a former housekeeper about Cameron's abusive treatment of his son that the committee suspends his security clearance. Dr.

Cameron disappears from the novel as quickly as he entered it, but his chilling influence remains until the final Christmas eve in St. Botolphs.

Beyond Melissa's fleeting thoughts about her own death at the florist, her lover Emile Cranmer provides the novel's only other glimpse of hope. Emile works at a large new supermarket trying to compete with smaller grocery stores. As part of a promotional event, he must hide a thousand plastic Easter eggs that contain certificates for prizes. Five golden eggs are redeemable for three-week European vacations, while other others contain various prizes of lesser value from perfume and an outboard motor to a dozen eggs. As the women of Proxmire Manor slowly learn that Emile is responsible for hiding the eggs, they begin to follow and taunt him, a band of avaricious housewives roaming the suburban streets gangster-style in search of the 19-year-old stockboy. After his perilous evening spent hiding the eggs, Emile has a moment of revelation from his neighbor's greedy siege, but appearing late in the novel, it is not without a prognosis for the whole globe: "The scene was apocalyptic. Forsaken children could be heard crying in the empty houses and most of the doors stood open in the dawn as if Gabriel's long trumpet had sounded."(*WS* 261)

> He felt tired, happy, humorous and relieved of his responsibility and of a much heavier

> burden. Something had happened. Something had changed. Like everyone else who reads the newspapers he had come to hold in his mind a fear that some drunken corporal might incinerate the planet and to hold in another part of his mind the most passionate longings for a peaceful life among his generations. In spite of his youth he had breathed in this concept of general infirmity. He seemed at times to listen to the planet's heartbeat as if the earth were a melancholy hypochondriac, possessed of great strength and beauty and with them an incurable presentiment of sudden and meaningless death. Now the moment of danger seemed past, and he felt joyfully that the illustrious and peaceful works of man would go on forever. (*WS* 262)

What must have seemed to Emile like the ultimate challenge to his humanity, the safe burial of these prize-winning eggs, has been met and Emile sees himself as a survivor. His fears of the planet's destruction have abated, and in their place is a steady sense that life will continue. Emile's optimism ends the chapter; he returns to the story when Melissa visits Ladros and buys him in a male slave auction. Turning their back on American society, Emile and Melissa become expatriates and depart the novel, living together in Rome.

The novel ends as it began, on Christmas eve. Cousin Honora has died and Coverly and Betsey must take her place as hosts of the annual Christmas dinner for the Hutchins Institute for the Blind. The foreboding that is everywhere on this last St. Botolphs Christmas eve extends even to the

Christmas sermon of the drunken Reverend Applegate:

> Let us pray for all those killed or cruelly wounded on thruways, expressways, freeways and turnpikes. Let us pray for all those burned to death in faulty plane-landings, mid-air collisions and mountainside crashes. Let us pray for all those wounded by rotary lawn mowers, chain saws, electric hedge clippers and other power tools. Let us pray for all alcoholics measuring out the days that the Lord hath made in ounces, pints and fifths.(*WS* 301)

Applegate's catalog of contemporary fatalities is not out of place in St. Botolphs. With a bow to the gardening machinery of the suburban elite, Applegate recognizes the straits of his parishioners, though it is perhaps fitting that only Coverly remains seated during this gloomy oration; all of the others leave in disgust.

Nearby at the Viaduct House, Moses and the widow Wilston are slowly disintegrating in alcoholic haze. Living apart from his wife and child, Moses is even disconnected from Coverly, the only remaining Wapshot. Applegate's sermon seems almost to have been directed at Moses, whose plight at the end of the novel mirrors that of a minor character from *The Wapshot Scandal's* Christmas eve opening, the lonely woman who telephoned her mother to wish her a merry Christmas: "the voice of Dolores with its prophecy of gas stations and motels, freeways and all-night supermarkets, had more to do with the world to come than the

singing on the green."(*WS* 13)

The world to come has arrived, and what was originally the perspective of a St. Botolphs outsider is now the experience of one of its first families. Moses' future holds little promise. "The damage he had done to his nerves and his memory was less painful than a sense he suffered of approaching disaster, some pitiless fatality that would break him without making itself known."(*WS* 303) In Rome, the ambivalence of Melissa and Emile presents a distinct hope for the future of the planet, however far from home they had to travel for that hope; by contrast Moses returns to his home to dissipate. *The Wapshot Scandal* ends with explosions as a storm lights the steeple and the narrator repeats a message from Leander Wapshot's wallet: "Let us consider that the soul of man is immortal, able to endure every sort of good and every sort of evil." But the last lines undercut even this promise. The novel ends with the end of St. Botolphs. Promising he will never come back, the narrator says "there will be nothing left, there will be nothing left but the headstones to record what has happened; there will really be nothing at all."(*WS* 309) There will be no more Wapshot stories, no generations of future Wapshots, not even a town where their memory can be stored. Cheever closes his franchise of postwar America in an manner that

meets the premonition of the novel itself, by erasing it from history altogether.

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John Cheever admits that most of us live like Honora Wapshot, sleeping beneath the "Damoclean antique" of her undressed canopy bedframe, waiting for it to end our lives in the middle of the night. Cousin Honora sleeps without anxiety. Most of Cheever's characters are in a similar position, but few manage as well. Instead they live in a precarious situation where impending danger does have an impact on their lives. The potential failure of life as they have lived it to continue looms over the horizon for Cheever's characters; some address it directly, some address it by appearing to ignore it entirely.

"Who will sound the alarm?" Moses asks in "The Death of Justina." Cheever himself returned publicly to the issue of the bomb and an abbreviated future months before his death when he received the National Medal for Literature. In a ceremony at Carnegie Hall in 1982, Cheever sounded the alarm, delivering remarks based on this entry in his journals:

> What I am going to write is the last of what I have to say, and Exodus, I think, is what I have in mind. In the speech on the 27th I will say that literature is the only consciousness we possess, and that its role as a consciousness must inform us of our inability to comprehend the hideous danger of

> nuclear power. Literature has been the salvation of the damned; literature, literature has inspired and guided lovers, routed despair, and can perhaps, in this case, save the world.[26]

The journal entry is reminiscent of the old senator's speech from *The Wapshot Scandal*. Cheever speaks directly of nuclear war while admitting our basic inability to understand its magnitude. By 1982, the Reagan administration, which had carried the arms race to a level surpassing even the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, briefly returned the fear of imminent destruction to the popular imagination so that a film like "The China Syndrome" or the mishaps of the Three Mile Island or Chernobyl nuclear reactors made Cheever's speech timely. Cheever suggests that our only consciousness is informed by literature. That consciousness cannot help us to understand the extent to which we should fear nuclear destruction, but can help us discover how *little* we understand.

Cheever's remarks remind us again of those given by William Faulkner when he received the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature, defining the novelist's burden "to....help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and

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[26] Cheever, *Journals* 393.

sacrifice which have been the glory of his past."[27] While Faulkner places the burden of the atomic age on the writer, Cheever endeavors to go even farther, with a grander claim that it is literature itself, apart from any creator, that has the power to save us from nuclear destruction.

Of course, Cheever had already spoken to literature's saving power in "The Death of Justina," when he wrote:

> Fiction is art and art is the triumph over chaos (no less) and we can accomplish this only by the most vigilant exercise of choice, but in a world that changes more swiftly than we can perceive there is always the danger that our powers of selection will be mistaken and that the vision we serve will come to nothing.(429)

We need a sense of how uninformed we truly are in order to save the planet from the overwhelming chaos that prevails after World War II. It would be a fitting sentiment for one of Leander Wapshot's journals, that "the unobserved ceremoniousness of life" requires a little awe. The elderly senator addressed Dr. Cameron with this question: "We possess Promethean powers but don't we lack the awe, the humility, that primitive man brought to the sacred fire? Isn't this a time for uncommon awe, supreme humility?"(*WS* 215) By the end of his life, Cheever has no ambivalence about this topic. Literature, which teaches reverence for

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[27] William Faulkner, *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters* (New York: Random House, 1966) 119-120.

the everyday, supplies the sense of awe that is vital for humankind to rescue itself from the peril of nuclear destruction. In Saul Bellow's novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Cheever's conservative optimism about literature will resemble a left-leaning progressivism when compared to the always-already dying thoughts of the unsentimental Mr. Artur Sammler.

"Living near the crater of Vesuvius": Saul Bellow and the spirit of the penultimate

> They all had such fun! Wallace, Feffer, Eisen, Bruch, too, and Angela. They laughed so much. Dear brethren, let us all be human together. Let us all be in the great fun fair, and do this droll mortality with one another. Be entertainers of your near and dear. Treasure hunts, flying circuses, comical thefts, medallions, wigs and saris, beards. Charity, all of it, sheer charity, when you consider the state of things, the blindness of the living. It is fearful! Not to be borne! Intolerable! Let us divert each other while we live![1]

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In 1962, the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Students for a Democratic Society issued the Port Huron Statement, a manifesto of the young, educated person's reaction to the Cold War which its authors called an "agenda for a generation." Grounded in a sensibility of postwar affluence, the Port Huron Statement aligns the decline of its authors' smugly contented middle-class childhood with the advent of nuclear war, "the awareness that we ourselves, and our friends, and millions of abstract 'others' we knew more directly because of our common peril, might die at any time." This is its first paragraph:

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[1] Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970; New York: Penguin, 1995) 294. Subsequent references to this novel will be indicated by page number.

> When we were kids the United States was the wealthiest and strongest country in the world: the only one with the atom bomb, the least scarred by modern war, an initiator of the United Nations that we thought would distribute Western influence throughout the world. Freedom and equality were for each individual, government of, by, and for the people -- these American values we found good, principles by which we could live as men. Many of us began maturing in complacency.[2]

A foundation text for the anti-nuclear movement of the later 1960s and 1970s, the Port Huron Statement also invokes an image of a middle-class American youth entirely aware of the geopolitical situation to which his or her affluence is linked. Though material privileges were taken for granted during childhood, as young adults, the Statement's authors came to believe that American affluence was less a benign influence on global democracy than a threat to world security. As Students for a Democratic Society cleave from the consensus of the 1950s, they see the arms race and the global insecurity dangled before the world as America's responsibility. Looking back with suspicion on the material and ideological comforts with which they were brought up, the authors of the Port Huron Statement anticipate the generational comedy, historical drama and allegorical character of Saul Bellow's 1970 book, *Mr. Sammler's Planet.*

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[2] Students for a Democratic Society, *Port Huron Statement* 1962. Chicago: C.H. Kerr, 1990. n.p.

Every character in this novel is aware that things are coming to a close. Even the "droll mortality" in the passage that opens this chapter comes out of an environment saturated with death and decay diagnosed by Mr. Artur Sammler, whose scorn for "the great fun fair" exploding around him sets him apart from others. But the novel's eschatological perspective extends beyond its main character to a critique of the U.S. role in bringing the planet to its current position on a trajectory toward obliteration. Though critical response to *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is preoccupied with the main character, reading the other characters as "more like allegorical figures...than multi-dimensional human beings,"[3] everyone and everything on Sammler's planet is infused with the spirit of the penultimate, including younger members of Sammler's extended family, total strangers who travel with him on the city's public transportation system, New York City and the planet itself. Focusing entirely on Artur Sammler fails to accommodate the novel's contention that Cold War Americans, at least those living in New York in the late 1960s, face a future of uncertainty together. But if the characters in Bellow's book share a sense of impending doom, the

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[3]Sarah Blacher Cohen, *Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1974) 181.

generations represented respond to it in radically different - and often antagonistic - ways.

Mr. Sammler's Planet presents the fear of apocalypse as grounds for a schism in the American middle class. While the younger generation, including those characters mentioned in the passage above, occupy themselves with a series of mad diversions, the novel's few mature individuals, such as Dr. Elya Gruner and Sammler himself, look to the future with a grim perspective of resignation, what Sammler calls "the luxury of nonintimidation by doom." Sammler does not want to react to the end of the world, but he has spent a lifetime tracking societies in decline, from Bloomsbury to Poland and finally, New York in the 1960s. Even the novel's scientist, Dr. Govinda Lal, recognizes that some solution is required to ensure the future of earth-bound humanity, proposing a colony on the moon once the earth becomes uninhabitable. The opportunities for the future that draw immigrants to America -- especially to New York City -- are empty promises composed of violence and the detritus of consumer waste. By considering a multiplicity of perspectives, the novel examines human responsibilities during a time of boundless descent, asking whether complicity in social decline is inevitable. Bellow is a writer who shares the conservative bias of his main

character, though this novel stands out as his most reactionary. Wherever we place Saul Bellow however, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* depicts considerable generational conflict played out on the pages of late twentieth-century American history, interrogating middle-class complacency, the counterculture, and Cold War U.S. imperialism in an economical narrative that foretells either doom or departure from the earth, all in little more than three days' time.

During these three days, the novel is infused with the spirit of the end. "Everything soon must change," Sammler says. "Men would set their watches by other suns than this."(134) There are numerous instances of people, institutions and entire civilizations on the verge of making an irreversible, permanent change, as if "we are about to conclude our earth business" altogether.(148) Sammler's escape from a mass grave in a Polish concentration camp gave him one last chance for life, a chance he remains reluctant to accept over the 30 years he has spent waiting to die. Dr. Lal examines a last chance for human beings to adopt to life on the moon. Everyone in the novel, including several more recent emigres to New York City beleaguered by their experiences in America, feels "the suicidal impulses of civilization pushing strong," yet they move forward anyway, attending lectures, devising business schemes, shopping, and

searching for sexual satisfaction.(33) As different responses to this historical moment are examined in detail, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* can be read as an allegory, raising questions not only about individual responses to apocalypse, but about America's role in global domination, and whether the orthodoxies of twentieth-century New York City will travel as civilization seeks to create worlds on other planets or to abdicate its hold on us altogether.

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Saul Bellow has often written on the position of the literate middle class facing the upheavals of the second half of the twentieth century, a half-century that parallels Bellow's career more closely than that of any other American novelist. His first novel *Dangling Man* [1944] details the final days before an American draftee is summoned for active duty in World War II. In his latest novel *Ravelstein* [2000], a conservative academic who has railed against progressive politics succumbs to AIDS. But Bellow's critique of the American middle class has seldom been as bitter as in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. One critic calls this a novel "not so much written as aimed,"[4] and indeed, it is much angrier than those that proceed and follow it, *Herzog*

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[4] Daniel Fuchs, *Saul Bellow: vision and revision* (Durham: Duke UP, 1984) 208.

[1964] and *Humboldt's Gift* [1975], which share *Mr. Sammler's Planet*'s concern with an educated individual's morality in an increasingly barbarous age. Like any Bellovian tale, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is comic in its presentation of human idiosyncracies. But its minor characters provide more than humorous episodes of extremism to which Sammler can react. Though capable of offenses from mild irresponsibility and pathological self-involvement to aggressive cruelty, the minor characters on Sammler's planet are the ones who illustrate the postwar *Zeitgeist* while Mr. Sammler can only indict the maturity of Enlightenment rationalism for inducing the noisy disturbances and heightened self-expression of the 1960s. But as the novel finally demonstrates, everyone on Sammler's planet lives close to the brink, and even the younger, carefree and careless people against whom Sammler rails are driven by the same awareness of apocalypse.

Though *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is attuned to a greater degree to the Cold War than *Herzog*, the earlier novel also grapples with the pervasive threat of nuclear war. Its protagonist however, despite occasional lapses into irrationality, is an optimist. Just as Sammler's weary perspective dominates the novel, Moses Herzog's outlook complements a frenetic, almost giddy, portrait of postwar

America. Of course, much of *Herzog* takes place in a New York City far more vibrant and appealing than the New York of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. In spite of, or perhaps because of the perils of the age, Herzog celebrates the densely populated cities where he can feel his connection to other human beings. For instance when Herzog sees nursery school students lining up at Chicago's Museum of Science, they are "blessed heads of all hues, shapes, and the promise of the world to come."[5] Sammler describes the university students to whom he is expected to lecture as "malodorous, peculiarly rancid, sulphurous."(40) Herzog finds a tender joy in watching his daughter June bathe; the same experience causes Sammler to retreat and speak coldly to his daughter Shula. Moving through city streets in a cab, Herzog notes,

> The square shapes were vivid, not inert, they gave him a sense of fateful motion, almost of intimacy. Somehow he felt himself part of it all - in the rooms, in the stores, cellars - and at the same time he sensed the danger of these multiple excitements. But he'd be all right. He was overstimulated.[6]

Herzog can choose from any seat when he travels by public transportation; Sammler squeezes himself onto a crowded bus where a pickpocket preys each day on commuters, becoming one of the touchstones for Sammler's diatribe against civic

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[5] Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (1964; New York: Avon, 1976) 334.

[6] Bellow, *Herzog* 38.

decay.

As in *Herzog*, there is much humor in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, but the earlier protagonist's madcap charm here is replaced by a quiet patrician rage at every aspect of American civilization. Sammler has grievances with the academy, the government, the middle-class homeowner, the urban planner, artists, physicians, parents and children. Where Herzog articulates his discontent in letters (often didactic but always amusing), Sammler carries on a lengthy interior monologue that indicts virtually every site of contemporary American culture. Unlike Moses Herzog, however, Mr. Sammler does not travel with a pad of stationery, does not voice his complaints about contemporary events in winningly eccentric letters to friends, associates, and those in power. As a result Sammler's objections must be contained in the kind of narration that sustains the novel, intermittently Sammler's thoughts and conversations that advance a meager plot.

Though *Mr. Sammler's Planet* addresses the threat of thermonuclear war intermittently, the novel takes the potential of global apocalypse as a given condition. It is clear from the first line that a toxic presence circulates throughout this narrative: "Shortly after dawn, or what would have been dawn in a normal sky, Mr. Artur Sammler with

his bushy eye took in the books and papers of his West Side bedroom and suspected strongly that they were the wrong books, the wrong papers."(3) This projection of abnormality, in this case a pernicious cloud hanging over Mr. Sammler's waking moments, suggests the kind of vaporous threat typical of apocalyptic science fiction.[7] Science fiction tropes do appear in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, those which show a genealogical decline damaging an entire generation because of some miasmic contagion let loose by a nuclear accident.[8] But the younger generation in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* does not suffer from a science-fiction malady; rather Angela, Wallace, Feffer, Eisen and even Sammler's daughter Shula, who have lived much of their lives during the Cold War, carry on with the possibility of sudden destruction indelibly etched into their consciousness. Theirs is the generation about whom Norman Mailer wrote in "The White Negro," raised from infancy knowing "that...we might still be doomed to die as a cipher

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[7] Jay Parini refers to the first line as a kind of gauntlet thrown down to fight the student and free-speech movements of the 1960s of which he was a part. *Mr. Sammler's Planet* continues the melee in earnest, "Mr Sammler: A Hero of Our Time," *Salmagundi* 106-07 (1995): 66-73

[8] An "airborn toxic event" is both a metaphor and reality in Don DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*, which recasts many of the themes of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* with an equally cynical eye.

in some vast statistical operation in which our teeth would be counted and our hair would be saved."[9] Not quite hipsters but not entirely squares, they are nonetheless aware that even amid affluence, political instability may cause an abrupt end to their life on the planet.

Mr. Sammler is an intellectual record of social concerns that predate the atomic age. A society surrounded by signs of death does not alter his consciousness, for in many ways Sammler has already died. Many readers have pointed out similarities to *King Lear*, both texts moving towards the impending death of the patriarch and filled with thankless children, foolish savants, and an inheritance that nearly destroys a family. Like Shakespeare's king, Sammler becomes "an oracle speaking to history" in a text where history itself is threatened by apocalypse.[10] But *King Lear* enacts the king's tragedy on stage; Sammler's tragedy has already taken place. While Lear rages against instances of apocalypse, Sammler's temper subsided long ago so instead of being King of Britain, Sammler is "the king of

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[9] Norman Mailer, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," *Advertisements for Myself* (1959; Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 338.

[10] Joseph A. Wittreich, *"Image of that Horror:" History, Prophecy and Apocalypse in* King Lear (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1984) 125.

alienation."[11] As he travels city sidewalks making acrimonious observations, death confronts Sammler everywhere. But while he finds decline in everything, he refuses to react to any indication that civilization is doomed.

Set during "one of those penultimate springs," the story is framed by premonitions of death.(45) Sammler's beloved nephew, Dr. Elya Gruner, a gynecologist, is suffering from a cerebral blood clot, and the novel awaits the moment his arterial walls will "spray the brain with blood" ending his life.(81) Anticipating this literal explosion in the two days that remain to Elya's life, the others are guided by an equally strong if more metaphorical sense of imminent doom. Elya's daughter Angela, sharing her thoughts with her Great Uncle Sammler, says, "It's like sitting on the edge of a cliff, waiting here."(302) In the final pages, she and Sammler have this exchange:

> "What is there to say? And can't you think of anything but death?"
> "But that's what we have before us."(306)

Death surfaces everywhere. Sammler's West Side -- in fact the entire metropolitan area, from Times Square to Elya Gruner's home in New Rochelle -- is decomposing, and signs of decay permeate the environment. Everything is dirty,

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[11] Parini 67.

ill-maintained, and rotting, from public services, the University and shop windows to the bodies of the people, even young bodies like Sammler's nephew Wallace's and his daughter Shula's. Sammler remembers his late wife, his late nephew, his late niece. "Wherever you looked, or tried to look, there were the late."(8) His son-in-law Eisen, who fancies himself an artist, has created an oeuvre of death in portraits of the family where "[E]verybody looked like a corpse, with black lips and red eyes, with faces a kind of leftover cooked-liver green."(65) Nor is youth protected from the visibility of death, as Elya indicates: "young people, too, perfect in every other respect sometimes drop dead of it. Walking along, strong, beautiful, full of beans, when it explodes inside. They die."(95-96) Sammler even comments to Elya that the same conglomerate that publishes the teen satire *Mad* magazine has bought all of the funeral homes in Manhattan, linking the adolescent readers of *Mad* to death.

Sammler conceives of the break-down in civic services and civilized behavior as a kind of death as well, remarking on the graffiti, dirt, and shit he claims engulfs the city. Human waste in particular plays a major role in New York's decay. As the end product of human consumption, shit's visibility in the novel makes perfect sense. From public

telephones smashed and used as urinals to city parks "invariably dog-fouled"(105) to Sammler's grand-nephew Wallace, who projects "a slightly unclean odor from the rear"(87), waste is everywhere -- or Sammler is hypersensitive to it. Even the remarks Sammler delivers at a Columbia University lecture are called shit by an audience of student radicals. Sammler's efforts to avoid contact with shit use up a lot of his energy, its prevalence underscoring the decline in civilization Sammler decries.

Yet the ubiquity of death does not render Sammler a survivor, rather someone who has not yet died. To his chagrin, Sammler's own mortality is in remission, but he nonetheless sees no future. Like Trilling's John Laskell, Sammler has literally come back from the dead, his reprieve taking him from the life of an emigre journalist living in London to that of an intellectual in New York. Left for dead by Nazis in a mass grave, Sammler sees his escape from the concentration camp as a delay of the inevitable outcome, not a second chance at life. Hiding from the Nazis in the Polish countryside, Sammler lived in a mausoleum, set apart from all human beings except the Polish stranger who brought him food. But surviving the Holocaust does not change the behavior Sammler learned in hiding. It is as if he is taking advice from Moses Herzog's friend Luke Asphalter, who counsels "pretend you have already died" as a way of

confronting depression.[12]

In New York, Sammler continues to live as if in a bunker, regarding contact with anyone whom he regards as a moral or intellectual inferior, a not inconsiderable number of people, as a rank imposition. He measures other people's lives, their habits and possessions, even their company, only for its potential to disturb him. A self-fashioned snob, Sammler recalls coughing into the hands of servants when a child to prevent himself from picking up his own germs. His ironic hostility is both racist and pretentious, and has no forgiveness for New York as an international city:

> New York was getting worse than Naples or Salonika. It was like an Asian, an African town, from this standpoint. The opulent sections of the city were not immune. You opened a jeweled door into degradation, from hypercivilized Byzantine luxury straight into the state of nature, the barbarous world of color erupting from beneath.(7)

Sammler quietly derides everyone, including his niece Margotte Arkin, in whose home he lives as a guest. With his sentimental interest in European culture, Sammler spends his afternoons in the public library re-reading Meister Eckhart, yet Margotte's equally affectionate singing of Schubert lieder while vacuuming earns only his scorn.

Sammler initially shared an apartment in New York with

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[12] Bellow, *Herzog* 329.

his daughter Shula, but her peculiarities and the building itself "made him feel that the twelfth-story room was like a china cabinet into which he was locked."(27) He has little patience with Shula, her instability and ungainliness outweighing her voluble filial adoration. Shula traffics in waste, combing the trash cans of the malls on Upper Broadway for treasures to present to her father, hoping to win his affection. But Shula's devotion means little to Sammler, and his attempts to keep away from her are indicative of his incipient death. Relocated to the home of his more socially-acceptable niece, Sammler mocks Margotte as well, her liberalism, her housekeeping, even her kindness. "You could criticize her endlessly," Sammler says to himself, "she talked junk, she gathered waste and junk in the flat, she bred junk."(20-21) Sammler's bedroom in Margotte's home resembles a bomb shelter. Determined to be as self-sufficient as possible, he keeps provisions (coffee, boiled water and onion rolls) on his window ledge and urinates in the sink in an attempt to avoid conversation with the garrulous Margotte.

Though the novel presents New York as the center of the world, the city's decline is also characterized by a breakdown in civility. Besides the rampant vandalism, intimidation and street-level crime Sammler witnesses, a pervasive tone of nastiness surrounds everyone. On

Sammler's planet, individuals have always had a hard time getting along with one another. People are not misanthropic by nature, but as Sammler sees it, they are lately motivated by the Enlightenment concept of the self. To these "Enlightened" individuals, concern for others is too often an obstacle to individual happiness. Even Sammler's savior in Poland, Cieslakiewicz, is ultimately revealed to be anti-Semitic, "an ordinary human being" who "wanted again to be himself" when his heroism was no longer necessary.(91)

Sammler is not alone in decrying these final days of civility. While it is reasonable to assume that even the unruly young people would join him in lamenting a world devoid of safety, cleanliness and kindness, only Sammler sees this decline as the result of unchecked subjectivity, a philosophy he finds gaining strength with the late 1960s counterculture. He does not see a possible explanation in shared thoughts of apocalypse. Jay Parini argues that Sammler "must turn away from the idea that humanity is trapped in these dark repetitions of brutality," hoping another explanation can be found.[13] Like Faulkner, Sammler declines to accept the end of the world. But in order to cultivate a response to doom, one needs to be alive, or more alive, at any rate, than Mr. Sammler, who cannot part from

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[13] Parini 70.

his excoriation of decline long enough to think of anything else:

> Like many people who had seen the world collapse once, Mr. Sammler entertained the possibility it might collapse twice. He did not agree with refugee friends that this doom was inevitable, but liberal beliefs did not seem capable of self-defense, and you could smell decay.(33)

"The luxury of nonintimidation by doom" directs Sammler's actions and sympathies away from a fear of apocalypse to indict the social madness he diagnoses in almost everyone.(134) In this respect, Sammler resembles Herzog, who writes, "We must get it out of our heads that this is a doomed time, that we are waiting for the end."[14] But Herzog's refusal to acknowledge doom is part of his well-worn optimism. For Sammler, it is the embodiment of misanthropic pessimism. Sammler holds responsible for this measurable decline all those who have faith in human perfectability: "So great was the evil of helpfulness, and so immense the liberal spirit of explanation."(199) He sees the rampant subjectivity that characterizes contemporary society, where "being right was largely a matter of explanations," as another instance of graffiti, this time written across our collective minds. He sums up this dismissive opinion as "Enlightenment? Marvelous! But out of

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[14] Bellow, *Herzog* 386.

hand, wasn't it?" (34)

The trajectory of Sammler's thoughts is illustrated fully in a lengthy interior monologue that castigates the philosophy of the Zeitgeist. In this passage, basic human rights are championed, then used as departure points for additional "rights" that define the current level of lunacy. Continuing for several pages, it is a fascinating philippic:

> He saw the increasing triumph of Enlightenment - Liberty, Fraternity, Equality, Adultery! Enlightenment, universal education, universal suffrage, the rights of the majority acknowledged by all governments, the rights of women, the rights of children, the rights of criminals, the unity of the different races affirmed, Social Security, public health, the dignity of the person, the right to justice - the struggles of three revolutionary centuries being won while the feudal bonds of Church and Family weakened and the privileges of aristocracy (without any duties) spread wide, democratized, especially the libidinous privileges, the right to be uninhibited, spontaneous, urinating, defecating, belching, coupling in all positions, tripling, quadrupling, polymorphous, noble in being natural, primitive, combining the leisure and luxurious inventiveness of Versailles with the hibiscus-covered erotic ease of Samoa. Dark romanticism now took hold. (32-33)

Sammler cites a few of the behaviors he finds abhorrent in those around him, bodily excesses that grow unchecked and make him truly uncomfortable. Of course, New York is neither Versailles nor Samoa, and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is fairly certain that people like Angela, Wallace and Feffer

do not so much subscribe to Enlightenment ideas as seek the most expeditious route to their own pleasure in a climate where time itself may be limited.

Stanley Crouch observes that Sammler is "obsessed with understanding what makes or breaks a society," and his life affords him a glimpse into several that have never recovered the civilization exterminated in the Holocaust.[15] But it is his fascination with New York that brings Sammler's obsession with social decline its greatest challenge. Unwilling to read the fear of the end, Sammler will not see New York's "madness" as a solution to fear devised by people with far more to lose. Those who "divert each other while we live" are just part of the problem; their insatiable appetite for pleasure a disreputable denial of death:

> For what it amounted to was limitless demand - insatiability, refusal of the doomed creature (death being sure and final) to go away from this earth unsatisfied. A full bill of demand and complaint was therefore presented by each individual. Nonnegotiable. Recognizing no scarcity of supply in any human department.(34)

Like the squares implied in "The White Negro," these people sublimate their fear in an imagined bounty of indulgence. Sammler reads the failure of "the doomed creature" to depart without satisfaction as avarice, not as the accommodation of

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[15] Stanley Crouch, "Barbarous on Either Side": The New York Blues of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*," *Mr. Sammler's Planet* by Saul Bellow (1970; New York: Penguin, 1995) viii.

nuclear anxiety in consumerism. Angela and Wallace Gruner operate without Bettelheim's so-called "middle-class morality," each able to meet a "full bill of demand" with their father's wealth, a means of instant gratification without waiting for anything.[16] Though Sammler may be unable to tolerate the progressive freedoms that lead to their uninhibited and spontaneous behavior, he is incessantly critical of those individuals who still enjoy themselves in spite of the end that faces us all.

Mr. Sammler does not recognize that in this precarious moment in history, one crucial "scarcity of supply" may be time itself. Suspicious of explanations, Sammler only judges the end result of this behavior, a noisy world without discretion. When the minor characters of the novel begin their escapades, his criticism turns to overt hatred.

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"Living near the crater of Vesuvius, it is better to be an optimist," Mr. Sammler says to Dr. Lal.(209) Sammler is speaking of the Jews, defending them against Schopenhauer's accusation that Jews are "vulgar optimists." But Sammler does not see the historical situation of the Cold War as analogous to the same peril. It is the young who most suffer from Sammler's blindness. While it is true that they

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[16] Bruno Bettelheim, "Children Must Learn to Fear," *New York Times Magazine*, 13 April 1969: 125.

are an unruly lot, selfish and irresponsible at their best, hostile and violent at their worst, even the student agitators who heckle Sammler during his aborted lecture are residents of Sammler's planet, facing the same global insecurity which foments the decline that is Sammler's preoccupation. Sammler himself admits that there is "luxury" in his resigned non-response to doom, the luxury of an old man who has been detached from life for thirty years. Young people in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* such as Lionel Feffer, Wallace and Angela not only recognize the potentially foreshortened civilization of the Cold War, but react to it, an accommodation to doom that Sammler cannot abide. They echo the position that grounded the authors of the Port Huron Statement in nuclear anxiety: "the sense that we may be the last generation in the experiment with living."[17] In the characterization of young people's selfishness, the novel is at its nastiest, but Sammler's antipathy toward the young belies several instances of hypocrisy in his own (and to a lesser degree, Elya's) behavior.

Sammler parts from the younger generation early in the novel. Lionel Feffer, the student organizer whose first name reminds us of his Columbia affiliation ("The Other Lionel"), has asked Sammler to address a group of students

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[17] Port Huron Statement n.p.

on the "British Scene in the Thirties." Discoursing on "the mental atmosphere of England before the Second World War" to a roomful of young people imbued with the mental atmosphere of the United States *after* the war, Sammler attempts to reconcile his knowledge of H.G. Wells' utopia with the more forthright political sympathies of the day. But Sammler is crudely shouted down from the podium by a group of students who object to his ironically laudatory comments about George Orwell, calling them shit and shouting derogatory epithets about Sammler's geriatric sexuality. Forced to flee a crowd of auditors described as "large, spreading, [and] shaggy," Sammler does not think highly of the student movement.(40) If *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is harsh in its treatment the sentiments of student protests, this fiction is still milder than at least one relevant non-fiction example, when another Columbia University student, Allen Ginsberg, told America "go fuck yourself with your atomic bomb."[18]

Throughout the book, most of Sammler's anger is targeted toward the young, members of his family and other young people with whom he comes in contact. His understanding of young people, their intellect, connection to the past, and affluence, is not charitable. He views

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[18] Allen Ginsberg, "America," *Collected Poems, 1947-1980* (New York" Harper, 1984) 146.

their indulgence as one more disturbing vision of contemporary American society. In his scorn, Sammler prefigures the conservative conjectures of Midge Decter, who in 1975 heard one question posed repeatedly by affluent, well-intentioned parents: "What," Decter asks, "has gone wrong with the children?[19] This question echoes the science-fiction apprehensiveness of *Mr. Sammler's* first line. The abnormality that resonates throughout *Mr. Sammler's Planet* takes its clearest form in the younger generation, Elya Gruner's children Angela and Wallace, Sammler's daughter Shula, her estranged husband Eisen, Lionel Feffer, and even the Black pickpocket from the Broadway bus. Like Decter, Sammler sees their fickle enthusiasms as a function of affluence, not a reaction to the tenuousness of the times or as the index of progressive change. There is an obvious difference between the generation of Sammler and Elya and their descendants and friends, fictional evidence of the idea favored by conservative critics of the counterculture, that progressive childrearing has made monsters of an entire generation.

Of course, no one in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* compares to the four "types" of radical children who appear in Decter's

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[19] Midge Decter, *Liberal Parents, Radical Children* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1975) 23.

Liberal Parents, Radical Children (the dropout, the pothead, the sexual revolutionist, and the communard). Only Angela's libertinism can be seen as any kind of a social protest, though it is unlikely that Angela herself would view it that way. Still, there is a connection between affluence and the Gruner children's failure to lead productive lives. Speaking specifically of being a parent, Elya tells Sammler, "I must have believed what America was telling me. I paid for the best."(177) Sammler offers a characteristically scatological explanation, asking of an entire generation, "[w]hat was it to be arrested in the stage of toilet training?"(45) But the novel poses the question with more concern for the position of these young people at the height of Cold War anxiety than the hypocritical older generation has for them.

Mr. Sammler's distaste for this behavior is expressed through his disdain for Elya's children, raised like Trilling's "well-loved child of the middle class" with the highest expectations of their role as leaders of a bright liberal future. As a testimonial to Elya's wealth, the Gruner home is completely alien to Sammler. Marilyn Motz and Pat Browne have argued that such an affluent middle-class household "becomes a monument to the willingness of the family to conform, usually at great expense, to accepted

standards of style and taste."[20] Its furnishings selected by an effete interior decorator, the New Rochelle house harbors a stereotypically dysfunctional family that has been harmed by its prosperity. "A house of misconceived purposes," it is similar to homes in Cheever's suburbs, except that at the Gruners', "nothing really functioned except the mechanical appliances," an improvement over the handsome deathtraps of Shady Hill where malfunctioning appliances are often the cause of comic fatalities.(192) But Sammler finds mortality here, amid his nephew's fashionable residential architecture and opulent interior design:

> The living room was what they called "sunken." You had to descend. A well, a pool, a tank of carpet. It was furnished or decorated with professional completeness, densely arranged. This, if you allowed it to, gave pain...It wouldn't be a bad custom to send these furnishings into the tomb with the deceased, Egyptian style.(203)

Gruner's home, another tomb-like shelter equipped with the trappings of middle-class suburban entitlement, connotes death to Sammler. Here, Dr. Gruner and his late wife raised Angela and Wallace, both of whom maintain an affectionate relationship with their reticent great uncle. Both in their early 30s, Angela and Wallace are products of a privileged

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[20] Marilyn Ferris Motz and Pat Browne, *Making the American Home: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Material Culture, 1840-1940* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State UP, 1988) 4.

suburban childhood. But unlike the dismissive Columbia students, some of whom demonstrate a semblance of political consciousness, Angela and Wallace are apolitical, concerned more with themselves than countercultural revolution and the global balance of power. Yet the Gruner children's lack of conviction does not mean they are unaware of their situation; on the contrary, as with others in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Angela and Wallace are expressions of the potentially unsteady nature of this moment in history.

Their father considers both of his children useless, failures for their inability to conform to the conventions of the upper middle class guaranteed by his wealth. Wallace has been unable to select a single career, leaving numerous academic degrees unfinished and chasing wild schemes to amass wealth even greater than his father's. Angela, perhaps more to her father's humiliation, has been unable to select a single sexual partner, remaining unmarried and childless but aggressively promiscuous. Angela and Wallace Gruner share the postwar middle-class child's inability to delay pleasure until later in life, what Bruno Bettelheim called the class's instinctual capacity for deferred gratification.[21] Neither of the Gruner children can wait, and neither wants to be limited, professionally,

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[21] Bettelheim 125.

financially, or sexually, in any way that signals the end of a lifetime of choices. The "permissiveness theory," that the progressive child rearing principles of Dr. Benjamin Spock were the cause of mid-to-late '60s student protest, fails to consider the Cold War history behind this generation's adolescence. Barbara Ehrenreich has shown the younger generation's fervent search for indulgence goes quickly to the roots of middle-class anxiety for its failure to put pleasure off for the future.[22] But in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, repeated forebodings that the end is near illustrate that deferring one's pleasures is a matter of some risk.

Angela Gruner cannot easily be called inconsiderate. Like her father, who brought Sammler and Shula from Poland after the war, Angela is thoughtful to her Sammler relatives, philanthropic with her allocation of her father's wealth, and mindful, if somewhat disdainful, of her younger brother Wallace. Sammler's objections to Angela begin with her education, composed largely of French literature in which the Enlightenment ideas of individual indulgence Sammler mistrusts find their most eloquent expression.

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[22] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Harper, 1990) 68-74. Ehrenreich begins her discussion with the middle-class discovery and subsequent infantalization of the poor, crystalizing its fear of raising its own children with any resemblance to the hand-to-mouth economy of the poor.

Angela's indulgence is purely physical. Though he seems neither to trust or care very much for his daughter, at one point calling her a "sloppy cunt," (78) Elya has made Angela a wealthy woman and recognizes that he is partially to blame for her extravagance. Angela's existence is entirely leisured. Sammler sees her use her wealth as part of her sexual allure, captivating herself and others with physical pleasures, those she can receive as well as give. But this is clearly an extension of how Angela was taught to be a consumer, taught by her father who always "paid for the best." (177)

> Well, after all, she had charge accounts at the finest shops in New York, and access to the best of everything in the world. If Pucci didn't have want she wanted, she ordered from Hermés. All that money could buy, luxury could offer, personal beauty could bear upon the person, or that sexual sophistication could reciprocate. If she could find the ideal male, her divine synthesis - well, she was sure she could make it worth his while. The best was not too good for her. There seemed to be no question about that.(67)

Angela is a talented consumer and her promiscuity is a product of an affluent, though not necessarily a permissive, upbringing. If "the ideal male" is just another commodity, then Angela does conform to class expectations: she is a comparison shopper.[23]

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[23] In his article on Black-Jewish relations in the novel, Ethan Goffman says that "the sexual revolution is a consumerist utopia, the search for the ultimate individual

The details of Angela's sexual experiences are well-known to the others, in particular a four-person tryst during a recent trip to Acapulco. These escapades are a special affront to her dying father's expectations about her future. Though she has steadily dated Wharton Horricker, a man whose promiscuity is also well-established, her lack of restraint does not suggest to Elya raising a family or any other conventional middle-class behavior. When Sammler tells Dr. Lal that Schopenhauer calls the sex organs the seat of the will, it is a reference to Angela's stubborn refusal to deny herself any readily-available sexual pleasure.

Both Sammler and Elya Gruner are threatened by Angela's sexuality. Sammler is more than unusually uncomfortable around the sights, sounds and odors of reproduction, referring to Elya's lifelong source of income as "female generative slime."(82) Sammler is particularly intimidated by the novel's most visible sexual organ, not any part of Angela's body, but the black pickpocket's penis, exhibited to Sammler in the lobby of an Upper West Side apartment building and "intended to communicate authority."(55) The

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fulfillment, one end result of the Enlightenment's privileging of the self." It is another of the novel's progressive movements in which Sammler can have no part. "Between Guilt and Affluence: The Jewish Gaze and the Black Thief in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*," *Contemporary Literature* Winter 38:4 (1997): 710.

thief's penis is not a symbol of procreation, in its creation of another generation, presenting a challenge to the status quo, but is rather displayed to assert his authority. Angela's indiscreet sexual experiences, those she shares with Sammler and those he merely suspects, have the same unsettling effect on him. Angela does not want to limit herself because she does not know when a limit will be imposed from elsewhere. Until her time runs out, sexual activity, what Sammler's admired H.G. Wells saw as "a vital anodyne for despair," can serve Angela admirably.[24]

Her brother Wallace is a far less attractive character. Described by one critic as "the late '60s writ large,"[25] and by his father as a "high I.Q. moron,"(177), Wallace moves easily from one career to another:

> Wallace nearly became a physicist, he nearly became a mathematician, nearly a lawyer (he had even passed the bar and opened an office, once,) nearly an engineer, nearly a Ph.D. in behavioral science. He was a licensed pilot. Nearly an alcoholic, nearly a homosexual.(88)

One anecdote tells of Wallace's brief career as an attorney, disappearing to an office his father furnished for him to spend the day completing crossword puzzles and inspecting his stenographer's breasts, cloaked in the mantle of middle-

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[24] Norman and Jean Mackenzie, *H.G. Wells: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973) 387.

[25] Fuchs 214.

class professionalism without having to perform any work. Wallace looks for wealth everywhere. The novel makes great fun of this in the final chapters when he becomes a literal fortune-hunter, excavating the water pipes in Elya's home where he insists his father has buried untold sums of cash earned through covert abortions performed for the promiscuous daughters of organized crime families. When this scheme, too, results in disaster, Wallace is unapologetic. He has flooded the entire house, but remains cavalier about his distrust of his father, the cost of repairs, even his inability to clean up:

> "I don't know the first thing about mopping. I doubt that I ever even held a mop in my hands. But I could spread newspapers. Old *Timeses* from the cellar. But just one thing Uncle."
> "What thing is that?"
> "Don't dislike me on account of this."
> "I don't."
> "Well, don't look down on me -- don't despise me."
> "Well, Wallace..."
> "I know you must. Well, this is like an appeal. I'd like to have your good opinion."
> "Are you depressed, Wallace, when things go wrong like this?"
> "Less and less." (244)

Standing with his uncle in the rapidly-flooding basement, Wallace can think only of Sammler's "good opinion," not the enormous damage to the home because, as Wallace has learned, as his father has taught him, "the estate will pay the bill." (245)

Wallace's current business plan satirizes the very suburban affluence that produced him. Together with Lionel Feffer, Wallace proposes to sell aerial photographs to wealthy suburban homeowners who cannot identify their own landscape. Wallace intends to hire local graduate students in botany to provide a taxonomy of the foliage surrounding suburban estates, equipping prosperous homeowners with a sense that their property is their own. This scheme is telling, as it indicates the failure of the suburban gentry, people like Elya Gruner himself, to identify with their semi-rural surroundings, requiring instead an outsider's expertise to make these middle-class *arrivistes* at home in their own homes.

But as with Angela, Wallace's erratic and irresponsible actions are the result of his fear of death. Wallace is motivated to possess great wealth not because he sees a future of limitless possibility, but because his awareness of death is acute. Certainly his father's illness is part of this, however insensitive Wallace is to complain about his inheritance hours before Elya's death. Elya's expectations have been stifling to Wallace, and like his sister, Wallace's failure to limit himself has left him floundering:

> I'll tell you what I'm afraid of, Uncle...if
> I have to live on a fixed income from a trust

> it'll be the end of me. I'll never find myself then. Do you want me to rot? I need to crash out of the future my father has prepared for me. Otherwise, everything just goes on being possible, and all these possibilities are going to be the death of me. I have to have my own necessities, and I don't see those anywhere. All I see is ten thousand a year, like my father's life sentence on me. I have to bust out while he's still living. When he dies, I'll get so melancholy I won't be able to lift a finger.(245)

Aware of the dangers of limitless support, Wallace does want to make it on his own, and an inheritance from his father's will might actually doom Wallace to a future of permanent adolescence. But it is not only Elya's death that brings these thoughts to Wallace. With Elya's death approaching, his mortality will soon be his primary concern.

> Still, to some people death is very welcome. If they've spoiled their piece of goods, I'm sure many would rather be dead. What I'm finding out is that when the parents are living, they stand between you and death. They have to go first, so you feel pretty safe. But when they die, you're next, and there's nobody ahead of you in line. At the same time I see already that I'm taking the wrong slant emotionally, and I know I'll pay for it later.(99)

It is tempting to read this passage as another instance of Wallace's insensitivity to his father's condition. But it suggests the moment the penultimate becomes the ultimate, both for an individual who finally realizes that he too will die, and for a planet that has made itself uninhabitable and must look to other worlds to continue its business. This is

the only passage in the novel that contains any sign of civilization's future hope on earth. In Wallace we see that upon acknowledging his mortality, Trilling's "well-loved child of the middle class" can finally grow up. Likewise human civilization, forced to confront a possible end, might actually mature into something that does not jeopardize its own existence. Mired during childhood and early adulthood in the infantalizing expectations of their "other-directed" parents, the women and men of Wallace and Angela's generation do act like children, but not without reason.

Something of a hypocrite, Mr. Sammler sees none of this. He accuses young people of a gross fascination with the underworld, thinking "what a tremendous appeal crime had made to the children of bourgeois civilization."(63) But the novel's representatives of middle-class children are not criminals. In fact their avarice makes them suspicious of the kinds of threat to their wealth posed by pickpockets, crooked insurance adjusters, and fraudulent attorneys. Sammler's objections to much middle-class behavior illustrates his hypocrisy, which is often comic. For example, although Sammler laments the transformation of public telephones into urinals across the Upper West Side, he has turned his own bedroom sink into a urinal, a no less appropriate method of relieving oneself than that of a vagrant or street vandal, merely to avoid Margotte. He

criticizes Walter Bruch's fetish for the arms of Latin women, but Sammler, too, ogles Margotte's plump forearms. Mr. Sammler cannot even avoid the consumerism he dislikes in others. Late in the novel, Sammler bases his very existence on his external appearance as a participant in the middle-class economy. Sammler "consumed his share of goods, ate his roll from Zabar's...took the bus to Forty-second Street as if he had an occupation, ran into a black pickpocket. In short, a living man."(274)

Though Sammler believes explanations are a wordy way of creating a double-standard, he cannot get through the novel without a number of them. Shula's theft of Dr. Lal's manuscript for instance, leads Sammler to write a detailed letter of apology that accounts for Shula's behavior, asking Lal's forbearance because of his daughter's enthusiasm for the Wells memoir without acknowledging Shula's criminality. Sammler is bothered by Feffer and Wallace's voyeuristic enthusiasm about the pickpocket, linking it to the middle-class enthusiasm for criminal activity, yet he cannot keep from traveling on the same bus, drawn to this artful criminal until his safety is jeopardized. Even Sammler's revered Elya Gruner has performed dozens of covert abortions for people with organized crime affiliations.

Sammler overlooks his own criminal past, murdering a polish soldier during the war. Though he justifies his

action as vital self-defense, he also feels one "establishes one's identity by killing." Sammler's fear is that this American middle class, with "no resistance to the glamour of killers," would have been unable to resist the state-sanctioned fascism that nearly led to his murder in Poland.(145) Stanley Crouch writes that "this love of criminality has led so many well-to-do people to get their thrills - or increase their fortunes - by lying down, one way or another, with small- or big-time gangsters," linking both Sammler and Elya to the same fascination with criminality Sammler laments in others.[26]

Reading Sammler's hypocrisy might be the best place to locate Saul Bellow as distinct from Artur Sammler, whose conservatism mirrors many of Bellow's thoughts about the counterculture.[27] Certainly the novelist is aligned more with the older, more reserved Sammler, Elya and Dr. Lal, than the unruly and promiscuous younger characters. But there is enough evidence of hypocrisy in Sammler's criticism of the young to argue that, while Bellow may be Sammler's partisan, he recognizes that the extremes of the old man's

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[26] Crouch xx.

[27] Bellow's essay "Culture Now: Some Animadversions, Some Laughs," *Modern Occasions* 1 (1971): 162-78 is a non-fiction counterpart to *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, presenting Bellow's opposition to the progressive intellectual and political movements behind much '60s radicalism.

position are ultimately impossible. Gloucester's son Edgar concludes *King Lear* with this reverberation of apocalypse:

> The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
> Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

Though none of the younger people in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* share Edgar's sobriety, their sense of a future far shorter than their parents' clearly informs their behavior.

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Mr. Sammler is unimpressed with the police officer to whom he reports the whereabouts of the pickpocket on the Broadway bus, weighing the officer's brusque response as another sign of civic decline. He comments sarcastically, "America!...Advertised throughout the universe as the most desirable, most exemplary of nations."(14) Even given his ironic detachment, Sammler's remark reflects New York City as Bellow depicts it. The ongoing promotion of boundless opportunity brings a number of people to the U.S., most often to New York where, in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, the continents converge. Allan Chavkin notes that "Artur Sammler is reconciling three worlds: British, Polish and American," yet the novel depicts emigres from Asia, Africa and Latin America as well.[28] Searching for opportunity,

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[28] Allan Chavkin, "Mr. Sammler's War of the Planets," *Critical Responses to H.G. Wells* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995) 33-49.

they find this "most desirable of nations" duplicitous and unsafe. Jean Baudrillard writes that "the entire world continues to dream of New York, even as New York dominates and exploits it,"[29] a transposition of Sammler's pithier comment, "Great cities are whores."(163) Sammler knows not to trust New York or the country that feeds it, and he despairs at those who do. In its picture of New York as the late twentieth-century melting pot, the novel is an allegorical critique of the United States' position of privilege as the first nation of the world. Given the imperious role of the U.S. in the nuclear club, the crisis of Mr. Sammler's New York is a microcosm of the havoc instigated by the U.S. all over the globe.

The novel is devoid of overt criticism of the United States' aggressive role in nuclear armament technology and manufacture, a kind of leadership which has brought the planet to its present eve of instability. "In Russia, in China, and here," Sammler tells Dr. Lal, "very mediocre people have the power to end life altogether," dividing blame equally among the late 1960s superpowers.(220) But Sammler sees the fortunes of New York's newly naturalized people repeatedly capsized. The pickpocket, whom Sammler describes as "an African Prince" aboard the Broadway bus, is

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[29] Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (1986; New York: Verso, 1988) 23.

assaulted with a bag of Eisen's heavy medals and left bloody and unconscious in Times Square.(14) Latin American women are objectified by Walter Bruch, whose trips to Spanish Harlem are motivated entirely by his fetish for the arms of young Hispanic women. Bruch tells Sammler of his current obsession with a Puerto Rican clerk in a drug store whom he nearly molests as she hands him his change in a wordless release of sexual tension. The somewhat more fortunate European community is represented by Sammler himself as practically a figure of Hellenic antiquity whom Daniel Fuchs calls a "Tiresias of the Upper West Side."[30] Sammler's Anglophilia, reflected even in his given name, render him as un-American as more recent emigres. Nonetheless, Sammler has met with disappointment and fear since Elya brought him to the United States so that even Sammler suffers from what a critic calls the novel's "counternarrative of terror inflicted upon marginalized peoples."[31]

But it is Dr. Lal, the Indian scientist whose mistreatment makes the strongest case for *Mr. Sammler's Planet* as a nuclear allegory. He is repeatedly described as "typically Asian;" his despair takes "Asiatic form," and in one instance, Lal is "like an Oriental ornament or

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[30] Fuchs 229.

[31] Goffman 706.

painting."(221) Like Asia itself, which paid the highest price for the United States' lead role in atomic destruction, Lal is also the character most tormented. Even his surname, an anagram for "all," brings to mind countless victims of acts of U.S. aggression to which Shula's theft of the manuscript may be added. Dark and diminutive, Dr. Lal, "whose wrist was no wider than a ruler," expects to find anxiety in America, and as he measures the Sammler family, is not disappointed.(206) Shula cannily steals the only copy of his scholarly treatise, *The Future of the Moon,* after a public lecture at Columbia. Although the police have been alerted, Sammler's experience with law enforcement and reports of street-level crime do not present sanguine hope that the police will recover the manuscript. Dr. Lal travels to New Rochelle, and still the manuscript is not recovered. As Dr. Lal says, "Somehow the kind of terror I anticipated in America. My first visit. I had an intuition."(204)

The domineering United States, creating and then dashing the hopes of the world's nations, is the leading force behind the global capacity to destroy itself. The U.S. has created a community of the whole world in many ways, not least of which is its unsurpassed ability to eradicate humanity, ignoring political and geographic

boundaries. "Of course," Dr. Lal tells Sammler, "in a sense the whole world is now U.S. Inescapable.... It's like a big crow that has snatched our future from the nest, and we, the rest, are like little finches in pursuit, trying to peck it."(205) While a nation that has commandeered the world's future might behave with a degree of humility, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* records only the United States' hubris as a leader. Shula claims that to benefit a creative mind like her father's, theft is justifiable. Likewise, our national explanation (in "an age of explanations") that advancing democracy justifies the U.S. nuclear arsenal and the destructive potential it engenders.

Dr. Lal's belief that the U.S. has taken the future from the rest of the world leads to the novel's final consideration of the future, an enduring colony on the moon. Though his manuscript is called *The Future of the Moon*, it is the future of earth that augurs irreversible catastrophe. Given this rancorous situation, Sammler weighs the options for humanity, either to continue journeying toward apocalypse or to transfer operations to another sphere. As Sammler paraphrases the question of Dr. Lal's manuscript, the novel asks whether the time has come "to blow this great blue, white, green planet, or to be blown from it."(51) Dr. Lal's writing poses the question of our departure to begin a

new future on the moon, and whether travel to the moon is another of the novel's hopeful second-chances for civilization or the abandonment of hope altogether.

Lal, "who must have been sick of the earth to begin with if he had such expectations of the moon," is filled with the spirit of the penultimate.(173) His examination of whether human civilization can be transplanted is less a foray into a lunar science-fiction narrative than a realistic account of human civilization's having fouled the nest so thoroughly that the moon presents its only option for escape. Of course, Sammler has considered this before. During the height of public speculation about other worlds and the space program, itself a function of the delicate Cold War balance of power, Sammler ruminates predictably, on the whole planet's decline:

> And we know now from photographs the astronauts took, the beauty of the earth, its white and its blue, its fleeces, the great glitter afloat. A glorious planet. But wasn't everything being done to make it intolerable to abide here, an unconscious collaboration of all souls spreading madness and poison? To flush us out? Not so much Faustian aspiration, thought Mr. Sammler, as a scorched-earth strategy. Ravage all, and what does death get? Defile, and then flee to the bliss of oblivion. Or bolt to other worlds.(135)

This question reaches its climax during the novel's central dialogue between Sammler and Lal. Both men travel separately to New Rochelle to locate Lal's manuscript. In

another indication of the adhesiveness of generations, they take an immediate liking to one another in spite of an adversarial beginning. Their conversation, with Lal's manuscript at its center, considers the decline in civilization Sammler has witnessed throughout his life and the potential solution presented by advancing (or retreating) to the moon. Both men discuss the fate of humanity in a context of Western philosophy, H.G. Wells, and the attempted exterminations of the Jews and the Punjabis, until Wallace bursts open the pipes and causes the abrupt end of the conversation.

Lal diagnoses the same problems in civilization that Sammler sees, and offers a moon colony as a remedy. Lal's premise updates the manner in which political dissent was contained in the past, as Lal says:

> After 1776 there was a continent to expand into, and this space absorbed all the mistakes. Of course I am not a historian. But if one cannot make bold guesses, one will have to surrender all to the experts. Europe after 1789 did not have the space for its mistakes. Result: war and revolution, with the revolutions ending up in the hands of the madmen.(218)

Dr. Lal sees the colonization of the moon as a way to accommodate current American tension in much the same way manifest destiny enabled the appeasement of revolutionary tension in the eighteenth century. Given Sammler's belief that the world is spinning out of control, the incremental

increase of the lunar surface could -- appropriately enough -- contain a great deal of lunacy. As Lal tells Sammler,

> Perhaps the problems of radiation will prove insuperable, or strange diseases will be contracted on other worlds. Still, there is a universe into which we can overflow. Obviously we cannot manage with one single planet. ...If we could soar out and did not, we would condemn ourselves. We would be more than ever irritated with life. As it is, the species is eating itself up. And now Kingdom Come is directly over us and waiting to receive the fragments of a final explosion. Much better the moon.(219)

Mr. Sammler's pessimism does not place much faith in the notion that much about human nature is likely to change upon our colonization of the moon. Still, he recognizes it as one possible opportunity to escape the madness of contemporary civilization. His former acquaintance H.G. Wells, a writer of utopian and dystopian imagination, envisions a kind of best-case scenario:

> as the old filth and gloomy sickness were cleared away, there would emerge a larger, stronger, older, brainier type, able to eat and drink sanely, perfectly autonomous and well regulated in desires, going nude while attending tranquilly to duties, performing his fascinating and useful mental work. Yes, gradually the long shudder of mankind at the swift transitoriness of mortal beauty, pleasure, would cease to be replaced by the wisdom born of prolongation.(72)

Wells' utopia is replete with the characteristics Sammler has found wanting in his young friends. He is pleased by thoughts of "Lunar chastity," and the knowledge that "on the

moon, people would have to work hard simply to stay alive."(67) This demanding lunar regimen would make it difficult for Angela and Wallace to survive. Given the behavior Sammler would expect to see duplicated on the moon however, departing this planet for that one is not the very last second-chance for humanity, but an admission of its failure.

The question of whether we have a future is left undecided on *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. Sammler's refusal to see doom as inevitable makes him reluctant to embrace the kind of lunar utopia Lal prescribes, and his impatience with contemporary culture gives him little faith that a human civilization on the moon, even one designed to save humanity from promoting its own end on earth, would be any kind of improvement. For Sammler, the contentious rabble of New York City will endure, some fortified by anticipating the end, others weakened by it. Angela's mocking suggestion that her father buy Wallace a flying saucer shows that Wallace's brand of inanity could make it to the moon as well, an inauspicious beginning for the new colony. Sammler's ambivalence about the future is ultimately translated into ambivalence in the novel, which leaves unresolved the end of the planet.

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Early in *Herzog*, Moses Herzog writes a letter to a Mr. Emmett Strawforth of the U.S. Public Health Service. Published two years after *The Wapshot Scandal*, Herzog's letter bears a distinct resemblance to the enfeebled senator's plea for humanity before the criminally irresponsible Dr. Cameron:

> The point was that there were people who could destroy mankind and that they were foolish and arrogant, crazy, and must be begged not to do it. Let the enemies of life step down. Let each man now examine his heart. Without a great change of heart, I would not trust myself in a position of authority. Do I love mankind? Enough to spare it, if I should be in a position to blow it to hell? Now let us all dress in our shrouds and walk on Washington and Moscow. Let us lie down, men, women, and children, and cry, "Let life continue -- we may not deserve it, but let it continue."[32]

But if Herzog talking about the hope for humanity reminds us of Cheever, he bears no resemblance to Sammler. For Herzog, the love of humankind endows those with power to decide in favor of the planet's fate. The will to continue, though sentimental, is a fundamental part of Moses Herzog's project. Herzog attacks pessimists and doomsayers, which makes the world of his novel one with a great deal to recommend it. It is difficult to say this of *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, whose picture of the world is far less promising,

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[32] Bellow, *Herzog* 67.

and impossible to say it of Sammler, who holds out no hope at all.

The characterization of the American middle class in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* is not attractive. Conditioned by affluence -- in one case, wealth amassed through illegal activity -- and selfishness, the generations have no patience with each other, even given their shared understanding of the planet's peril. Equally disturbing are young people's responses to the end-of-the-world sensibility and Mr. Sammler's vituperative judgment of them. That Sammler's position is formed in part by a philosophical objection hardly justifies his outright dismissal of the fears of the age. The Damoclean spirit of the novel is impossible to ignore, even as Sammler wages a quiet war against capitulating to the demands of doom through his hypocritical criticism of others. But just as disturbing is Bellow's portrait of New York City as an international capital. Though falling apart in a hundred ways, the New York of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* still lures people from across the globe to take up residence before falling victim to the city's outrageous brutality. New York in turn, mirrors the United States' supremacy in subjecting every other nation to the civilization-threatening effects of its way of conducting war.

In the end of course, no one is safe. As Mr. Sammler tells Dr. Lal, "Man now plays the drama of universal death,"(220) but there is no consensus on how that drama is enacted. Our common fears far outnumber the lesser anxieties which divide us by our age, our race, our gender, or to echo Sammler's critique, how thoroughly we subscribe to Enlightenment notions of the self. The contentious society of New York that responds to the pressures of the Cold War is itself an excellent model for the world in the atomic age, with so many parties performing according to their own needs without a thought to community. The extent to which nuclear terror is lessened when one nation acts as a single body is considered in Don DeLillo's novel *Underworld*.

"Everything is connected in the end": Don DeLillo and the last crowd scene

> "And when the cold war goes out of business, you won't be able to look at some woman in the street and have a what-do-you-call-it kind of fantasy the way you do today."
> "Erotic. But what's the connection?"
> "You don't know the connection? You don't know that every privilege in your life and every thought in your mind depends upon the ability of the two great powers to hang a threat over the planet?"
> "That's an amazing thing to say."
> "And you don't know that once this threat begins to fade?"
> "What?"
> "You're the lost man of history."[1]

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With the Cold War "out of business," *Underworld*, Don DeLillo's 1997 novel of baseball, memory, and the culture of the atom bomb looks at American society in the bomb's aftermath. The novel moves from 1951 to the late 1990s, from the first hours of a Russian nuclear threat to years after the fall of the Soviet Union when U.S. global supremacy is unopposed. The novel tells in detail the history of those years, a history very much about the bomb. DeLillo's longest novel has among its ambitions the

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[1] Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997) 182. Subsequent references to this novel will be indicated by page number.

portrayal of American fears during the Cold War, a tall order even for a book of *Underworld*'s length. It is a *Bleak House* cavalcade of characters and historical situations so expansive that no analysis could account for every (often contradictory) element. Through a desultory chronology and the inclusion of both fictional and non-fictional characters, the novel has astonishing breadth. It moves in quick succession from a 1951 baseball game at Upper Manhattan's Polo Grounds to a 1992 artists' colony in the New Mexico desert, from a Lenny Bruce routine in Miami Beach on the eve of the Cuban Missile Crisis to a living room in Madison, Wisconsin where campus riots are erupting over Dow Chemical's role in munitions manufacture. Few significant moments of postwar U.S. history are not touched upon. But *Underworld* is less a catalogue of postwar American experiences than a summation of the Cold War's effects on American consciousness, consumption, and waste. It admits to the futility of ever completely assessing the impact of the bomb on our lives, but comes close to saying that no segment of life during the second half of the twentieth century is free of the bomb's influence. The bomb is here an avocation, a curriculum, and an obsession. Its themes are the subject of stand-up comedy, its technology the medium for conceptual sculpture.

Observing the American middle class cope with nuclear consciousness is not beside the point in *Underworld*, but neither is it the only point. The "amazing thing to say" in the passage above is the link DeLillo readily draws between the end of the Cold War and the fear of death that stays with us as that war's survivors. This observation is made possible beginning with the two coincident historical events of October 3, 1951: the Bobby Thomson home run that brought the New York Giants to the World Series and the global recognition that the Russians had successfully exploded a nuclear device. This is the first connection in a novel obsessed with connections. For DeLillo, that day and the Giants' win are part of a connection that embodies much of the paradox of the Cold War: "the communal joy of it married, as it is on the front page of the Times in 1951, to the nuclear explosion in Kazakhstan."[2]

If *Underworld* dwells at length in the nostalgia of the American 1950s and 1960s, it also provides a post-Cold War perspective of the bomb's effects on civilian life in the latter half of the twentieth century. The Cold War was a 50-year smokescreen that asked us to believe mortality was a function of politics. By 1997, we knew that the U.S. way of

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[2] David Remnick, "Exile on Main Street," *The New Yorker* 15 Sept. 1997: 42-48.

life was not abruptly terminated by nuclear warfare. With that awareness foremost in our consciousness, readers of *Underworld* walk backwards through the half-century, the years of Trilling and Mailer, Cheever and Bellow, to view a period in American history where the bomb informed our fears, our spending and our relationships to one another. On the very final pages, when nuclear waste and the detritus of Cold War consumption remain to be disposed of, the frosty dynamic of global bipolarity is replaced by a kind of millennial humanism.

But because of the bomb, that humanism is long in coming. Nuclear fear dominates nearly all human alliances: sexual and familial relationships, teacher-student relationships, and even those of artist and audience. Each character has his or her own relationship to the complete destruction of American society. Nick Shay's son Jeff possesses "the special skill of an adolescent to imagine the end of the world as an adjunct to his own discontent."(89) Nuclear scientists are "awed by the inner music of bomb technology."(404) An African-American street preacher shouts that "[e]very one of those people standing in those shelters while the bombs raining down is a white person."(353) Even Nick, whose ambivalence is pronounced, tells himself at a professional conference, "Bomb or no bomb, he says, that's a

boring bunch of people out there."(798)

That a novel about the bomb follows a trajectory determined by a single baseball, a material object sold and re-sold in the novel eventually for the hefty sum of $34,500, is no surprise; material goods in *Underworld*, as in many other DeLillo novels, are never far from the scene of toxins, explosions and apocalypses.[3] As with the other texts used in this study, the proliferation of consumer goods placates for many the terror associated with nuclear destruction -- or dislodges it entirely. In a novel where two inanimate objects, the winning baseball and the bomb, govern much of the action, there is a correlation between a collective national enthusiasm represented by the baseball and our collective ideas of national destruction represented by the bomb.

John Cheever wrote novels and stories featuring the bomb because it encapsulated much of what he wanted to

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[3] In this respect, DeLillo's work has much in common with John Cheever's. Throughout his short stories and in the Wapshot books, bizarre accidents and nightmarish disfigurements accompany enthusiasm about new consumer goods. In *The Wapshot Scandal* for instance, suburban housewife Gertrude Lockhart ends her life at the conclusion of a chain of events that begins with malfunctioning plumbing and eventually renders all of her household appliances useless. In the story "The Death of Justina," a copywriter loses his job when he writes ad copy that reminds consumers of the radiation sickness they can avoid by purchasing the tonic Elixircol.

illustrate about Americans' failure to recognize what is truly valuable in our lives. During the last years of his life, Cheever echoes Faulkner, admitting finally that it is the novelist's job to endow us with the proper sense of awe. As grand as Cheever's ambition was, DeLillo's purpose in *Underworld* is even larger. Though *Underworld* succeeds as a chronicle of the second-half of the twentieth century, it also offers an understanding of human history, how a sense of community is endowed by common historical experience, and conversely, how history itself consists of the community so-created.

As in all of DeLillo's novels, the fear of death is central to human identity. In his *White Noise* [1985], a character takes a mysterious medicine called Dylar, designed to reduce the anxiety associated with mortality but does so secretly, without admitting it to her husband or children. The fear of death that appears elsewhere in DeLillo becomes in *Underworld* a social bellwether; during the years of U.S.-Soviet strife, DeLillo shows the fear of death collectivized because we associate mortality with the political destiny of the nation. Once the Cold War is over, we must revert to seeing our own mortality independent of anyone else's. The "lost man of history"of my epigraph is everyone who now experiences death apart from a national constituency.

DeLillo's post-Cold War perspective, the knowledge that fifty years of bi-polar turmoil did not destroy the planet, permits him to re-examine this period in a way Cheever could not have done. A society that collectively sublimated its terror of nuclear destruction by embracing a middle-class quality of life must now confront its mortality alone, without the sublimating possibilities of the Soviet threat and the consumption that engendered it.

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The novel's lengthy prologue "The Triumph of Death" introduces us to a prototype of DeLillo's definition of history and provides an illustration of a community that becomes an ideal for the remainder of the novel, one where everyone acts in concert. The prologue is a cinematic trip to the 1951 pennant game, one baseball aficionados call the single most important contest of the twentieth century.[4] The entire story emanates like spokes from the first scene, aligning the partisan community of Giants fans with the partisan community of post-WWII Americans. In the tentacular realm of DeLillo's novel, where everything and everyone is connected, antecedents spring up at the Polo

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[4] Like several of Cheever's *Wapshot* chapters, the prologue and a number of separate chapters of *Underworld* were published first in slightly modified forms in *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Grounds that reverberate for the entire novel. The most important of these is the crowd itself which contains the seeds of every character and event that will arise over the course of the novel. The pairing of a baseball game and the bomb is made to seem obvious, for what two sets of circumstances could better demonstrate the American fixation on global supremacy during the Cold War and the relationship already evident in this study between quality of life concerns and the threat of nuclear annihilation?

In many reviews, *Underworld* is compared to Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* -- another novel where postwar middle-class history is told through the story of a bomb -- which was also published in the fall of 1997. Paul Gediman says that unlike Roth, who creates memorable characters, DeLillo "brings outside forces to bear on [his characters], creating uncanny reverberations between their inner lives and the Babel of popular culture....DeLillo's novels are primarily concerned with the many permutations of America."[5] Of course, DeLillo would not permit popular culture to be called Babel any more than he would discount the effects of mundane circumstances and everyday consumer products on human history. Beginning at the Polo Grounds, events are

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[5] Paul Gediman, "Visions of the American Berserk," *The Boston Review* October/November 1997. [http://bostonreview.mit.edu/BR22.5/gediman.html122/5]

set in motion that draw every episode of the novel together with hundreds of familiar objects from the second half of the twentieth century, rendering *Underworld* DeLillo's most (and possibly only) work of fiction that is truly Dickensian. It is at once universal and totalizing, static in its deeply recognizable world, but apprehensive about the direction in which that world is moving.

In *Underworld* as in ten prior novels, DeLillo writes about the ways in which a common human history enters our lives. He has written fictions in the past about political terrorism, ecological emergencies and political assassination, each with painstaking attention paid to the ways in which certain average Americans experience the events that comprise twentieth-century American history. *Underworld* begins in a similar vein, its prologue a picture postcard of thousands of people acting in unison.[6] Because that 1951 baseball game is intimately paired with the first stirrings of awareness about the Soviet bomb, the Polo Grounds crowd is analogous to the entire American community, reacting simultaneously to a shared local enemy, a rival

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[6] The Prologue of DeLillo's 1991 novel *Mao II* has many similarities to "The Triumph of Death." "At Yankee Stadium" depicts a mass performed by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon where thousands of people act in unison not only as spectators, but on the baseball diamond itself where a marriage ceremony becomes a ceremony for crowds.

baseball team, as they would to a shared global threat, a rival superpower. Even the style of "The Triumph of Death" is a microcosm of the novel and an example of DeLillo's idea of history. Neither the prologue nor the novel contains any transitions from scene to scene, character to character, or year to year. We exist with the common knowledge of major milestones in American political, cultural and social history, and a handful of significant themes that direct our consciousness, this 1951 baseball game among them. Transitions are not necessary, DeLillo is telling us, because we share this common history. As the Giants' radio announcer Russ Hodges puts it in the prologue, "When you see a thing like that, a thing that becomes a newsreel, you begin to feel you are a carrier of some solemn scrap of history."(16) For Nick Shay, the main character who listens to the game from a Bronx rooftop, experiencing a shared event is rendered even more succinctly: "It changes nothing but your life."(32) We are part of a community when we watch a baseball game, reacting together at the success or failure of our team. We are also part of a community when we share a common enemy. Beginning on October 3, 1951, ours is a history of peril, offense and defense.

A national community coalesces in the prologue, beginning at the Polo Grounds among those attuned to a baseball game. DeLillo illustrates this with the very first

sentence: "He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful."(11) The word 'American' could operate as both address and adjective but in either case, it invites the reader to become part of this assembly from the start. People from vastly different social spheres are watching the game, as the narration moves like a motion picture camera from one part of the stadium to another, picking up bits of conversation from different groups of spectators. But instead of documenting differences in the social class or degree of celebrity enjoyed by select fans, DeLillo levels them, every single spectator fixed on the minutiae of the same moment. In one section of the crowd, Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason and Toots Shor joke with J. Edgar Hoover about the Dodgers' record and Gleason's appetite. Elsewhere, Cotter Martin, a 14-year-old from the neighborhood, watches the game with Bill Waterson, a suburban home builder who is delighted to have a fellow enthusiast with whom to enjoy this common pastime. Hodges announces the game from the press box while a few miles away, Nick listens to this broadcast over the radio on a rooftop in the Bronx. But when Ralph Branca throws the pitch that leads to "the shot heard 'round the world," ending the game with the Giants' victory, everyone is absorbed in the moment. Branca's pitch and Thomson's home run dissolve the differences between a 14-year-old boy

from Harlem and a famous motion picture star. At a fixed instant in time, everyone in the stadium erupts.

With the baseball as the center of their attention, all of the men watching the game are drawn together, though only Hoover, Cotter and Nick re-appear in the novel in any substantial way. DeLillo is direct about what all of these men will share over the next fifty years as Hodges muses over the afternoon:

> Isn't it possible that this midcentury moment enters the skin more lastingly than the vast shaping strategies of eminent leaders, generals steely in their sunglasses -- the mapped vision that pierce our dreams? Russ wants to believe a thing like this keeps us safe in some undetermined way. This is the thing that will pulse in his brain come old age and double vision and dizzy spells -- the surge sensations, the leap of people already standing, that bolt of noise and joy when the ball went in.(59-60)

DeLillo recognizes as history only those events which have been shared by many people, not the actions and reactions of kings, presidents and generals. This is especially relevant in a novel about the Cold War, because it directs attention away from Washington and Moscow, whose executive inhabitants figure only nominally. Instead the focus is on the impact of nuclear destruction and its potential victims attending to a daily ritual like watching a ball game:

> This is the people's history and it has flesh and breath that quicken to the force of this old safe game of ours. And fans at the Polo Grounds today will be able to tell their

> grandchildren -- they'll be the gassy old men leaning into the next century and trying to convince anyone willing to listen, pressing in with medicine breath, that they were here when it happened.(60)

"The people's history" is at the core of this novel and baseball and the bomb are major components. The 1951 home run ball itself is not much of a narrative tool; we lose track of it frequently over the course of 827 pages. But the sense of community that comes from group participation, from crowds, is the same as the national sense of community of postwar America, unable to escape the bomb's influence. Later in the novel, a character compares the memory of this game to the memory of President Kennedy's assassination, an event of such emotional gravity, most Americans can say where they were when they first heard of it. Another character suggests that people may not even have been at the Polo Grounds that day to believe that they saw the whole thing:

> people claimed to have been present at the game who were not and how some of them honestly insisted they were there because the event had sufficient seeping power to make them think they had to be at the Polo Grounds that day or else how did they feel the thing so strongly in their skin.(94)

This idea of group security through collective memory is only available through hindsight. Still, at the Polo Grounds, J. Edgar Hoover, who has just learned of the Soviet nuclear test, recognizes the formation of this community,

and likens it instantly to a nation of victims. Hoover defines the Cold War American community that will remain in place for the next forty years. Though an elitist, Hoover longs to participate in a community like this one, even though it shares something more treacherous than a mutual interest in the Giants' 1951 season.

> Edgar looks at the faces around him, open and hopeful. He wants to feel a compatriot's nearness and affinity. All these people formed by language and climate and popular songs and breakfast foods and the jokes they tell and the cars they drive have never had anything in common so much as this, that they are sitting in the furrow of destruction.(28)

This American community is created by the material culture that surrounds them only to the point where the bomb takes over and dominates their confederacy. Not even Hoover has all of the information. Like a reader at the beginning of a novel, Hoover does not know what to expect, but he knows to expect something:

> What secret history are they writing. There is the secret to the bomb and there are the secrets that the bomb inspires, things even the Director cannot guess -- a man whose own sequestered heart holds every festering secret in the Western world -- because these plots are only now evolving. This is what he knows, that the genius of the bomb is printed not only in its physics of particles and rays but in the occasion it creates for new secrets. For every atmospheric blast, every glimpse we get of the bared force of nature, that weird peeled eyeball exploding over the desert -- for every one of these he reckons a hundred plots go underground, to spawn and skein.(50-51)

We are told at the outset of one hundred plots underground, and *Underworld* does not disappoint that early estimate. Though each character and scene is linked tangentially to every other one, the common ground among these stories is the impact of this period of history on individual lives -- even for an elitist like J. Edgar Hoover. The phrase "secret history" comes up again years later, when comic Lenny Bruce refers to a ship that sneaks through the Naval blockade during the Cuban Missile Crisis to deliver toilet paper and auto parts: "The secret history that never appears in the written accounts of the time or in the public statements of the men in power."(594) Those narratives are a secret which illustrate the lives of the people, the stories that go underground following a public event.

But the real secret history that lies beneath that surface is the fear of death, exactly as it was in Cheever's "The Death of Justina." During the Cold War, Americans are able to overlook the anxiety of individual mortality, turning instead to the terror generated by a common enemy. The distinction Mailer made in "The White Negro" applies, that we fear death as part of a community "in some vast statistical operation" differently than we fear death on our

own.[7] As the crowd at the Polo Grounds begins to tear up magazines and throw them into the air, J. Edgar Hoover snatches from the sky a page from *Life* magazine. This page shows a copy of Pieter Bruegel's painting "The Triumph of Death" that is a prototype of collectivized death. Watching the game silently with his celebrity friends, Hoover is fixated by the painting:

> It is a color reproduction of a painting crowded with medieval figures who are dying or dead -- a landscape of visionary havoc and ruin. Edgar has never seen a painting quite like this. It covers the page completely and must surely dominate the magazine. Across the red-brown earth, skeleton armies on the march. Men impaled in lances, hung from gibbets, drawn on spoked wheels fixed to the tops of bare trees, bodies open to the crows. Legions of the dead forming up behind shields made of coffin lids. Death himself astride a slat-ribbed hack, he is peaked for blood, his scythe held ready as he presses people in haunted swarms towards the entrance of some helltrap, an oddly modern construction that could be a subway tunnel or office corridor. A background of ash skies and burning ships. It is clear to Edgar that the page is from Life and he tries to work up an anger, he asks himself why a magazine called Life would want to reproduce a painting of such lurid and dreadful dimensions.(41)

Bruegel's painting is noteworthy for its departure from other allegories of the period that depict death as a single figure. Instead, armies of skeletons dispatch with an

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[7] Norman Mailer, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," *Advertisements for Myself* (1959; Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 338.

entire colony of human prey across a landscape of water, air and earth. Laborers and aristocrats, a king and a cardinal are part of the illustration, so the carnage is not limited to one stratum of society. The human figures in the painting are drab and uniform, none drawn to look like an individual. In fact everywhere one looks in the painting, a variation of the same plot is acted out, human beings performing some mundane activity when death approaches. Bruegel's work is an allegory, but not an allegory of *Underworld*. While there are punishable sins in the novel, its instances of murder, adultery, and thievery are less striking than the day-to-day experiences of Americans engaged in their daily rituals, the activities which make them Americans. Hoover's concentration on this painting provides the novel's unifying theme, the introduction of death into the consciousness of the people.

As the game ends in Thomson's fabled home run, Hoover looks up to see the crowds take the field. What he sees is an all-encompassing narrative frame, and he connects it to the painting.

> He looks up for a moment. He takes the pages from his face -- it is a wrenching effort -- and looks at the people on the field. Those who are happy and dazed. Those who run around the bases calling out the score. The ones who are so excited they won't sleep tonight. Those whose team has lost. The ones who taunt the losers. The fathers who will hurry home

> and tell their sons what they have seen. The husbands who will surprise their wives with flowers and chocolate-covered cherries. The fans pressed together at the clubhouse steps chanting the players' names. The fans having fistfights on the subway going home. The screamers and berserkers. The old friends who meet by accident out near second base. Those who will light the city with their bliss.(51)

The community created by the Giants' dramatic win dominates Hoover's field of vision, taking over every available space in the street. It is one of the novel's only descriptions of an actual crowd, and the only time people act in unison until the final pages.

In direct opposition to this panorama of communal happiness is the painting, a panorama of communal death. Hoover cannot keep himself from associating it with the research facility that devised the Soviet bomb:

> The meatblood colors and massed bodies, this is a census-taking of awful ways to die. He looks at the flaring sky in the deep distance out beyond the headlands on the left-hand page -- Death elsewhere, Conflagration in many places, Terror universal, the crows, the ravens in silent glide, the raven perched on the white nag's rump, black and white forever, and he thinks of a lonely tower standing on the Kazakh Test Site, the tower armed with the bomb, and he can almost hear the wind blowing across the Central Asian steppes, out where the enemy lives in long coats and fur caps, speaking that old weighted language of theirs, liturgical and grave.(50)

The connection Hoover draws between the crowded canvas and the solitary Russian landscape hangs over the novel, though

the story takes us to Eastern Europe only twice. But the difference between DeLillo's panoramic American response to the bomb, the noisy community of the novel, and the "lonely tower standing on the Kazakh Test Site," is palpable. From the broadcast booth, Russ Hodges and Al Edelstein, his producer, have this exchange:

> "I'll tell you one thing's for certain, old pal. We'll never forget today."
> "Glad you're with me, buddy."(54)

Hodges and Edelstein's remarks are typical of the sentiment attached to the Giants' victory, carrying the emotional weight of a characteristically American (as opposed to Russian) event. The baseball game of the prologue was a shared event, and the experience of this impromptu community will become history not only for those spectators at the game, but for all Americans. Soon they will learn what Hoover already knows, and then this community will come face to face with communal death.

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Underworld immediately jumps from 1951 to 1992, from Manhattan clear across the country to New Mexico and a rented Lexus moving through the desert and everything has changed. Nick is visiting Klara Sax, his former lover and a well-known artist whose work transforming U.S. bomber planes into sculpture has earned her international attention. The

entire arc of Cold War history has risen and fallen between the Prologue and Part I of the novel; though only pages earlier we read of Hoover's anxiety about the Soviet bomb, Klara Sax can now transform junked U.S. aircraft into art. The Cold War is over before the novel itself has begun.

The omniscient narration of the prologue's noisy celebration has been replaced by Nick's isolated first-person narrative. This sudden switch to the adult Nick is indicative of the post-Cold War remoteness of one human being from another. Traveling on a silent New Mexico highway, Nick is a representative of the Cold War society, one defined by an isolation in stark contrast with the communal clamor of the prologue. He remarks that this rented car was "assembled in a work area that's completely free of human presence":

> There's nobody on the line with caffeine nerves or a history of clinical depression,. Just the eerie weave of chromium alloys carried in interlocking arcs, block iron and asphalt sheeting, soaring ornaments of coachwork fitted and merged. Robots tightening bolts, programmed drudges that do not dream of family dead."(63)

The car is an antiseptic vehicle for driving through an isolated landscape, but it has a material temperament whose human counterpart is Nick himself. He refers to himself as "a country of one," not merely a loner and uses the Italian word *lontananza* to explain how he sees himself:

> as I use the word, as I interpret it, hard-edged and fine-grained, it's the perfected distance of the gangster, the syndicate mobster -- the made man. Once you're a made man, you don't need the constant living influence of sources outside yourself. You're all there.(275)

This is an uncanny statement in a novel that emphasizes linkages, but Nick's experiences support it. Isolation is a meaningful characteristic during the Cold War when our individual identity is bound up in membership to the American community, but it is now 1992, three years after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

While the action of the novel began with a frenzied mass reacting in unison at the Polo Grounds, Nick was alone even then, listening to a radio broadcast from his rooftop in the Bronx. Nick now drives his car through the desert alone, he walks through the Manhattan streets alone, and he is alone when he replays over and over the moment when he pulled the trigger on a loaded pistol, killing his friend George a few days after that 1951 baseball game. As the novel's Cold War shows the eventual disintegration of the national community, Nick is ahead of his time: he has always been alone.

The irony of Nick's solitude is that he is also at the center of *Underworld*'s web of recurring characters, including his mother Rosemary, brother Matt, and wife

Marion, Klara Sax and her ex-husband who was Matt's chess coach. While the story of *Underworld* is more complex than the story of this former convict, high school Latin teacher, and waste engineer, Nick draws together the farthest corners of an outlandish plot and assembles them as part of postwar life. And it is Nick who owns the fabled baseball at the novel's conclusion. Since the ball's 50-year trajectory governs the plot, this is a distinction of some significance. When compared to just about every other character, Nick's relationship to the bomb is minimal. But his lifetime spans the novel's Cold War years. He is on the rooftop in 1951 listening to the pennant game on the radio, and he is in Kazakhstan after the Soviet break-up in the early 1990s, bidding on a Russian government contract to bury radioactive nuclear waste.

Nick's chief role in the novel, as a kind of *ficelle* for DeLillo, demonstrates how one person can become a conduit for history. Like Russ Hodges in the prologue, Nick is aware that the momentous baseball game was a watershed; his eventual ownership of the baseball, according to Hodges, "a thing that seems to recapitulate the whole history of the game every time it is thrown or hit or touched," makes it possible to see this half-century of history at once.(26) In Nick's words, this affords us fifty years in "a single

narrative sweep, not ten thousand wisps of disinformation."(82) In this way, Nick provides a key to the novel's theology. More than a number of religious characters, he has abiding faith. He both respects and cherishes secrecy, and finds the greatest opportunities in thinking about the unknown and unknowable. While in a reformatory for juveniles, Nick read a book written centuries ago by a mystic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which suggests that we only know God through what we do not know. *The Cloud* further asks that "we try to develop a naked intent that fixes us to the idea of God" through the establishment of one mantra-like word of a single syllable.(295)

Nick shares his experience of reading and adapting to *The Cloud of Unknowing* at a conference center in Southern California simultaneously rented by Nick's colleagues in waste engineering and a group of married couples there to exchange sexual partners. Talking to Donna, with whom he is soon to have sex, Nick goes through the words he has considered using to embody the unknowable nature of God: love, help, and its Italian translation, *aiuto*. Donna learns that Nick has fixed as his word the expression *todo y nada* (all and nothing), which Donna instantly likens to sex, "the best sex." Nick agrees:

> "I'm not saying sex is our divinity. Please. Only that sex is the one secret we have that approximates an exalted state and that we share, two people share wordlessly more or less and equally more or less, and this makes it powerful and mysterious and worth sheltering."(297)

When we are coupled in a sexual union, we are sharing a secret whose best nature is kept mysterious. Since characters in *Underworld* seldom reveal the depths of their anxiety about the bomb, relationships with this kind of sexual reticence are representative of all manner of human interaction. In the prologue, J. Edgar Hoover thought of "secret history" as every individual's fear of death. The shared secret of sexual linkage is one of many ways these characters try to negotiate their fear of the bomb. In the passage that began the chapter, Marvin Lundy goes even further, asserting that the threat of destruction was necessary even to have a sexual fantasy with an unknown woman in the street. Nick and Donna's sexual union is a prototype of the kind of physical interaction characters in *Underworld* will undergo to cheat death.

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A character in *White Noise* compares dying in Tibetan and American society. He suggests that while death is an art in Tibet, "Here we don't die, we shop. But the

difference is less marked than you think."[8] Tom Engelhardt observes that the bomb is responsible for this peculiar similarity, linking U.S. material and military supremacy.[9] The aspirations of the middle class in *Underworld* are best represented by Janet Urbaniak, Nick's sister-in-law, married to his younger brother Matt. Janet's fantasies about the future, reminiscent of Betsey Wapshot's in *The Wapshot Chronicle,* imagine the future as a vision of matrimonial spending:

> I want us to be surrounded. I want photographs, silverware, things we'll pass on some day. I want to talk about what we're having for dinner. You like baked clams? We've barely ever talked about food, you and I.(464)

The future in *Underworld* is most immediately associated with material objects that this character imagines enclosing her and her family in the regularity of their lives as middle-class parents and homeowners. When J. Edgar Hoover snatches the Bruegel reproduction out of the sky, it is part of a stream of torn paper images, ads from *Life* magazine that Giants fans hurl from above as Bobby Thomson steps up to the plate. The bounty of American advertisements is indicative

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[8] Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking, 1985) 38.

[9] Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) 77.

of this moment as well, an enthusiastic eruption of high spirits that is part of a larger upsurge in American culture of the 1950s, the proliferation of manufactured goods and a surge in consumer spending. Throughout *Underworld* there is an almost-constant recital of consumer products, from the all-contraceptive emporium Nick visits early in the novel to housewife Erica Deming's rhapsodic repetition of the names of physical conveniences in her suburban home: "Breezeway, Crisper, Sectional."(520) But out of this downpour of the spoils of the American marketplace, Hoover selects an image representing the ultimate ascendancy of mortality. Though representations of "the venerated emblems of the burgeoning economy"(39) descend as if from the heavens, Hoover's attentions remain fixed on Bruegel's graphic depiction of the carnage that is death's final say. There is an immediate relationship here between consumer goods and death. At one level, this connection reflects once again that the bomb and new products are the twin results of scientific improvements. It also demonstrates the more insidious charge that many Americans operate under the illusion that they can buy their way out of mortality. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, a woman mistakes President Kennedy's televised message about a swift military build-up for the build-up of grease in her oven, and her thoughts go

immediately to a new oven cleaner. Cotter Martin tells himself he must be familiar with significant events of American history, which he renders as "the downfall of the empire and the emergence of detergents." An advertising slogan in the same chapter sums up this connection: "War and treaties, eat your Wheaties."(141)

Underworld is filled with reminders of the relationship between material goods and death, but they are especially noteworthy in Part 5, "Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry: Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s." The public fragments include narratives about well-known individuals such as Hoover and Lenny Bruce and familiar public events like Truman Capote's Black and White Ball and the 1965 New York blackout as well as purely fictional episodes in the lives of the novel's main characters. The title's trusty Madison Avenue phrase, borrowed from DuPont Chemical, promises a celebration of the material goods of contemporary society. But as Engelhardt writes, "the peaceable giants of consumer production were also the militarized giants of weapons production."[10] As the chapter makes clear, those synthetic products, the fruits of the same spirit of scientific inquiry that created the bomb, are embraced as a means to avoid facing the

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[10] Engelhardt 79.

thought of death. This recalls Nick's brother Matt's association of material production with destruction:

> He felt he'd glimpsed some horrific system of connections in which you can't tell the difference between one thing and another, between a soup can and a car bomb, because they are made by the same people in the same way and ultimately refer to the same thing.(446)

It is disturbing that Matt first makes this connection, because it was Matt's wife Janet who linked material goods with the future, children and posterity. But like the human beings in *Underworld*, objects have death as a common reference point as well. New, shining commodities, including condoms, rubber gloves, Jell-o, and even pin-up Jayne Mansfield, are central to "Better Things for Better Living...," and most are celebrated as guaranteed improvements over prior conveniences. Mansfield, called by one character a "fake Marilyn," was more suited to being Marilyn Monroe than Monroe herself, but died a few years after Monroe did in a sea of liquor and sexual abuse.(474) Every product is ultimately underscored by death.

Matt makes this discovery of the relationship between consumer products and death at the Pocket, the missile site where he is employed as a researcher. "How," he asks himself, "can you tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange if the same massive system connects them at

levels outside your comprehension?"(465) This relationship is especially resonant when we consider that Matt does not know how the fruits of his research will eventually be used. It is, he tells himself, "one of the underlying themes of the systems business, where all the work connects at levels and geographic points far removed from the desk toil and lab projects of the researchers," a theme which shows another connection enshrouded in mystery that even its practitioners cannot comprehend.(401)

The novel's ad man, Charles Wainwright, appears in "Better Things for Better Living" seated at a desk in his midtown Manhattan agency surrounded by baseball memorabilia. The first character to purchase the Thomson-Branca baseball, Wainwright hears his art director define death as "nature's way of telling you to slow down."(527) Reflecting on the appropriateness of the joke, he remarks on the proximity between advertising and death, on the fact that *The New York Times*' daily ad column appears directly opposite the obituaries. Given that the novel is set in motion by the contiguous news stories of baseball and the bomb, this is significant. At an advertising firm where a fertilizer campaign has the in-house handle of the "bomb your lawn" campaign, Wainwright correctly tells himself that, "Every third campaign features some kind of play on weapons."(528-

29) One ad shows a white and a black car racing to the Los Alamos testing site, the white car representing the U.S., the black one the Soviets. Ostensibly, promotions such as this demonstrate U.S. ascendancy, a motivation for the consumer to purchase the product and so avow American supremacy. But if this race ends at Los Alamos, it is also showing our race to the final end.

As often as material goods are linked to destruction, they also serve as a palliative. Just as Irene Wryson in Cheever's story submerges her fear of the bomb through suburban "upzoning," characters in *Underworld* seek material comforts as a way of avoiding confrontation with death. The character who understands this connection most clearly is Marvin Lundy, the man who has followed the path of the Branca-Thomson ball from 1951 to the late 1980s when Nick Shay buys it for $34,500. In this passage, Marvin explains the number of empty seats at the Polo Grounds on October 3, 1951:

> Because this was an all-or-nothing game between the two hated rivals of the city. People had a premonition that this game was related to something much bigger. They had the mental process of do I want to go out and be in a big crowd, which if something awful happens is the worst place to be, or should I stay home with my family and my brand-new TV, which common sense says yes, in a cabinet with maple veneer.(172)

The desire to avoid likely urban targets and large public

gatherings is an elemental nuclear fear. But Marvin, who lives in suburban New Jersey, recognizes that a nuclear explosion will have an impact well into the suburbs and suggests that the material comfort of domestic life is an anodyne even if the home itself is no safer than a ball park. In fact the sublimation of nuclear anxiety in consumer products removes such absentees from the community formed at the baseball game, at least until the memory of the game becomes part of American history.

Sublimating fear of nuclear anxiety in consumption is the defining trait of the Deming family, the novel's best representatives of the suburban idyll. Sharing their surname with the New Mexico town an afternoon's drive from the site of the Manhattan Project, the Demings live in a Levittown-style house that reflects the replicability of their lives. The family's Saturday afternoon is a caricature of the enthusiasm for the consumer goods in an American home of the 1950s. Everything is new, and its contents are valued for their surface appearance. The layout of the Demings' street, for example, offers "a sense of openness, a sense of seeing everything there is to see at a single glance, with nothing shrouded or walled or protected from the glare."(514) Even their names, Eric, Erica, and Eric, Jr. indicate their interchangeability. Earlier in the novel, Eric Deming appeared as a "bombhead"

friend of Matt Shay's in Los Alamos. But in a chapter dated October 8, 1957, Eric is a teenager, shown in his bedroom masturbating into a condom alongside a photo of Jayne Mansfield. His father is in the driveway simonizing a two-tone Ford Fairlane convertible, "brand-new, like the houses and the trees."(515) His mother is in the kitchen making striped Jell-o desserts. Akin to Betsey Wapshot in both Wapshot books, Erica finds meaning in her role as mother and in maneuvering the time-saving conveniences of her suburban home:

> One of Erica's favorite words in the language was breezeway. It spoke of ease and breeze and being contemporary and having something others did not. Another word she loved was crisper. The Kelvinator had a nice roomy crisper and she liked to tell the men that such-and-such was in the crisper....There were people out there...who didn't know what a crisper was, who had iceboxes instead of refrigerators, or who had refrigerators that lacked crispers, or who had crispers in their refrigerators but didn't know what they were for or what they were called, who put tubs of butter in the crisper instead of lettuce, or eggs instead of carrots.(516)

Erica recites the names of her favorite material goods to herself as if she were joining Nick is the search for a single word to stand in for God. "All the things around her were important. Things and words. Words to believe in and live by."

Stacking chairs	Room divider
Scatter cushions	Fruit juicer
Storage walls	Cookie sheet(520)

Erica equates her family's standard of living not only with the possession of household conveniences, but with the superior discernment that tells her what each device is designed to do.

But a pall is cast over the smiling aspects of the Deming's afternoon. Throughout the narration are interspersed directives, as if from the product safety panel of a household cleanser, that suggest toxic danger. With no explanation (and no cleaning product mentioned), we read "Avoid contact with eyes, open cuts or runny sores," or "Prolonged exposure to the sun may cause bursting."(514) While Eric Jr. brings himself to climax, he cannot keep from imagining a filmed transcript of these moments of pleasure broadcast to everyone he knows after his death. Even Erica, a recognized virtuoso of Jell-o invention, is aware of a shroud of gloom over the day that she cannot quite explain.

At the dinner table, when Eric invites Eric Jr. to drive into the country to see the Russian satellite with a pair of binoculars, Erica figures out why she has felt glum all day.

> Yes, that satellite they put into orbit a few days ago....Erica felt a twisted sort of disappointment. It was theirs, not ours. It flew at an amazing rate of speed over the North Pole, beep, beep, beep, passing just above us, evidently, at certain times. She could not understand how this could happen. Were there other surprises coming, things we haven't been told about them? Did they have

crispers and breezeways?(518-19)

News that the Soviet satellite Sputnik now orbits the earth charges the home with an adversarial tension, in spite of the material comforts that surround and fascinate Erica. Her delight in her refrigerator's crisper, and her glee at the expense of poorer, less worldly neighbors who do not have crispers, cannot be relied upon to protect her and her family if equivalent technologies also enrich Soviet homes. For Erica, it is the material items that are the real test of global supremacy, not missiles and satellites. If the brief episode featuring the Deming family appears almost snide for the Deming's remarkable materialism, one need only remember Vice President Richard Nixon's remark to Premier Khrushchev at the Kitchen Debate. Nixon articulates an impulse identical to Erica Deming's, and he does so on behalf of the entire nation, encouraging material advantages as the mission of democracy. DeLillo's fictional Demings are closely connected to the real attempt to bury Cold War political tensions in the passion for consumption.

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The comic Lenny Bruce, whose nightclub monologues appear intermittently throughout Part 5, places his finger in a condom and says, "I just realized. This is what the twentieth century feels like."(584) Bruce's joke certainly

applies to *his* twentieth century, years of paranoia, sexual repression and censorship that brought him celebrity but ultimately cost him his career. But the smooth synthetic surface of a condom, its impenetrability, also reflects the lives of most Americans in *Underworld*. The atomic age creates a barricade where characters are protected from harm but shielded from the truth of humankind's fate. Fear and its manifestations like an embrace of material goods, keep people inside emotionally, intellectually and physically impregnable spaces where they imagine themselves to be safe. Bruce's condom is a bomb shelter, where human life is buried beneath the surface to save itself. But Bruce's condom is also a shared mindset, reflecting the barriers with which we have surrounded ourselves to repress our fear of destruction and ultimately, our fear of death.

In DeLillo's fiction, characters' heightened consciousness about the bomb has interfered with their lives before. Gary Harkness, the college football player in DeLillo's second novel, *End Zone* [1972], is consumed by the idea of nuclear destruction. He leaves the University of Miami because he becomes obsessed with a book on nuclear war. Newly-enrolled at Logos College in West Texas, Gary meets Major Staley whose course, Aspects of Modern War, rehearses the potential for nuclear destruction across the

U.S. An entire chapter consists of Staley's lectures and Gary's responses, including the following exchange:

> "What did you want to see me about exactly?"
> "Just nuclear war, sir. What it might be like."[11]

Gary cannot escape his thoughts about nuclear war, specifically the level of physical destruction and numbers of civilian dead. No one in *Underworld* is his equal in outright fascination with nuclear war, but with the bomb as a major character, wildly subjective anxiety over destruction appears on virtually every page. When Klara Sachs as a teenager is necking in the back of a car, she is fearful that the Japanese will invade China. In the front seat of the same car, her friend Rochelle was worried that her partner did not have a condom. Though DeLillo shows fear manifest in different ways, it is always somehow attributable to the bomb. In addition to the sublimating pursuit of material goods, there are other embodiments of fear in *Underworld*, peculiar amalgamations of paranoia, sexual license and humor that suggest the nuclear anxiety shared by the community.

One of the most literal instances of fear from atomic weapons comes from Sister Alma Edgar, the novel's true

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[11] Don DeLillo, *End Zone* (1972; New York: Penguin, 1986) 86.

paranoid. Most significant of several religious figures in the novel, Sister Edgar is also its least faithful. Her fear of the bomb overtakes her religious conviction, both for herself and her parochial school students. Though her first name is derived from the Latin word for "spirit" or "soul," she uses the name Edgar, likening her not to the heavens but to Hoover, with whom she is doubled throughout the novel. Not a spiritual woman, Sister Edgar shares Hoover's alternately controlling and terrified personality. Sister Edgar is not a spiritual woman. She is described as "a cold war nun who'd once lined the walls of her room with Reynolds Wrap to safeguard against nuclear fallout."(245) Our first glimpse of her comes in the 1980s when she is part of a parish operation to locate abandoned cars throughout the Bronx for money to buy groceries to feed the poor and homeless. Later in the novel, Sister Edgar is Matthew Shay's sixth grade teacher, presiding over "duck and cover" drills, forcing her students to stare directly at the nuclear threat and embrace its full potential for destruction.

The drama of the civil defense is rendered as high comedy in three short segments, while the violent Sister Edgar buffets and taunts her charges with a governmentally-sanctioned curriculum designed to allay fears of total destruction by suggesting that only those who follow orders

will survive a nuclear attack. The mandates of Civil Defense, "Keep calm...Do not answer a ringing phone...Unplug your toaster... Carry a handkerchief to place over your mouth,"(728) are a series of modest guidelines more likely to quell immediate anxiety than long-term damage. They recall Dr. Edward Teller, the atomic scientist who put suntan lotion on his face and hands as a safety measure for watching the first atomic explosion from 20 miles away.(84) Like Dr. Teller, Sister Edgar has scant understanding of the effects of nuclear radiation, but takes great comfort in trying to lessen its dangers.

In her classroom, panic is a compulsory part of the curriculum. She patrols the aisles inspecting not only her students' fingernails, but their dogtags, "designed to help rescue workers identify children who were lost, missing injured, maimed, mutilated, unconscious or dead in the hours following the onset of atomic war."(717) Using another namesake's poem "The Raven" as a text, Sister Edgar wants to personify terror. The poem's apprehensive tone is a fitting emotional chord for her lesson, guaranteed to accomplish its objective and "make them shake in their back-to-school shoes."(776)[12] Students need to fear the bomb the way they

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[12] It is worth mentioning that the Prologue makes special note of the raven depicted in Bruegel's painting "The Triumph of Death."

fear God and the future, she suggests, and take precautions for each one. But time spent on the Baltimore Catechism is brief. Her atomic lesson plans take up more of her attention and far more class time. Even a succinct discussion of Adam and Eve leads to the surprise thrust of a young boy's head into the blackboard. The real lesson of the sixth grade is terror with no advance warning.

Frightened of atomic destruction in the 1950s, Sister Edgar is frightened of AIDS in the 1980s. She keeps Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome on a personal list of acronyms that includes the KGB, two entities "part of the multiplying swarm, the cell-blast of reality that has to be distilled and initialed in order to be seen."(243) As she and fellow nun Sister Gracie travel through the landscape of death in the novel's South Bronx, she seeks protection on all sides, even for her hands.

> Edgar force-fitted the gloves onto her hands and felt the ambivalence, the conflict. Safe, yes, scientifically-shielded from organic menace. But also sinfully complicit with some process she only half understood, the force in the world, the array of systems that displaces religious faith with paranoia.(241)

This displacement is a 1980s version of Sister Edgar's real catechism, that fear belongs more properly where faith once stood. We negotiate our lives through an "array of systems" that includes the epidemiological as well as the political, and Sister Edgar sees them as one.

> It was in the milky-slick feel of these synthetic gloves, fear and distrust and unreason....But latex was necessary here. Protection against the spurt of blood or pus and the viral entities hidden within, submicroscopic parasites in their soviet socialist protein coats.(241)

These gloves supply a kind of indemnity that establishes for Sister Edgar the spirit of the age, just like the condom Lenny Bruce wore on his index finger. As she and Sister Gracie move through the vacant lots, abandoned apartment buildings and urban blight of the South Bronx, Sister Edgar's fears are everywhere. She is wary of AIDS transmission from Ismael, the Fagin-like character who directs a team of young scavengers and develops a pool of income for the sisters' charity. She is wary about the racial and economic changes that have come to her Bronx neighborhood, the reasons she gave up teaching. She cannot even wash her hands without wondering whether the soap has been kept in a contamination-free container. Eventually, Sister Edgar will move from the margins of the novel to the center, enjoying a new perspective on life that renders her bolder, braver than the frightened, bullying figure of the 1950s and 1980s. But throughout the Cold War chapters, Sister Edgar is its most easily-terrified figure.

Lenny Bruce is also consumed by fear of destruction, though like sculptor Klara Sax and Sister Edgar, Bruce finds a way of working it into his act. We glimpse his comic

routines during the weeklong period of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, a five-day period when national apprehension about a Soviet attack was at its height, so Bruce is not a paranoid on the order of Sister Edgar. Sister Edgar used fear to legitimize her power over her students, transferring the religion of her curriculum into terror. Lenny Bruce makes his anxiety the source of humor. His monologues are a *tour de force* in the novel, capturing the obscene content and improvised brilliance of Bruce's mind while confronting his and the audience's anxiety about the Cuban Missile Crisis.

DeLillo suggests that Bruce is the hero of the Beat Generation, otherwise absent from the novel. The bomb, Bruce tells us, is the Beats' "handiest reference to the moral squalor of America...part of a scary ad campaign that had gotten out of hand."(545) Accordingly, the comedian retains his normal topics of social criticism in these monologues, wrapping each one in the contemporary fear of the bomb. As the actual comic became the nation's conscience with jokes about racism and sexuality, this Lenny Bruce serves a similar purpose in the novel, demonstrating how our fear is a product of class, race and religion. At the height of the Missile Crisis, Bruce reminds his audience of the political reality, "twenty-six guys from Harvard

deciding our fate" who "wear boxer shorts with geometric designs that contain the escape routes they've been assigned when the missiles start flying."(505) Before a largely Jewish audience in Miami, Lenny says, "And we won't get killed for being Jewish....They'll kill us for being American. How do we feel about that?"(591) In San Francisco Bruce says, "You look down at Watts. You look up at Harlem. And you say, Fuck with our chicks, man, we drop the bomb. Better end the world than mix the races."(548) These are distinctions that should be subsumed by the "end of the world" mentality but continue in spite of the Missile Crisis's potential to level them.

The Lenny Bruce monologues are the only instance in the novel when anyone speaks overtly about imminent destruction. Bruce asks his audience to confront what its thoughts will be as we face the end of the world:

> [T]he audience sat there thinking, How real can the crisis be if we're sitting in a club on Santa Monica Boulevard going ha ha ha.
>
> *'We're all gonna die!'*
>
> Lenny loves the postexistential bent of this line. In his giddy shriek the audience can hear the obliteration of the idea of uniqueness and free choice. They can hear the replacement of human isolation by massive and unvaried ruin.(507)

The line "We're all gonna die!" becomes a mantra for these performances, a way of consolidating the horror and absurd humor of the situation in a familiar refrain that signals

that the end of everything is near. It simultaneously creates from his nightclub audience a community of victims that can react together to Bruce's commentary. Bruce tells himself that line "was wondrously refreshing, it purified his fear and made it public at the same time -- it was weak and sick and cowardly and powerless and apathetic and also noble somehow."(547) Bruce's preferred subject, the loneliness of the human condition, is the defining characteristic of Nick Shay's life. After a Soviet attack, Bruce suggests, ruin will replace loneliness, making our other concerns appear solipsistic. With the end of the world briefly outlined, Bruce goes on to evaluate our apocalyptic thoughts. He embarks on a lengthy improvisation of human expectations and emotions, interspersed with contemporary references to indicate the intellect and cultural sophistication of his audience, and he is funny, which separates Bruce's response from Sister Edgar's. "How can they justify the inconvenience of a war that's gonna break out over the weekend?" he asks.(584)

> You had it all planned. Friday night. Movie with your high-brow art-film friends. Serious Swedish flick at the little theater near the university. Ursula Andress naked to the waist with a slain calf slung over her shoulder. Saturday morning. Let's see. Dry cleaner, post office, grocery store, pick up shoes, put cat to sleep, call mom back home in French Lick -- yeah, I'm fine, how're you, yatta yatta yatta, got a big date tonight with a real nice girl, Raytheon, she's a

> Mormon, they don't drink tap water or play the saxophone.(584)

Life stopped mid-action like this is terrifying, made more so by mundane activities he describes and the cultural details he includes to identify with the young cognoscenti that comprise much of his audience. But in addition to defusing this fear with humor, Bruce draws his audience into a group that shares the destiny of imminent extinction, numbing the terror of every individual's death.

While this common powerlessness is troubling, it also enables a freedom we would not have in the face of human continuity. Not surprisingly, for Lenny Bruce, sex is at its core:

> The whole point of the missile crisis is the sexual opportunity it offers. You get Raytheon to your place and convince her the whole world's about to go zippo and astonishingly it works and within minutes she's standing naked in your living room and she is all overalls and loops, like the Palmer handwriting method, and so blond she could be radioactive.(586)

As an old girlfriend tells Nick elsewhere in the novel, "I want everything that happens to happen to both of us."(553) Even Marvin Lundy, in the passage that began this chapter, tells Nick's friend Brian that the Cold War is responsible for a "what-do-you-call-it kind of fantasy" with an unknown woman in the street.(182) As there was with material goods, there is a *carpe diem* spirit of sublimating nuclear anxiety

in sexual encounters. Bruce is suggesting that sexual restraint has no purpose if even the next day is in doubt. The sexual favors of Raytheon, whose corporate name contains the promise of the future, are won by a sexual brinkmanship that is amusing but informing: Raytheon will become part of a community too, create a sexual union when faced with her own mortality. Earlier in the novel, Nick tells the swinger Donna that sex was "worth sheltering," that the sexually-connotative *todo y nada* was his way of approaching God. Bruce shows us that it is also a way of cheating death.

The final response to nuclear fear that needs examining is Matt Shay's. For Matt, the terror presented by the bomb enables a kind of camaraderie he is unable to locate anywhere else in his life. Taunted because of his studiousness and chess-playing, Matt is further separated from the other boys because his father left when he and his brother were young. But Matt is nothing like Nick. He revels in belonging. In Sister Edgar's sixth grade classroom, Matt establishes a joy in the ritualized drills of civilian nuclear readiness because through civil defense exercises, he is part of a larger group:

> He liked to duck and cover. There was a sense of acting in unison that he found satisfying. It was not so different really from opening and shutting the cloakroom doors with two of his classmates or reciting mass answers to Sister's questions from the catechism. He

> felt positioned more or less identically with the others. After the first moments of surprise and confusion, they were all calm now. This as the first rule of atomic attack. Keep calm. Do not get excited or excite others. Another rule, Do not touch things.
>
> He felt an odd belonging in the duck-and-cover. It was a community of look-alikes and do-alikes, heads down, elbows tucked, fannies in the air.(728)

Like the Polo Grounds community in the novel's prologue, these sixth-grade heads, thrust together under their desks under the strict supervision of Sister Edgar, will remember this as part of history. But it is history shaped by a rarefied (and improbable) response to a particular set of political circumstances which, *Underworld* indicates, have a reverse impact once the global balance of power has changed. Matt Shay is one who found safety and identity in thoughts of his peers as his common enemies against a Soviet bomb, "a community of look-alikes and do-alikes." Though Matt must someday die, his childhood identification with everyone else's peril cannot extend beyond 1989.

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Even following the demise of global bipolarity, *Underworld* continues to examine nuclear consciousness, though the threat of destruction no longer comes from a single global superpower. The culture of the bomb is greatly diminished by the proliferation of potential enemies, none equal to the Soviet Union as a danger to the

U.S. After the Cold War, the community of American society driven to jointly fear and celebrate its existence in opposition to the Soviet Union now only fears death, the enduring anxiety that has survived the Cold War. Like the radioactive waste and consumer detritus that remain, our fear of death cannot be easily discarded.

The community of Sister Edgar's sixth graders, heads bent underneath their desks awaiting sudden destruction, no longer exists. By the time of *Underworld*'s publication, Matt Shay and his contemporaries have grown to adulthood, and no younger "duck and cover" practitioners have come to take their place. The nuclear threat remains, but as nation after nation is added to the community of nuclear powers, the nature of our fear has changed and with it, the way we configure our own mortality. The bilateral terror of global annihilation has passed, Americans are no longer defined as part of a community with a common global enemy. The first sentence in *Underworld*, "He speaks in your voice, American..." regardless of the grammatical function we ascribe to the word 'American,' could never be used to draw the reader into the crowds of "Long Tall Sally," the part of the novel set in 1992. In fact since *Underworld*'s nonserial chronology places 1951 and 1992 next to each other, this difference in community sensibility is particularly evident.

The Arthur Avenue section of the Bronx that is the setting in the 1950s section of the novel is replaced in the 1990s by Nick's housing development in suburban Phoenix. Klara Sax's community of the early 1970s Manhattan intelligentsia has become a nomadic band of artists living on the margins of the New Mexico desert. The Deming family's television set is now a TV that runs on power generated by a homeless Bronx teenager pedaling a stationary bicycle in an abandoned building. All of the people who occupy the more recent sections of the novel, those that take place after the fall of the Soviet Union, are part of fragmented assemblies that remain after the cohesive groups of the Cold War sections have dispersed. It is as if the Soviet breakup precipitated a similar disintegration in the United States. Like the Lexus Nick Shay rents to visit Klara Sax in the desert, a car assembled free of human contact, the Americans of the late 1980s and 1990s never need to react to stimuli from other people. The community that grew from simple mutual interest in the outcome of a baseball game is replaced by individuals who appear in a single mass, but upon closer inspection are revealed to have discreet trajectories they share with no one.

A passage describing groups of people marching through an airport gives Nick the chance to witness the opposite of the cohesion that took place at the Polo Grounds 40 years

earlier:

> ...people disembarking and others waiting for them and greater crowds in the baggage areas and the concourse, the crossover roars of echoing voices and flight announcements and revving engines and crowds moving through it all, people with their separate and unique belongings, the microhistory of toilet articles and intimate garments, the medicines and aspirins and lotions and powders and gels, so incredibly many people intersecting on some hot dry day at the edge of the desert, used underwear fistballed in their bags, and I wondered where they were going, and why, and who are they, and how do they all disperse so quickly and mysteriously, how does a vast crowd scatter and vanish in minutes, bags dragging on the shiny floor.(105)

These people have all emerged from the same airplane. It is far more likely that they share common economic or social traits than Cotter Martin and Frank Sinatra did. They are surrounded by their possessions, but these are the only details we learn about them. And though they have been through the experience of flight together, they share nothing. In this scene of dispersal, we see the disintegration of the American community. The fragmented nature of post-Cold War life extends from human communities even to garbage. Among the many instances of recycling in *Underworld* is Nick and Marian's obsession with sorting and classifying different pieces of refuse into categories for efficient recycling. Not even garbage retains characteristics of wholeness.

Many of the characters are aware of this transformation from community to fragmentation, including Nick, who is its prototype, Klara, and Marvin Lundy. As early as the prologue, this idea was nascent in the mind of J. Edgar Hoover who thought to himself, "It's not enough to hate your enemy. You have to understand how the two of you bring each other to deep completion."(51) Hoover would know how incomplete we would feel at the end of the Cold War. Marvin Lundy suggests that it was required to give our lives a context of historical meaning. Without it, Marvin says, we are all "the lost man of history."(182) His theory, that everything in our lives, down to the smallest erotic fantasy, is dependent upon the Cold War's balance of power, is merely speculative when he shares it with Nick's friend Brian in a conversation from the 1980s:

> "You need the leaders of both sides to keep the cold war going. It's the one constant thing. It's honest, it's dependable. Because when the tension and rivalry come to an end, that's when your worst nightmares begin. All the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream. You will no longer be the main -- what do I want to say?"
> "I'm not sure."
> "Point of reference. Because other forces will come rushing in, demanding and challenging. The cold war is your friend. You need it to stay on top."
> "On top of what?"
> "You don't know on top of what? You don't know the whole thing is geared to your dominance in the world?"(170-71)

These "other forces" responsible for this fragmentation are perhaps best examined by Klara Sax. Klara too, is intrigued by recycling. When Nick travels to her outdoor studio in the New Mexico desert, Klara has turned her creative energy to manufacturing art out of surplus bomber aircraft. Nick describes Klara's motivation:

> She wanted us to see a single mass, not a collection of objects. She wanted our interest to be evenly spaced. She insisted that our eyes go slowly over the piece.(83-84)

As an act of recycling excess expenditure, Klara's work disputes Dr. Lal's claim in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* that "Wastefulness can be justified if it permits inventiveness, originality, adventure"(217). Klara's art project, a construction quite a lot like *Underworld* itself, is named Long Tall Sally, for one of the women painted on a bomber's nose as "a charm against death" by its original pilots.(77) But as it often is with DeLillo's novel, it is difficult to step far enough back from this collection of variegated objects and see a uniform whole. In an interview for a French television program, Klara says:

> I think if you maintain a force in the world that comes into people's sleep, you are exercising a meaningful power. Because I respect power. Now that power is in shatters or tatters and now that those Soviet borders don't even exist in the same way, I think we understand, we look back, we see ourselves more clearly, and them as well. Power meant

> something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. It was greatness, danger, terror, all those things. And it held us together, the Soviets and us. Maybe it held the world together. You could measure things. You could measure hope and you could measure destruction.(76)

According to Klara, the balance of power motivated more than the procurement of the aircraft that figures in her work. Like Marvin Lundy, Klara sees the Cold War defining the lives of individual Americans, people whose identities were formed by the carefully-controlled relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union that was always poised on the brink of complete destruction. Explaining Long Tall Sally, she says,

> What I really want to get at is the ordinary thing, the ordinary life behind the thing. Because that's the heart and soul of what we're doing here.(77)

Klara's wish to reveal "the ordinary life behind the thing" reminds us of the novel's title, the place where the mysterious connections are suddenly transparent, the place underneath the surface we will never see.

Earlier in the novel in 1974, Klara and a group of friends went to Radio City Music Hall for a presentation of "*Unterwelt*" [*Underworld*], a film believed to have been lost or destroyed by Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. The screening is a centerpiece, coming in the middle of the book

and at the center of its 50-year chronology. Beyond DeLillo's sharp observation of the Manhattan elite during the steamy months of summer, the segment broaches once more the theme of relationships connected below the surface. Though Eisenstein's film is from the 1930s, it is prescient, suggesting the deleterious effects of a nuclear explosion. Powerful scientists, human mutations and distortions, and even melanoma appear to be the result of dangerous scientific experiments. Klara summarizes the film this way:

> All Eisenstein wants you to see, in the end, are the contradictions of being. You look at the faces on the screen and you see the mutilated yearning, the inner divisions of people and systems, and how forces will clash and fasten, compelling the swerve from evenness that marks a thing lastingly.(444)

These sentences speak for much of the novel, on every page related and contrasting essences which create conflicts that cause permanent alterations to any natural order. This "swerve from evenness" is epidemic in *Underworld* as it was in "*Unterwelt*," no single entity existing without a malevolent partner beneath the surface.

*

The novel concludes with a set piece strikingly similar to the prologue. I have suggested that American identity built up during the Cold War was replaced by millennial humanism on the novel's very last pages. Most of the final

chapter does not exist in actual time and space however, but on the Internet, a place "where everybody is everywhere at once"(808) but where no one ever comes into contact with anyone. The Internet provides a hypertext version of *The New York Times'* front page from 1951 that inspired the prologue, a space where two unrelated narratives, a baseball game and a nuclear explosion, are directly linked. If the Internet provides more connections than one page of newsprint, it is no more capable of connecting seemingly unrelated stories that turn out to have the most intimate connection.

Surfing the World Wide Web, Nick's son Jeff locates a miracle that brings about an unlikely transformation, resolving *Underworld* on a note that is oddly optimistic. Given the inhuman fragmentation that has turned the society of the novel into a barren landscape well-represented by a webpage, "http://blk.www/dd.com/miraculum," we do not expect a conclusion to differ markedly from the bleak endings of other DeLillo novels. This apprehension appears to be well-founded when we reach a website illustrating Sister Edgar, still searching for Esmeralda, the homeless girl who roams the abandoned streets and has eluded the capture and care of Edgar and her fellow nun Sister Gracie for much of the book. Described as "something godly blowing through the

world,"(813) Esmeralda is a symbol of hope, a sign of "radiant grace" to the Cold War nun whose mounting despair is as obvious as the medieval wimple and cincture she wears throughout the South Bronx.

Esmeralda's story is doubled with an extended routine Lenny Bruce tells during the Missile Crisis, about a virginal Puerto Rican girl who can blow smoke rings out of her womb. This girl's gift is seen by many as an omen:

> a sign from heaven that the world is about to end. God has selected a poor illiterate undernourished orphan girl to convey a profound message to the world. Because isn't it possible that all these O's coming out of her womb refer to the Greek letter that means The End?(630)

In Bruce's monologue, the girl's potential is recognized by a millionaire who brings her to a mansion on the Hudson River, teaches her four languages and how to play the oboe only to find he is more interested in the smoke rings. But before he reaches his conclusion, Bruce dissolves the joke, takes apart the millionaire, then takes apart the mythology of the smoke rings, and leaves his audience with a poor homeless girl living with her junkie mother on the streets of the South Bronx. This girl becomes Esmeralda.

We remain on the Internet and as the engine reads "searching," Esmeralda is raped, murdered, and thrown off a building. The hope she provided in the novel is eradicated just as Bruce erased his creation of the virginal oddity

with strange powers. Klara Sax told a French journalist that the hope enabled by the balance of power no longer exists after the Cold War. So we anticipate as well an apocalypse of the hope that had Esmeralda as its last remaining source. "Edgar used to care but not today and maybe never again," fearing her only real reason to continue to live has been snuffed out in a meaningless criminal act.(816)

But it is not the end of hope. A first keystroke shows an apparition of the murdered child appearing on an advertising billboard beside a vacant lot in the South Bronx each time a suburban train passes overhead. In time, the apparition becomes a local phenomenon. A crowd of total strangers from every level of society gathers night after night to witness what they take to be a miraculous event. As Sister Edgar observes,

> Then she sees it, an ordinary commuter train, silver and blue, ungraffiti'd, moving smoothly toward the drawbridge. The headlights sweep the billboard and she hears a sound from the crowd, gasp that shoots into sobs and moans and the cry of some unnameable painful elation. A blurted sort of whoop, the holler of unstoppered belief. Because when the train lights hit the dimmest part of the billboard a face appears above the misty lake and it belongs to the murdered girl. A dozen women clutch their heads, they whoop and sob, a spirit, a godsbreath passing through the crowd.(821)

Although many have dispersed, this is the first crowd to

gather since the first scene at the Polo Grounds. And it is group strikingly similar to the fans who cheered for the Giants back in 1951. Cars are amassed together, vendors pass through the crowd selling commemorative objects, food and "laminated images of Esmeralda printed on prayer cards."(823) Following the post-Cold War disconnection, people are acting as one: "This is how a crowd brings things to single consciousness."(821) The increasing distance of one human being from another is inverted as this impromptu group of strangers observes a miracle from a traffic island in the Bronx. If a community no longer exists through which we can collectivize our fear of death, a community does exist in *Underworld*'s final pages that enables us to collectivize hope.

Prior to this vision of Esmeralda, Sister Edgar had stopped caring altogether, reduced her belief to terror, "a faith that is spring-fed by the things we fear in the night."(817) But on hearing of this mystic apparition, spread throughout the Bronx by word-of-mouth, she insists on making a late-evening visit to join the crowd of observers, the faithful who believe that Esmeralda has been reincarnated after her brutal murder. Standing among the crowd, Sister Edgar is transformed by the vision of Esmeralda, her paranoia, xenophobia and disconnectedness

fall by the wayside. In the prologue, Hoover was our agent, his perspective revealing the intensity of the moment. That function is here ascribed to the other Edgar:

> She feels something break upon her. An angelus of clearest joy. She embraces Sister Grace. She yanks off her gloves and shakes hands, pumps hands with the great-bodied women who roll their eyes to heaven. The women do great two-handed pump shakes, fabricated words jumping out of their mouths, trance utterance -- they're singing of things outside the known deliriums. Edgar thumps a man's chest with her fists. She finds Ismael and embraces him. She looks into his face and breathes the air he breathes and enfolds him in her laundered cloth. Everything feels near at hand, breaking upon her, sadness and loss and glory and an old mother's bleak pity and a force at some keep level of lament that makes her feel inseparable from the shakers and mourners, the awestruck who stand in tidal traffic -- she is nameless for a moment, lost to the details of personal history, a disembodied fact in liquid form, pouring into the crowd.(822-23)

It is particularly meaningful that Sister Edgar is part of this scene. The character who has had no faith is now the agent of faith. When the Internet text informs us that "Everything is connected in the end," we are not surprised; everything has been connected from the beginning. Sister Edgar takes this moment to die, passing from life on earth to life in cyberspace where it is not enough to say that everything is connected, but that everything is a connection. That is, things exist only as conduits to other things, that is the sum total of their identity.

Marvin Lundy said we needed the Cold War in order to feel connected with each other. Even our erotic fantasies were enabled by the threat of nuclear extinction. But Sister Edgar's transformation in *Underworld*'s final pages, epitomizing the connection of one human being to another, takes place after the Cold War, removed from possibility of nuclear threat, and without any recognizable national identity. Human connections during the Cold War have been a way to hide from death, to reduce the fear of nuclear destruction by acknowledging it as a jointly-held part of American experience. It is here that *Underworld*, its chronicle of 50 years of paranoia and disintegration, becomes a sentimental novel. Sister Edgar's death is her own, and because of the connections she has forged among the crowd her last night on earth, she welcomes death.

Underworld has prophesied on both sides of the question of faith. The final decision rests with us, the bomb and the Soviet threat, material objects and the waste they generate, perhaps even death itself having no real impact on questions of faith:

> And what do you remember, finally, when everyone has gone home and the streets are empty of devotion and hope, swept by river wind? Is the memory thin and bigger and does it shame you with its fundamental untruth -- all nuance and wishful silhouette? Or does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces,

> something holy that throbs on the hot horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt?(824)

Sister Edgar, who earned her cynicism during the Cold War and allowed its paranoia to direct her entire life, elects faith at the very end. But her belief is ultimately not Catholic or even Christian. It is the broad ecumenical faith of the community, the faith of crowds. The second-person address from the novel's first sentence returns in its very last paragraph. You remain at your desk, seated before a computer, surfing the World Wide Web:

> And you can glance out the window for a moment, distracted by the sound of small kids playing a made-up game in a neighbor's yard, some kind of kickball maybe, and they speak in your voice, or piggy back races on the weedy lawn, and it's your voice you hear, essentially, under the glimmerglass sky, and you look at the things in the room, offscreen unwebbed, the tissued grain of the deskwood alive in light, the thick lived tenor of things...(827)

We read next of "the apple core going sepia in the lunch tray," "the chipped rim of the mug that holds your yellow pencils," "the slabbed butter melting on the crumbled bun," details from the physical world that have been absent for much of the previous pages as the narration moved to the cyberspace channels of the Internet.(827) The last paragraph is filled with tactile details, the noises, sights and odors of the world that surround you as you meld with the cyberspace world. The voice from the prologue's first

sentence, once identified as American, is no longer linked to a nation because national identity required a national enemy.

The novel concludes with another connection, one single word, "a word that appears in the lunar milk of the data stream" that returns us to Nick for the last time.(826) Appearing as it does in cyberspace, you can click on this word's surface to reveal its etymology, its meaning, its translation into several other languages. The word answers the question asked paragraphs earlier, whether you should have faith in humanity or not, whether amid the detritus of the finished meal lying beside you on a tray, or the detritus of the twentieth century itself, you have faith or not. The word is the word for which Nick has been searching in his quest to find a single word to represent God. The word, the last in the novel, a word which can serve the community, now global, now human, not American, is peace. In the unsteady years that precede the millennium, *Underworld* concludes with an indeterminate optimism whose faith in other human beings, like Sister Edgar's, has outweighed its fear. For post-Cold War readers and for DeLillo himself, this faith is a kind of peace dividend.

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