AMERICAN "I-DEOLOGIES": THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL IN THE POST-VIETNAM NOVEL

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2008

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
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dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

American "I-deologies: The Personal and the Political in the Post-Vietnam Novel

by Barrie Balter/Advisor: Professor Morris Dickstein

This dissertation addresses five works that I argue represent an unrecognized and specifically American political novel. In doing so, it challenges a tacit critical consensus that "true" political novels disappeared at the end of the Second World War. The disfavor in which critics like Irving Howe have held American political novels stems largely from the perception of American individualism as innately apolitical, complicated by an attendant and longstanding critical bias against domestic political fiction. As a result, Howe in particular treated the American political novel as either a mythic beast —a contradiction in terms, or an anachronism — a casualty of the anti-Stalinism that arose at end of the Second World War. Strictly speaking, however it was not the novels that vanished, but the politics that informed them. Beginning with E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) and proceeding through Norman Mailer's *Executioner's Song* (1978), Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), Mailer's *Oswald's Tale* (1995), and Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997), these new, generically hybrid "novels" reexamine formative moments in American history (including the Rosenberg trial and the Kennedy assassination) through the personal histories of their central figures. Because these "historical biographies" foreground the experience of culturally marginal players rather than "heroes" (Oswald rather than Kennedy for example), they present a kind of dissenting testimony that calls received historical narratives into question. More importantly, these five works elevate personal experience to political significance, reversing Irving Howe's notion of what constitutes "political" subject matte, and redeeming American political fiction as source of trenchant social critique.

For Mitchell Boris Balter (1925-1994)

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the members of my committee, Professors Morris Dickstein, Marc Dolan, and John-Christopher Suggs for their invaluable guidance on this project. Marc Dolan was an unfailingly thorough and engaged reader, and pointed me toward a wealth of secondary sources, while Chris Suggs's suggestions for contextualizing my argument revealed possibilities I would not otherwise have considered. I am particularly grateful to Morris Dickstein whose kindness, generosity of spirit, and unfailing support endured through numerous early drafts, and whose keen insights helped to shape them.

I would also like to thank my family for their support, particularly Irma Lann, truly a Woman Warrior— may every daughter have such an example before her, and my wonderful sister Nina Balter-Wright. My friends deserve heartfelt thanks as well, especially Phoebe Brown for her words of wisdom and help formatting this manuscript, and Marie de Puthod for excellent writing advice and a lot of laughs— usually at the same time.

There should be an honorary degree for spouses: I thank my beloved, Jonathan Berlin, whom I met at the beginning of this project, and who walked every step of the way with me—hot soup, cold soup.

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Introduction

Many people find their way to the general through the personal .In that sense biographies have their right.
Leon Trotsky

Like the novel itself, the American political novel has been declared dead many times. Critics and novelists often blame each other for its demise, but both locate the genre's heyday in an idealized past of American political engagement which has supposedly been eroded by a shift in values. The general complaint is that American critics, writers, or readers (depending upon who is asked) are basically apolitical, and as a result political novels are either not being written, not being read, or not respected in the United States. But, as Morris Dickstein points out in a recent article in *Bookforum*, "The boundaries of th[e] genre are very hard to delimit,"[1] and a closer look at the history of the American political novel suggests that the genre's decline had more to do with a change in how "the political" was defined than any tangible retreat on the part of American authors from engagement with the social milieu.

Thus, the "disappearance" of the American political novel is more accurately a kind of invisibility. But its location in a critical blind spot is also complicated by a longstanding critical bias against domestic political fiction. Both of these issues are raised in a 1988 interview with E.L. Doctorow in which Bill Moyers asks the author why " 'the prominent contemporary political fictions are written in South Africa and Latin

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[1] Morris Dickstein, "Fiction and Political Fact," June/July/Aug 2008, http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/015_02/2458, accessed 6/8/2008.

America,'" but not in the United States. Doctorow answers, "[t] here's no critical fraternity today that has much regard for the political novel in America. But when political novelists come along from other countries, the value of their work is recognized. It's almost as if we're too good to need political novels in this country." [2]

Doctorow's observation that there is "no critical fraternity *today*" betrays the prevailing nostalgia for a bygone era of political engagement (not to mention a certain asperity toward critics). Lest Doctorow's comments be dismissed as artistic sour grapes, it is worth noting that at least the first half of his complaint may be justified. In *Politics and the Novel* (1957) Irving Howe argued that the individualism that was central to American postwar culture was antithetical to "political" (which is to say communitarian) ideas, and hence to political fiction. As a result, Howe's study presents the American political novel as a kind of mythic beast, valorizing instead the European "novel of ideas".

Howe's insight was penetrating, and his assessments have, for the most part, remained valid. His willingness to reexamine and even reverse his judgments only underscores the currency of his thinking. But this makes Howe's dismissal of American novels all the more problematic. For Howe praised the "political" valence of European novels over and above the "personal" concerns of domestic novels to the end of his career. To some extent Howe's critique was informed by his position within a contemporary culture war. Like most of the New York Intellectuals, Howe's orientation

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[2] Cited in John Whalen Bridge, "Some New American Adams: Politics and the Novel into the Nineties" *Studies in the Novel* 24:2 (Summer 1992):187-200.

was cosmopolitan, and therefore (in the context of the Cold War) adversarial. Rather than championing the singularity of American culture, which he found insular, Howe decried its failure to take up the philosophical concerns of the international community. But while the cultural landscape shifted, Howe's framework did not. As a result, he continued to measure American writers and thinkers by the standards of European cultural tradition into the 1980s.

Howe's ideas have had a tremendous impact on the fate of the American political novel. Until the 1980s, when the publication of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) shifted the location of a work's political meaning from "content to context" [3] Howe's framework was the primary rubric for assessing political literature. *Politics and the Novel* has informed, through opposition or emulation, the reading of political literature for the past fifty years. This study is no exception, other than its seemingly paradoxical ambition to do both at once. For while Howe's vision of the relationship between what he called "political ideas" and literature was critically and morally rigorous, it was also limited by its exclusion of American writing from its purview.

Leaving aside, for the moment, the specific reasons that Howe found a novel like *Magic Mountain* more concerned with what he called "the autonomous field of political action," than a personalized vision of the world, his dismissal of American novels is still glaring. All the more so, given his deliberately loose definition of a political novel, by

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[3] Myra Jehlen, "Literary Criticism at the End of the Millennium," *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick:Rutgers University Press: 1994).40-53.

which he "mean[t] a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role, or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting" (*Politics* 17). In short Howe, along with the two generations of critics formed in the tradition of the New York Intellectuals, and even Bill Moyers have almost completely ignored twenty years of politically engaged fiction written by some of the best-known contemporary American authors, including E. L. Doctorow, Norman Mailer, Don DeLillo, and Philip Roth.

One of the reasons that these novels, which examine the tenets of the Constitution, the functioning of the justice system, the ideology and fate of its dissenters, are omitted from the critical discussion of political novels is that they do virtually everything Howe claims a political novel must not. While it would be difficult to discount either their prominent placement of " political ideas" or their location within "the political milieu," each one quite deliberately "fail[s] to see political life as an autonomous field of action" (*Politics* 166), or if it does, it is a political arena that is co-opted for very personal causes. But what Howe saw as an abdication these works redeploy as critique, depicting American life as an arena in which the personal is the only possible location of autonomous action. In this sense their "political" enterprise is predicated on the very melding of assumption "social and individual experience" that Howe rejected.

In this dissertation I argue that, in their almost-perfect reversal of Howe's criteria for "true" political novels, *The Book of Daniel* (1970), *The Executioner's Song* (1979), *Libra* (1988), O*swald's Tale* (1995), and *American Pastoral* (1997) inaugurate a new, and specifically American, political novel. Strictly speaking, these "political" works are biographies, which is to say that they view politically formative moments in

contemporary American history through the prism of the life story of its central figure(s). But because these "biographical histories," illuminate the inner lives of marginal figures rather than cultural heroes, they are not solely biographical in scope. More precisely, in their juxtaposition of the interior life of well-known figures with quotidian elements of contemporary American life they underscore what K. Anthony Appiah has called "the intersection of personal and national histories". [4] For example, both *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale* present the assassination of President Kennedy as the result of a chain of chaotic events set in motion by the personal concerns of its key players, Lee Harvey Oswald and Jack Ruby. Similarly, in *The Book of Daniel*, E.L. Doctorow examines the political ramifications of the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs through the eyes of a fictionalized son, while *American Pastoral* revisits the radicalism of the sixties from the point of view of the father of a proto-Weatherman bomber. Because these biographical histories see American political events and American lives as mutually influencing, they forge an inextricable *causal* relationship between the personal and the political.

The link between these two realms was perhaps assumed in the Marxist/Proletarian fiction of the first half of the 20th century. However, it is the very issue of ideology that separates the post-Vietnam political novel from its earlier counterparts. These are themselves loosely divided by the Second World War. Prewar novels from, for example, *The Iron Heel* to *Jews without Money* and *The Grapes of Wrath* depicted the lives of the dispossessed in order to espouse a specific ideology. They

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[4] Anthony K. Appiah, Introduction to *The Seductions of Biography*, ed. Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff (New York: Routledge, 1997).

were generally socialist in worldview and activist or revolutionary in nature, while the political novels of the early postwar period (such as *1984*) were largely anti-Communist.

The novels included in this study are neither explicitly revolutionary (they do not call for social reform), nor explicitly Socialist (they do not contain a direct critique of Capitalism) in nature. Rather, they depict a post-ideological world in which seemingly random elements determine events. Because their location of the political is different from both the proletarian/activist novels *and* the anti-Communist novels of the first half of the 20th century, critics and scholars of political novels have largely dismissed them. But because they are formally distinct from their predecessors, they have been equally limited by contemporary critical frameworks. Variously referred to as "historiographic meta-fictions" (Linda Hutcheon) "documentary fictions" (Barbara Foley), "true life novels" (Mailer) or "false documents" (Doctorow), these works are generic hybrids; they are neither novels nor historical accounts precisely, but rather, both of these at once. Contemporary critics have almost unanimously (and correctly) identified their blurring of fact and fiction and their narrative self-consciousness as a hallmark of postmodernity. But because these "meta-novels" are postmodern in stance, and foreground the issue of representation, critical attention has focused on their structure and representative strategies to the exclusion of their "content." In the case of other non-Realistic novels of the period a critical climate in which "context is now text," (Jehlen 42) is perhaps ideal. But in their representation of people and events that have loomed large in American life, these works have explicitly political "internal" content that has gone unaddressed or been inadvertently obscured by the tendency of more recent criticism to locate "the

political" in formal or contextual issues, which is to say, outside the text. For if, as Fredric Jameson remarked, "everything is political," then nothing is-in particular.

The "gap" in which the post-Vietnam political novel has languished, then, suggests a kind of stasis on the part of a surprisingly wide variety of critics. For radically different reasons, critics from Irving Howe to Fredric Jameson have failed to entertain these books' uniquely American definition of "the political." The fifties and sixties produced (in addition to *Politics and the Novel*) a number of well respected, if less influential, studies of the American political novel. These included Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left* (1961) and Joseph Blotner's and Gordon Milne's 1966 studies *The Modern American Political Novel*, and *The American Political Novel*, respectively. These were primarily "internal" studies that explored the specific ideology (or anti-ideology) valorized by the leftist novels published between 1900 and 1960, and did not extend to the novels published after the Vietnam War. The next fifteen years, which spanned the late sixties and all of the seventies, were almost silent on the topic of political novels, perhaps because more immediate political concerns were being played out in the "real" world of American streets and in the more rarefied world of the academy. The publication of *The Political Unconscious* signaled the shift in the location the political that would inform much of the critical analysis of the eighties and early nineties. Since the mid-1960s, then, there has been little discussion of an American political novel as such.

By the second half of the nineties, however, a few critics, including Myra Jehlen and John Whalen-Bridge were beginning to express uneasiness about the application of poststructural, or "external" criticism to "internally" political texts. John Whalen-

Bridge's study, *Political Fiction and the American Self* (1998) and Cyrus K. Patell's *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology* (2001) return the discussion of politics both to the novels' "internal" content, and in turn, to the content of American life.

This dissertation, while similar in spirit to Whalen-Bridge and Patell's studies, addresses a more explicitly political realm. In their exploration of "real" lives and events that have become part of a shared American history, Doctorow, Mailer, DeLillo and Roth's "false documents" simultaneously critique and create possibilities for American lives and self-perceptions. But in addition to exploring of Whalen-Bridge's "American selves" I hope to illuminate the way in which these post-Vietnam novels forge an inextricable connection between the nation's personal and political *conscious*ness. In doing so, I seek to redeem the American political novel from critical disfavor.

Contrary to critical belief, the American political novel is not dead; it has merely proposed new possibilities. In order to remain alive to these possibilities, however, a delicate critical balance must be achieved. If a formal critique is insufficient, a "straightforward" close reading offers little more than a rereading. Interestingly, it is Fredric Jameson who suggests the most constructive approach, and offers perhaps the greatest encouragement: "… [W]ith the proper combination of alertness and receptivity, problems may be expected to pose themselves in ways that allow us to make a detour around the reifications of current theoretical discourse." In the spirit of Jameson's observation, this dissertation will attempt to contextualize both the works it addresses, and the critical terrain they must necessarily inhabit.

Chapter One: "The Failure of Analysis": *The Book of Daniel*

I don't believe in Jesus/I don't believe in Kennedy/…I don't believe in Timothy Leary/
I just believe in me/…and that's reality/The dream is over/
John Lennon, God (1970) [1]
As a cultural ideal, nationalism is the claim that while men and women have many identities, the nation provides them with their primary form of belonging.
Michael Ignatieff [2]

Despite unanimous agreement that *The Book of Daniel* (1971) is in some way "political," it has rarely been discussed as part of a tradition of American political novels. The most obvious reason for this is a tacit critical consensus that the genre, always embattled, declined at the end of the Second World War. Strictly speaking, however, it was not the novels that vanished, but the politics that informed them. What Daniel Bell referred to as "the end of ideology" was the origin of a broad-scale shift in the definition, or really the location, of "the political". This shift had an enormous impact on the critical perception of the political novel in the United States. Until the end of World War II the majority of American political novels were expressly Marxist or Socialist in ideology, and located political critique in their "internal" content, or, in "the view of history implicit in the book" (Williams 60). By the mid-1980's, the focus of political critique had shifted to "external" or textual issues, effectively replacing "…cultural issues [with] epistemological ones" (60). While this "Poststructuralist turn," as John Williams refers to it (78), was extremely useful in revealing the textual politics of the novel, it rendered

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[1] John Lennon, "God (The Dream is Over)," John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band Capitol, December 11, 1970.

[2] Michael Ignatieff. *Blood and Belonging: Journeys Into the New Nationalism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993) 5.

political texts (those with "internal" political content) oddly irrelevant. This is not to say that critics such as Linda Hutcheon, Barbara Foley and Fredric Jameson (who have written extensively about textual politics) have been engaged in obscurantism; quite the opposite. In fact, these contemporary critics have been engaged in the same political analysis that such novels as *Iron Heel*, Jews *Without Money*, and *Manhattan Transfer* performed in the early part of the twentieth century.

The "problem" this seems to pose for contemporary political novels is that their traditional function has been eclipsed. Moreover, because their location of the political is different from that of their predecessors-both the proletarian/activist novels of the first half of the century, and the anti-Communist novels of the post World War II period, the post Vietnam political novel has existed in a kind of critical gap. However, because it is possible to see Poststructuralist criticism itself as a product of ideological disillusionment that began at the end of World War II, it is helpful to see the second shift as a product of the first. To that end, Daniel Bell's 1960 study, *The End of Ideology* places the postwar political climate in a useful context. Subtitled "On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties," it argued that in the aftermath of World War II the broad-based ideologies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (particularly Communism) were no longer viable, and predicted that they would be replaced by a multiplicity of personal "micro" ideologies. In this sense, Bell's subtitle is more to the point: Although his study details the "end" of ideology, it does not deny a future for political ideas. Bell was primarily a sociologist; unlike many of the intellectuals of the American Left, he did not see the disenchantment with "humanistic" ideologies as a failure, but rather, more neutrally, as a profound social shift away from a collective vision and toward individual experience.

Given Bell's thesis, the American political novel's postwar invisibility is no surprise: What Bell saw as anti- ideological, more staunchly left-wing critics like Irving Howe saw as apolitical. In the original edition of *Politics and the Novel* (1957), Howe suggested that the American preoccupation with individualism was inherently apolitical because it precluded the existence of a separate political realm:

> The Americans failed, they could not help but fail, to see political life as an autonomous field of action…personalizing everything, they could not do justice to the life of politics in its own right …personalizing everything they could brilliantly observe how social and individual experience melt into one another, so that the deformations of one became the deformations of the other (166-67)

For Howe, American life lacked the necessary division between personal and political spheres that (he argued) it was the work of the political novel to mediate. As a result, by Howe's criteria, a "true" political novel has always been something of impossibility in the United States. But the genre's contemporary lack of status is also a reflection of a long-standing bias on the part of American critics against domestic political fiction. In the same edition of *Politics,* Howe unfavorably contrasts the "personal" American novel with the European "novel of ideas": "[t]hose massive political institutions, parties, and movements which in the European novel occupy the space between the abstractions of ideology and the intimacies of personal life are barely present in America." (166)

Howe was by no means a voice in the wilderness. In *American Fictions* (1983) the critic Frederick Karl also favors the worldview of foreign novels, claiming that "in

American life, questions of pastoral and space have always preempted purely political matters," and that therefore "[t]he large-scale political novels we associate with Mann, Musil, and Kafka... has eluded the grasp of the American novelist, postwar or otherwise" (254). Karl's assessment, which echoes Howe's (perhaps by way of R.W.B. Lewis), locates the "problem" with American novels in their authors' identification with the figure of Adam as an embodiment of the "simple genuine self against the whole world." For Karl the attachment to the myth of Adam betrays a pastoral yearning and a narcissistic concern with selfhood that "precludes the public attention to politics" and fosters a sense of disconnection from the state, which, he argues, an American sees as "a distant body, not concerning him" (Karl 254). Here again the apolitical American consciousness is taken to task. Like Howe, Karl contrasts its valorization of the individual and its affinity for insular pastorals unfavorably with the broader consciousness of the European novel.

Thus, despite the New York Intellectuals' journey "from cosmopolitanism to national identity," both Howe and the critics of his ilk continued into the mid-1980s to hold up as exemplary the "uncompromising" (if flawed) presentation of "political dilemmas" in the novels of such authors as Nadine Gordimer, V.S. Naipaul, and Milan Kundera (*Politics* 1986, 252), while omitting American novels from a similarly nuanced consideration. Ironically, it is Karl himself who, in describing the demise of the American political novel, actually inscribes its rebirth. Bearing out Bell's thesis, the second time as critique, Karl dismisses the political value of the postwar American novel, because "questions of ideology…are not viable. Instead, state and nation are transformed into questions of 'how to live'…" (261). But it is in Karl's very question of "how to live" that

these works locate their political content. Both *The Book of Daniel* and its successors (*The Executioner's Song, Libra, Oswald's Tale and American Pastoral*), are predicated on the very assumption that most left-wing critics have rejected.[3] Each of these works quite deliberately "fail[s] to see political life as an autonomous field of action," and takes as a given the fact that "social and individual experience melt into one another." In the context of the Cold War, and in the wake of the Kennedy assassination, Vietnam, and later Watergate, they propose the personal, for better or for worse, as the sole location of political agency. And in this sense they are creatures of their time. Rather than being configured negatively- as an abdication, or as insufficiently European, their inextricable linkage of social and individual experience is both expressly political and uniquely American. Thus, what Howe and Karl dismissed as a "deformation" of political vision is taken up as the central negotiation of American identity.

In addition to its new emphasis on individual experience, the postwar was the catalyst for another important and (as we will see) related shift that informs the worldview of *The Book of Daniel* and its successors: The blurring of the boundary between literature and history. Both Linda Hutcheon and Barbara Foley have written about the "permeability of the borders" between these two discourses. Hutcheon, in "The Pastime of Past Time" points out "it is [the] very separation between the literary and the historical that is now [the late 1980s] being challenged in postmodern theory and art…"

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[3] For the full context of these arguments see Frederick Karl's, *American Fictions 1940-1980*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1983) and R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

(105). If there is any doubt that the roots of this particular postmodern "challenge" long predate Hutcheon's "now", the subtitle of Norman Mailer's 1968 *Armies of the Night*, (*The Novel as History, History as a Novel*) makes it explicit.

While the "postmodern" challenging of disciplinary boundaries is most often seen as a literary or specifically textual phenomenon, it is important to see it as part of a broader philosophical movement away from empirical analysis and toward experiential models of understanding the world. Similar discussions were taking place in the discipline of History. By 1979, Lawrence Stone's article "The Revival of Narrative" had explicitly distinguished "narrative history" from "structural history" by its "descriptive" rather than "analytical" function, and by its "central focus on man not circumstances" (3). In rejecting a structural interpretation of history, historians of the period were not returning to the earlier "great man" theory of history. Instead, they were creating a third model that gave credence to individual experience, and attempted to see inside the everyday life of historical "actors". This model proposed a kind of pointillist depiction of history in which an individual life is a tiny unit of the whole: Each life is dignified as both unique and representative. In "The History of Everyday Life," Georg Iggers summed up this new ethos: "There is no reason why a history dealing with broad social transformations and one centering on individual existences cannot coexist and supplement each other. It should be the task of the historian to explore the connections between these two levels of historical experience" (Iggers 104). Like novels then, historical analysis began to integrate personal and social experience into a meaningful whole. The logical vehicle for such an undertaking is narrative. Assembling experience into a narrative, Stone points out, imposes order and thus meaning: "Narrative is taken to

mean the organization of material in a chronologically sequential order and the focusing of the content into a single coherent story…" (3)

The redemption of narrative in the field of history coincides interestingly with its increasing fragmentation in the literary works of the same period. This is not as contradictory as it sounds, because both the fragmentation of narrative in literature and its revival in history arose from the same progressive impulse. In different ways, both representational strategies seek to restore human agency by elevating subjective experience to the same status as empirical evaluation. In the field of history, which had been preoccupied with establishing a methodology distinct from its literary origins, the return to narrative represented a privileging of human experience over "data". In literature, the departure from traditional narrative refuted received ideas that preserved status quo power relations.

For Linda Hutcheon, the bid for human agency is one of the creative possibilities afforded by the postmodern. According to John Duvall, Hutcheon uses the term "postmodernism" to refer to a cultural or artistic movement that constitutes a specific "response of the arts to the material conditions created by modernization" (373). Hutcheon sees in its techniques an opportunity to disrupt and "rewrite" received historical narrative. On the other hand, in Fredric Jameson's framework (as in Barthes' and Derrida's) agency is no longer possible for either the producer (the author) or the consumer (the reader) of a literary work. As a result, "the political" is no longer apprehended in the relationship between text and reader, but rather, through the mediation of the critic.

The "problem" with positioning the critic as the center of political analysis is the temptation to read disparate works of literature through a single (and distorting) critical lens. For example, Jameson's description of Doctorow as "the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past" (*Postmodernism*, 24-5) is apt, but his reading of *The Book of Daniel* projects his own critical framework retrospectively. According to Jameson, "What is culturally interesting… is that [Doctorow] has had to convey this great theme formally (since the waning of content is very precisely his subject) and, more than that, has had to elaborate his work by way of the very cultural logic of the Postmodern, which is itself the mark and symptom of his dilemma" (24-5).

Jameson's comment that "the waning of content is very precisely [Doctorow's] subject" bears contextualizing. What is the true "subject" of *The Book of Daniel?* This ambiguity is the true "mark and symptom" not of Doctorow's dilemma, but instead, that of Jameson's readers of the late 1980s. While a number of the novel's contemporary readers may have identified with the narrator's ideological disaffection, this position was not yet the default stance that it would later become, nor would the "subject" of the novel have been in doubt. It is only in retrospect that "the waning of content" can be seen to be "precisely [Doctorow's] subject". Furthermore, this insight is only possible within a contemporary epistemology in which "context is now text" (Jehlen 42).

The conflict between Hutcheon and Jameson's readings is a perfect example of critics "speak[ing] past each other" (Duvall 380). For despite appearances, they do not differ ideologically so much as contextually. In this awareness may lie a way out of the critical dilemma that surrounds both *The Book of Daniel* and the other political novels discussed in this study. Like the first-generation political novels (and narrative

historiographies), both Hutcheon and Jameson are performing a Marxist critique, but at different locations. Hutcheon's "postmodernism" focuses on the more traditionally Marxist notion, the means of production, which in the case of literature consists of "the intentions of *artists* to comment critically on their contemporary moment" [italics mine] (373). While Hutcheon is concerned with the author's agency, Jameson privileges the reader's experience, and focuses "attention.... toward…the means of consumption" (373). Unlike Hutcheon, Jameson sees the postmodern as a state of being, or more precisely, a location in time that entails a specific relationship to history: "…Jameson is…interested in mapping the affect of the contemporary moment, the way "postmodern" people feel about themselves [so] when he speaks of postmodernism or the postmodern, what he means might more accurately be called…'the condition of postmodernity'" (373).

Duvall provides some much-needed context by casting Hutcheon's concerns as essentially modernist, and therefore a subcategory of Jameson's. In a sense, Jameson's is a theory of contemporary consciousness, within which literature is contained, while Hutcheon's is a theory of literature, within which contemporary consciousness is contained. Neither theory, then, is more "correct." Rather, they are equally useful in different contexts. If, as this dissertation argues, the political novel remains a viable American genre, Jameson's critical framework is useful in illuminating its context, but has the unfortunate effect of obviating its subject matter. On the other hand, while Hutcheon is not, as Duvall credits Jameson with implying, "just another formalist performing a mandarin close reading" (383) her delineation of "transparent political meaning" must be contextualized if it is to remain meaningful.

As I have pointed out, the political novels of the post-Vietnam period span a literary and historical period during which formal and generic boundaries gradually shift position. In this context, Duvall's move to integrate Jameson and Hutcheon's critical frameworks is particularly vital. But because *The Book of Daniel* is a transitional text in this shift, it requires an equally multivalent critical approach. Reading the 1971 novel solely through the critical lens of 1986 distorts its politics and obscures its specific argument. On the other hand, a straightforward close reading that ignores the critical context of the novel merely recapitulates earlier readings that were largely dependent upon the politics of the reader. To that end, this chapter will attempt to place *The Book of Daniel* in both its historical and literary contexts. The understanding that these are at once discrete and mutually influencing will inform my reading, and is in fact, one of the central problems taken up in this study.

Unlike its predecessors, which combine "twenties bohemianism and thirties politics," (Dickstein 12) *Daniel* is an amalgam of fact, fiction, and sixties politics. Not surprisingly, the novel's generic hybridity established it in retrospect as an early "postmodern" text. However, while its formal and rhetorical elements seem inarguably postmodern, the goal of their use belongs to an earlier, content-based political novel. If Doctorow himself claimed in 1975 that "there [was]] no more fiction or nonfiction—only narrative" [4], his conflation of fact and fiction follows function before form; it is not an end in itself. In other words, *The Book of Daniel* uses what Linda Hutcheon might term

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[4] E.L. Doctorow, acceptance speech for Best Novel of 1975, National Book Critics Circle.

the techniques of Postmodernism to convey what Jameson would probably see as a Modernist sense of loss, in this case of "the American radical past".

In the arc of the post-Vietnam novel then, *The Book of Daniel* is a transitional text at the levels of form and content. While the novel's disillusionment with the American Left (and ideology as a whole) bears out the first half of Bell's thesis, the yearning for political solutions remains an implicit element of its content. In this sense Doctorow's novel is still engaged in mourning the loss its "post-ideological" successors will take for granted. Unlike *Daniel*, which indicts the failure of political systems to address basic human problems, the novels that follow in the late seventies and eighties will primarily be concerned with solutions to the problem of "how to live" in the absence of a viable political vision. The real feat of Doctorow's novel is removing this concern from the realm of the metaphysical and presenting it as part of the political context of American lives. Mailer, DeLillo, and (from a different point-of-view) Roth's novels propose their protagonists' personal and idiosyncatatic solutions to this problem as a form of radical agency; such a project would not have been possible outside the context of Doctorow's. In this sense, *The Book of Daniel* informs the worldview of all the novels in this study, and by extension, much of the political fiction that followed.

In keeping with the tension it maintains between form and content, text and context, *The Book of Daniel* is really two books: one the author's and the other its protagonist's. Narrated primarily by Daniel Isaacson, the novel encompasses a thinly-veiled account of the arrest, trial, and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Doctorow's book has a broad historical context, interweaving the McCarthy and Vietnam eras into a pointed critique of American Cold War democracy. Like the historiographic

narratives of the 1970s, Doctorow's novel preserves the Isaacson's experience as individuals without losing sight of its relationship to their social and historical circumstance: They are both people, and a class of people. True to Stanley Kauffmann's comment that the novel is not specifically "about" the Rosenbergs, but rather, "the idea of the Rosenbergs" (Kauffmann 25), Doctorow has described the case as a kind of testing ground for a number of ideas that were central to his thinking:

> In the late sixties, I found myself thinking about the Rosenberg case…I started to write the book and discovered I could hang an awful lot on it—*not only the explicit and particular story of two people* who were trapped in this way, *but also the story of the American left in general* and the generally sacrificial role it has played in our history [italics mine]. (Trenner 61)

These ideas did not come to fruition until the late sixties when (as will Philip Roth in his American Trilogy) Doctorow began to draw a parallel between the political atmosphere of the McCarthy era and that of the Vietnam War. Doctorow has commented that while "I was fully sensitive to the McCarthy period generally…the case didn't propose itself to me as a subject for a novel until we were all going through Vietnam" (Trenner 46).

Doctorow's novel casts the Isaacsons as representative figures in a general elegy for the Left, but Daniel's "book" is essentially a personal elegy for his parents. Here that the blurring of generic boundaries asserts itself powerfully. While Doctorow's ostensibly "fictional" narrative employs the Isaacsons as a vehicle for a specific historical analysis (the fall of the Left), Daniel's supposedly "empirical" narrative (his history dissertation) depicts the impact of the trial and execution on the personal lives of the Isaacsons. More

importantly, the novel's reversal of the roles of history and fiction legitimizes Daniel's (auto) biography of his family as a form of dissenting testimony, thereby reversing the agenda of the very trial documents upon which its empirical validity rests. Through its recreation of the Isaacson's experience, Daniel's account reveals the extent to which they were betrayed by the very system they were accused of betraying. As Linda Hutcheon asserts about the techniques of postmodernism, Mary Rhiel and David Suchoff underscore biography's power to "[call] established cultural history into question"(2). Ultimately it is Daniel's *personal* history, and not legal history that bears witness to the sacrifice of his parents to the imperatives of Cold War "democracy".

The first moments of *The Book of Daniel* set the tone of the novel, and establish Daniel's profound alienation from both generations of the Left, which is to say, his past and his present. Daniel's narrative begins in the late sixties, a time when his fashionably radical look- "steel-rimmed spectacles," long hair, and full moustache (4)- would have been equally appropriate on an Old Left radical: "If he'd lived in the nineteen thirties this way, he would be a young commie." (4) Daniel's pride in his association with the Young Communists (he describes his self-presentation as "deliberately cool" and points out that "nothing about this appearance was accidental") and his gentle send-up of the values of his "enlightened liberal" foster parents (4) suggest loyalty to his birth parents' Old Left politics. But Daniel's affinity with both his parents and their politics is profoundly ambivalent. His decision to begin his account on Memorial Day, as he hitchhikes to visit his sister in a psychiatric ward, underscores his dedication to his parents' legacy, and hence the novel's elegiac stance. On the other hand, the legacy to which he clings is also suffocating him. Sitting side by side in the hospital, Daniel and Susan are

> like the compensating halves of a clock sculpture that would exchange positions when the clock struck…Without saying much of anything, without even caring if he was there, Susan could restore in him the old cloying sense of family…[I]t was their thing, this orphan state, and…it obliterated everything else and separated them from everyone else , and always would , no matter what he did to deny it. (8-9)

As Daniel has discovered, his personal identity and his American identity are mutually exclusive. While he cannot renounce his membership in his family, it has in effect stripped him of his citizenship. The "FBI men" who are assigned to him "have only to make sure I am in no way involved in the United States Government, either as a social beneficiary, or as a servitor…They will give me no money. They will force me into no uniform…." (72).

If Daniel cannot serve his country, neither can he rebel against it, for he has been politically neutralized by his parents' fate. The Isaacsons' ultimate act of dissent called down the government's ultimate punishment. In both recompense and punishment for their execution, Daniel exists in an unacknowledged state of political invisibility. As a result Daniel is denied political agency because his every dissenting act is co-opted *a priori* by the state. :

> I live in constant and degrading relationship to the society that has destroyed my mother and father. …If I left school today, my classification would still be 2-A, which covers any situation not in the national interest….I could burn my draft card on the steps of the

> Pentagon and nothing would happen. Nothing I do will result in anything but an additional entry in my file…I am deprived of the chance of resisting my government [italics mine]. (72)

Because he can neither reject his familial identity, nor claim his national identity, Daniel's exists in a kind of paradox in which his personal disaffection mirrors his political dislocation: "The final existential condition is citizenship. Every man is the enemy of his own country…Every country is the enemy of its own citizens." (73).

As John Williams points out, the disaffection expressed by Doctorow's narrator led the majority of critics to praise or condemn the novel according to their own political sympathies, or really, those they perceived (often erroneously) to be Doctorow's (60-63). This tendency represents the obverse of the "poststructuralist turn," for while "postmodern" critics obscured Daniel's political content by locating it in the context of the novel's formal experimentation, other critics did the same by failing to consider the nature of Doctorow's relationship to his narrative (and hence his narrator).

Not surprisingly, much of Daniel's critical reception is a product of the very cold-war ideology the novel critiques. Joseph Epstein's 1977 article in *Harper's* depicted the novel as "anti-America"(77) while Carol Harter and James Thompson "solve" this problem by pointing out that Daniel is an unreliable narrator who does not "necessarily" embody Doctorow's politics (5). In turn, Carol Iannone's article on "Doctorow's 'Jewish' Radicalism" critiques, not the novel's configuration of Jewish and radical identities, but, as the title announces, Doctorow's own Jewish identity.

While Harter and Thompson are correct in identifying Epstein's failure to see Daniel as an authorial creation, their determination to distinguish Doctorow's politics

from those of his narrator betrays more than a touch of Epstein's conservative anxiety. In the first place, their reading errs too far in the opposite direction: If, as Williams paraphrases their argument, Daniel is an unreliable narrator whose beliefs are seen to be flawed" (61), it would be difficult to determine which beliefs those might be. And if Daniel's critique of the Left is not provably Doctorow's, neither is it intended to be satiric. Furthermore, Harter and Thompson's (re)assurance that Daniel's "anti-American" stance is tempered by a negative view of Communism and "undermined by the book's context" (Harter 5, Williams 61) not only establishes a false binary (anti-Communism = patriotism), but would seem to be unnecessary, given their dismissal of Daniel's political vision as a product of authorial irony. Finally, while Harter and Thompson cite the potential of the book's context to "undermine" its own content, they overlook the irony inherent in demanding a consistent authorial statement from a text that, by their admission, calls its own methods into question.

According to Harter and Thompson's logic, Daniel's analysis is unreliable because it is not objective. But, as the novel points out, it is objectivity itself that is unreliable. Despite the extensive research Daniel has conducted for his dissertation, he concludes, "I find no clues as to their guilt or innocence. Perhaps they were neither guilty nor innocent" (130). Thus, Daniel's "flawed beliefs" and his "failure" to "exonerate his parents" (47) are not weaknesses in the novel, but in fact its central stance.[5] More

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[5] That this "failure" is a deliberate choice on Doctorow's part is made clear by Robert (Rosenberg) Meeropol's ongoing assertion of his parents' innocence. See "Carry it Forward and Pass it on," In *Red Diapers: Growing Up in the Communist Left*, ed. Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998) 210-13.

importantly, despite Harter and Thompson's assertions, an unreliable narrative is not unmeaningful. While Daniel cannot ascertain his parents' guilt or innocence, his "flawed" worldview affords him a remarkably cogent assessment of their arrest:

> Of course, there is a slight oddness in the way they reacted to the knock on the door—as if they knew what was coming. And so did everyone else who lived with some awareness into that time. There were certain convictions that American Democracy would no longer allow you to hold. If you were a Jewish Communist, anti-Fascist, if you cried Peace! And cheered…at the Progressive rally… if you were poor; if you were all of these things, you knew what was coming." (130)

In short, while *Daniel's* "book" is clearly inflected by his bitterness and his "principled antagonism" "(Dickstein 41), Harter and Thompson's assertion that *the novel* (as a whole) fails to "offer a coherent analysis of either the cold war or the counterculture," or "provide a clear perspective for judging American society" (47) is demonstrably false.[6] However ambivalent its relationship to "truth," *The Book of Daniel*

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[6] Daniel's analysis of Cold War politics is not without solid theoretical basis. Doctorow grounds much of it in the work of historian William A. Williams, whose name he also gives to the superintendent of the Isaacson's building. See Daniel Zins, "Daniel's 'Teacher' in Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*." *Notes on Modern American Literature*, 3 (Spring 1979) note 16.

presents a vision of American Cold War "democracy" that is in accord with both its historical context and with many of Doctorow's stated beliefs. [7]

Doctorow's comments in a 1994 interview make Daniel's characterization of "American Democracy" explicit: "Domestically, the Cold War at its worst was a kind of civil religion with distinctly Puritan cruelties." (Wutz 1994) Doctorow apparently uses the word "Puritan" here in its strictest sense; one of the central goals of *The Book of Daniel* is to characterize Cold War American identity as oppressively narrow in its "advoca[cy of] and aspir[ation to] a special purity of doctrine or practice." [8] As a result, the novel presents what Doctorow refers to as "the sacrifice of the Left" as a ritual designed to reinforce a threatened nation's idea of itself.

Robert Coover's novel *The Public Burning* (1977) takes Doctorow's notion of the sacrificial Left quite literally, going to far as to "stage" the Rosenberg execution as "a kind of public exorcism":

> Bard College, 1966-67: I draft some scenes for a street theater/*commedia dell'arte* based on the notion of restaging the 1953 Sing Sing executions of the alleged Atom spies Julius and Ethel

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[7] Robert Meeropol (nee Rosenberg) dismisses the novel's interpretation of the Rosenbergs' fate, its depiction of their children, and its characterization of the Old Left; this is also evident in the screenplay Doctorow adapted from the novel. In a speech given on the 50th anniversary of his parents' execution, Meeropol claims, "In [the film] *Daniel*, Hollywood indulged in the stereotype that progressives sacrificed their families for their causes…But the movement that tried to save my parents nurtured and protected me and Michael for years afterward. It kept the spark of our parents' resistance from being extinguished. We became the children of that movement…" (211).

[8] Oxford English Dictionary, online edition: http://www.oed.com

> Rosenberg in Times Square as a kind of public exorcism with Uncle Sam as emcee and carny barker.[9]

As these comments from " The Public Burning Log" indicate, Coover actually began the novel in a different form between 1966 and 1967, during his first year as a professor at Bard College. Not surprisingly, the novel's politics, style and tone--its "broad satire," evocation of street theater, and mythic overtones identify it as brainchild of the 1960s. This is particularly true, given that Coover's use of myth to ground the story is expressly antithetical to the novels written after the Vietnam War. Coover seems, at least in retrospect, aware of the influence of the 1960s on his novel[10]. Describing himself as writing "in that late '60s spirit**,"** Coover sees *The Public Burning* as "invoking "'the divine concursus" with scapegoat rituals and American showbiz (sic)…The satire in the fragments is still quite broad, the acts carnivalesque" (85). Here the influence of the 1960s protest theater of groups like the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Bread and Puppet Theater is evident. In addition, Coover's linkage of figures of folk Americana (Uncle Sam as "emcee" and "carny barker" (84)) with a kind of collective unconscious is pure 1960s ethos.

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[9] Robert Coover, "The Public Burning Log 1966-77" *Critique* 42.1 (Fall 2000): 84.

[10] The exact chronology is difficult to determine. Coover's log (see note 9) is not exactly a journal, but what he describes in its introduction as "a *narrative* of the writing and publishing of *The Public Burning*, taken from logs and letters of the time[italics mine]" ("Log" 84).

Unlike Doctorow, who sees the Isaacsons as individuals, Coover's references to the Rosenbergs as "mythic touchstones of a tribe's shared stories" (85) places them in an almost Jungian symbolic realm. Even Coover's "staging" the execution as a public witch burning harks back to ancient social forms. The comments in his log (as well as the finished novel) suggest that Coover was determined to preserve the stylistic and metaphoric elements of his own version of the story. In fact, Coover deliberately avoided reading Doctorow's novel until the winter of 1972-73, when he was well into his own:

> Autumn, 1972: I dutifully return to the subject of the Rosenbergs, by way of a review for the *New York Times Book Review* of *The Implosion Conspiracy*, a wretched book on the case by Louis Nizer. At a party in New York given by Ted Solotaroff, I meet Ed Doctorow, whose *Book of Daniel*, also based, though more conventionally, on the Rosenbergs' case, I have so far avoided reading, not wanting it to leak into mine, but I pick it up now, read it over the winter. (89)

While *The Public Burning* and *The Book of Daniel* may not share a genre, they do share a specific vision of Cold War American nationalism. Both novels critique American Cold War politics as a kind of performance designed to forge a unified national identity. More importantly, in both works that identity is enacted in specific opposition to the atheism of the Soviet Union — as faith-based. In *The Public Burning*, there is no separation of Church and State. Instead, Coover presents a bizarre amalgamation of traditional folk culture, contemporary pop culture and religion as the basis for the "deep horizontal comradeship" that Benedict Anderson defines as a nation. (Anderson7*n*). In

Coover's novel there is no qualitative difference between a spiritual and an Irving Berlin song, a trial or a musical revue, or a judge and a priest. Presiding over the execution, the members of the House of Representatives, Judge Kaufman, and the prison chaplain Irving Koslowe all wear the same black liturgical/juridical robes. Richard Nixon draws courage before speaking from his personal trinity of Lincoln, Jesus, and Dale Carnegie: "Lincoln was always helpful in a tight spot, better even than Jesus or Dale Carnegie." (587)

In Coover's formulation, the conflation of religious and secular cultures establishes American patriotism as synonymous with religious faith, and through faith with a sense of destiny. The narrator, punning on Betty Crocker's homemaker image, refers to her as a "Holy Mother" (560), while in an ironic parody of religious diversity, "Jehovah, Jesus and Joseph Smith lead the crowd in a prayer"(626). In the same vein, Coover presents the Rosenberg execution as a combination of political rally and revival meeting. When President Eisenhower steps up to the microphone he addresses the crowd "like a Dallas radio preacher," and his speech explicitly links American Democracy to freedom, and freedom to religious faith. (625) Eisenhower informs the crowd that the fight against Communism is neither political, nor economic. Instead,

> "It is, friends, a *spiritual* struggle! And at such a time in history, *we who are free must proclaim anew our faith*: we are called as a people to give testimony that in the sight of the world to our faith that the future shall belong to the free…I know of nothing I can add to make plainer *the sincere purpose of the United States.*" [italics mine] (625)

Whittaker Chambers' 1952 confessional narrative, *Witness* reveals that Coover's satire cuts close to the bone. In it Chambers makes remarkably similar claims for the "sincere purpose of the United States." According to Chambers, the true apostasy of American Communists is not political, but religious. Reversing Marx's analogy, he posits Communism as a misguided substitute for religion:

> [Communism] is…the great alternative faith of mankind. Like all great faiths, its force derives from a simple vision. Other ages have had great visions. They have always been versions of the same vision: the vision of Man's relationship to God. The Communist vision is the vision of Man without God. (*Witness* 9)

Chambers' political agnosticism here is shrewd. In presenting himself as "a witness [rather than a participant] to each of the two great faiths of our time," (7) Chambers demonstrates an understanding of Cold War America that contrasts sharply with the Rosenbergs' (both historical and fictionalized) naïveté. In his introduction to the narrative, which he addresses to his children, he is noticeably silent regarding his faith in the tenets of Marxism. In fact, he never formally repudiates either his attraction to or involvement with the Communist Party. Instead, he underscores his faith in God, a faith that communist ideology must necessarily lack, and (he understands) American ideology must necessarily embrace. What Chambers knows instinctively and the Isaacsons fail to grasp is the power of his espousal of faith to confer on him a unified, and hence, fully loyal identity. Here Chambers' narrative establishes his faith in God and his belief in the tenets of Communism, as mutually exclusive:

> I date my break [with Communism] from a very casual happening…. My daughter was in her high chair. I was watching her eat…. My eye came to rest on the delicate convolutions of her ear—those intricate, perfect ears. The thought passed through my mind: "No, those ears were not created by any chance coming together of atoms in nature (the Communist view). They could have been created only by immense design." The thought was involuntary and unwanted. I crowded it out of my mind…If I had completed it I should have had to say: Design presupposes God…God alone is the inciter and guarantor of freedom. He is the only guarantor…
>
> Religion and freedoms are indivisible….A communist breaks because he must choose at last between two irreconcilable opposites—God or Man…Freedom or Communism (16).

Chambers' conflation of religion and freedom as "indivisible" is particularly disturbing. By echoing the rhetoric of the Pledge of Allegiance ("one nation *indivisible*"), Chambers skillfully co-opts its authority to undermine the constitutional separation of Church and State. His linkage of God with "design" and "freedom" is a false syllogism that establishes America as not merely antithetical to Communism, but as the fulfillment of a divine plan. This notion, of a pre-ordained and divinely sanctioned destiny removes the disquieting possibility of arbitrariness from national affiliation, thereby imbuing it with purpose and meaning.

In both *Secret Agents* and *One Nation under God?* Marjorie Garber and Rebecca Walkowitz reveal the linkage of religious faith and patriotism as a defining characteristic

of Cold War American identity. In *Nation*, Garber and Walkowitz characterize the 1954 addition of the phrase "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance as "a slap at 'Godless Communism,'" pointing out that the reference to God merely "made explicit a connection between patriotism and 'God' that their sponsors argued was already there" (ix). Despite the Constitution's putative separation of church and state, the official recommendation of the Library of Congress supports Garber and Walkowitz's assertion. Out of three versions of the phrase that The Library was asked to consider, its officials chose "One Nation under God" "[s]ince *the basic idea* is *a Nation founded on a belief in God*…[italics mine]."[11]

According to Benedict Anderson, the relationship between religious faith and patriotism (national faith) is innate:

> With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary…What was then required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning… [F]ew things were better suited to this end than an idea of nation. (11)

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[11] Three minor variations were considered: 1. "One Nation under God," 2. "One Nation, under God," and 3."One Nation indivisible under God." Congress accepted the Library of Congress's recommendation of variation #1. The Library explained "'Since the basic idea is a Nation founded on a belief in God, there would seem to be no reason for the comma after Nation.'" See http://www.PledgeQandA.com.

Anderson refers here to the origin of the nation-state in the eighteenth century, but his point obtains equally well in the America of 1952, when Chambers (the former editor of a national news magazine) could make the claim that "Faith [as opposed to economics] is the central problem of this age" (17). It is important to note, however, that Anderson's idea of nation *reverses* Chambers'. Unlike Chambers, Anderson sees the nation as a "*secular* transformation," which is to say, a move away from religious faith as a unifying force. According to Anderson, "nationalist imagining" with a "strong affinity for religious imaginings" is innately conservative. Citing national reverence for any Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Anderson points out that "neither Marxism nor Liberalism is much concerned with death and immortality" (10).

In Doctorow's vision of America, the Constitution provides a basis for a national identity that is cohesive, but not dependant on a common ethnicity or religion. As a secular expression of the *Ur-* code of ethics, Doctorow sees the Constitution as a vehicle for the "transformation" that for Anderson defines a nation. Doctorow's invocation of Biblical law seems paradoxical given his characterization of himself as "a leftist…of the pragmatic, social-democratic left" (Trenner 52), but Doctorow sees his politics as based in a "primitive" (by which he seems to mean "innate" or perhaps, pre-theological) Old Testament morality. When asked, in a 1982 interview, about their origin, Doctorow is quick to eschew a specific ideology:

> Victor Navasky wrote about me that I have a kind of *primitive* politics, almost a *primitive* sense of …what justice is and what injustice is… It's at the level of 'Don't do this. This is wrong…God is going to punish you.' All the analysis is built on it: Stealing is

> wrong. Therefore tax laws, which favor the wealthy, are wrong. Murder and torture are wrong… (Trenner 52)

Because Doctorow sees the Bible as *religious* transformation of an ethical code there is nothing contradictory in his view of the Old Testament as the a *priori* criterion for American law. In both his personal and political vision, it is the Old Testament's code of ethics that informs (and hence precedes) all other ideologies: "I've been called an idealist and naïve and a pseudo-Marxist. But in this country the reference has to be the Constitution; and the political analysis, Marxist or otherwise, will have to develop from just such elemental biblical perception…not from what Europe is" (Trenner 52).

By configuring the Constitution as both secular *and* revealed, Doctorow posits the document as a (specifically) American birthright. In this way, Doctorow's vision of American identity "solves" the existential problem that informs Chambers' false dichotomies of "God/Man" and "Freedom/Communism." The Constitution's "elemental" and therefore received nature carries with it the same authority and sense of destiny as Biblical law. Like religious faith it both confers an (American) identity as inevitable, and precludes, by its very nature, any other that must be "chosen." However, unlike religious doctrine (and Chambers' vision) its cohesive power derives from inclusion (its breadth of its vision).rather than exclusion (the specificity of its ideology).

In direct contrast to Chambers' exclusionary formulation of American identity, Doctorow sees himself as the inheritor of a secular and politically progressive tradition that is not antithetical to American democracy, but in fact, its true origin. Doctorow's vision of American identity combines the self-determination of what Michael Ignatieff

calls “civic nationalism,” with the sense of “destiny” inherent in “ethnic nationalism” (5). According to Ignatieff, civic nationalism, “turns national belonging into a form of rational attachment” while in ethnic nationalism,“…an individual’s deepest attachments are inherited not chosen.” Unlike ethnic nationalism, in which “the national community defines the individual” (5), civic nationalism allows the individual to determine the nature of his “rational attachment” to the nation.

Both Doctorow and Daniel are to some extent products of this tradition: progressive, secular and Jewish. In *World’s Fair*, Doctorow’s explicitly autobiographical novel, little Edgar Altschuler’s (Doctorow’s first name is Edgar) paternal grandfather is Isaac. Thus, like the narrator of *The Book of Daniel*, Doctorow is “Isaac’s son.” Like Daniel’s father, Paul Isaacson, Edgar’s father sells radios. Young Edgar’s father is also a leftist and a secular Jew. David Altschuler “disliked religion…He believed in progress,” a value system his mother credits to Edgar’s grandfather. Edgar’s mother depicts Isaac as a secular Jew with socialist sympathies:

> …[A] wonderful man, very scholarly, but not pious. For Isaac, religion meant superstition and poverty and ignorance as it had in the old country. He was a socialist…he believed the problems on earth in life—food, shelter, education-should be solved on earth. So your father had a background in these sorts of ideas. (28)

Like Edgar's father, Paul Isaacson associates religion with poverty and superstition. Characterizing his mother-in-law's religious devotion as "a predictably abnormal response to an impoverished life," (69) Paul's thinking reveals a similarly socialist bent But here Doctorow allows the irony that colors much of Daniel’s narrative

to creep in, slowly revealing the nuances of Daniel (and Doctorow's) opposition to his parents' thinking. Playing on the distancing effect of reported speech, Daniel's reiteration of his father's Marxist analysis suggests it to be glib and doctrinaire:

> My father believed that a life committed to superstition could have no other end than madness, because madness was the disease of fantasy, and fantasy of God, or superstition, was itself madness…The most enormous problem faced by the Bolsheviks, he said, was the education of the peasants…God was an instrument of the Czar And Grandma grew up, of course, in the shtetl of a provincial Russian town, a Jew, but also a Russian peasant. *My father always gives you more of an answer than you bargained for* [italics mine]. (69)

Rochelle Isaacson reads her mother's madness (or perhaps, Alzheimer's disease) through the lens of Communist philosophy as well, but her analysis also reveals the "primitive politics" that informs her investment in communism. While Rochelle's "catalogue of [his grandmother's] misfortunes…[from] the abandoned parents [to] the death of her husband…" is summed up as political object lesson for Daniel, ("What killed him was not tuberculosis. What killed him and killed them all was poverty and exploitation, and that means being poor and being kept poor by rich people who grow fat and rich from your labor"[69]) Rochelle's sense of injustice ultimately outstrips her political rhetoric. "It's *not fair, is it?*" she asks Daniel. "Your grandmother slaved all her life to end up with nothing" (69). Unlike his father's politics, as Daniel points out, "[Rochelle's] politics was not theoretical or abstract" (42). In answer to Daniel's

question about his Grandmother's "spells," Rochelle tells him, "It is simple. "Grandma goes mad when she can no longer consider the torment of her life…" (69). Rochelle's political vision also transcends the boundaries of her husband's rationalism. Rather than rejecting religion as a tool of oppression, Rochelle's communism assimilates its power to confer meaning on human suffering. In this sense, as Daniel points out, "Her *politics was like grandma's religion*-some purchase on the future against the terrible life of the present":

> Grandma lit candles on Friday night, with a shawl over her head, and her hand covering her face while she said her prayer. When she lowered her hands, her eyes… were filled with tears, and devastation was in her face. *That was my mother's communism*. It was something whose promise was so strong that you endured much for it…*The coming of socialism would justify those who had suffered.* You went out and took your stand because someday there would be retribution and you wanted just a little of it to bear your name [italics mine]. (42)

In its moral vision (the "justification of those who had suffered"), commitment to self-sacrifice ("its promise was so strong you endured much for it"), and promise of vindication ("someday there would be retribution"), Rochelle's communism is indistinguishable in function from her mother's religion. But like Doctorow, Daniel suggests that religious doctrine *precedes* political doctrine-- or more accurately, that they share a common origin as articulations of human experience. Thus, in Daniel's rendering of his grandmother's words, it is possible to hear the cadences of his parents'

revolutionary rhetoric: "[We were] a couple, neither smart nor dumb, neither short nor tall or ugly or beautiful, but hard-working folks and for thousands of years my people stumbling through the world in their suffering, *looking for paradise on earth*…an earth habitable in reason and peace and humanity, somewhere [italics mine]." (65) In immigrating to America, Daniel's grandmother embraced the same utopian vision that informs her daughter and son-in-law's communism. Once there, however, she is spiritually "radicalized" by the same oppression from which she fled Russia. While Daniel's parents will embrace communism, his grandmother turned to religion:

> In any one day it is possible to derive joy from your being and be nourished by it. In a filthy room with cold, broken windows and the clatter of oppression in the streets, it is possible. And starving, with your teeth rotting in your mouth …and your eyes shattered by the horror of what you have seen-all together…*I call it God*. And there is a traditional liturgy which is lovely in itself, but which reminds you too that others born and died know this feeling also…And my curses are my love for them whom I curse for existing at the mercy of life and God, and for the dust they will allow themselves to become for having been born [italics mine]. (70)

Daniel's conflation of his grandmother's religion and his parents' politics bears out Chambers' characterization of communism as a "great alternative faith." The redemptive power that Daniel's grandmother attributes to God ("The possibility to derive joy" in the face of "the horror of what you have seen") Rochelle attributes to communism. For Daniel's grandmother, the liturgy's power to remind those who recite it of the feeling that

"others born and died know this feeling also," provides the sense of meaning and solidarity that her son and daughter find in Marxist rhetoric. While the notion of common ground between Doctorow and Chambers seems counterintuitive, the novel recapitulates Chambers' critique of communism to the extent that it critiques ideological sectarianism in general. It is important to note that (through Daniel) Doctorow makes a distinction between socialism, which is to say, a set of principles, and what Daniel refers to as "my *mother's* communism," which embraces the power of "the *coming of socialism"* to provide the same sense of meaning and destiny that Chambers attributes to faith-based American nationalism.

Like Daniel's grandmother, who seeks in religious faith to "change fatality to continuity and contingency into meaning" (cursing "the dust" her children "will become for allowing themselves to be born") both Chambers' "democracy" (that "God is the guarantor of freedom") and the Isaacsons' "communism" (which "would justify those who had suffered" and "bring retribution") attempt, by opposing means, to solve the existential conundrum that Anderson argues is central to the nation. But while Socialism accomplishes the secular transformation that Doctorow and Anderson envision, Doctorow presents the Isaacson's communism as freighted with philosophical demands that political ideology cannot fulfill.

In two quick sketches of his mother and his sister, Daniel reveals their political ideology to be an expression of innate familial (and hence personal) values. "The *whole thing* with Rochelle," Daniel sums up, "was defending her against the vicious double-crossing trick that life was. Income was defense. A clean house. A developed political mind. Children" (41). Like her mother's communism, Susan's ideology is an expression

of her oppositional identity rather than the product of a specific analysis. According to Daniel,

> In Susan resides *the family gift* for having opinions. Always taking stands, even as a kid. A moralist, a judge. This is right, that is wrong. With her aggressive moral openness…And all wrong. Always wrong. From politics back to drugs, and from drugs back to sex, and before sex, tantrums, and before tantrums, a faith in God….A long time ago…on an evening in 1954…Susan gave me the word about God: "He'll get them all…He'll get every one of them [italics mine]." (9-10)

In Daniel's mind, there is little difference between his grandmother's "madness" and his mother and sister's ideological zeal: "[Rochelle's] weaknesses were not as obvious to me as Paul's. If someone claims to deal with life so as to survive, you grant him soundness of character. But she was as unstable as he was. In her grim expectations. In her refusal to have illusions. In her cold, dogmatic rage."(41) But Daniel cannot truly reject his family's radicalism because his political identity is inextricably bound up with his familial identity. In an otherwise inexplicable digression, Daniel calls up in the reader's mind the image of

> A medical textbook. On the white and shining pages are photographs of three female bodies…Grandma…Rochelle…[a]nd Susan…Grandma looks like the wrinkled matriarch of an aboriginal tribe…The meaning of the picture is in the thin, diagrammatic arrow line , colored red, that runs from Grandma's breast through your

> mama's, and into your sister's. The red line describes the progress of madness inherited through the heart. (71)

As the image of his grandmother as the "wrinkled matriarch of "an aboriginal tribe" makes clear, the "madness of the heart" that his parents and his sister call communism is in a sense, inherited, and therefore constitutes his identity as profoundly as his genetic code. But in the term "tribe" Doctorow skillfully encompasses the multifarious affinities that constitute Daniel's identity, and hence the staggering complexity of his entanglement with his personal and political heritage. As a "tribal" legacy, the Isaacson's affinity with communism (and "madness") is like their Jewishness: at once ideological, national, and familial. A conversation Daniel imagines having with his dead grandmother characterizes their multivalent identity as heritable through both biology and culture. In it she passes on to him the heavy burden of responsibility that ensures the survival of his family's legacy. By calling Daniel a "good boy" she confers upon him his responsibility to both the past and future generations. As she was to her parents, "their life" and "their only reason for enduring suffering on this earth "(64), so Daniel must be for the generations before him:

> … [P]erhaps it is that I recognized in you the strength and innocence that will reclaim us all from defeat. That will exonerate our living and justify our suffering…Just remember, though, this placing of the burden on the children is a family tradition. But only your crazy grandma had the grace to make a ritual out of it. (70-1)

Although Daniel describes his sister as a "moral speed freak" (10), he depicts himself as an "inheritor" of his family's self-sacrifice and righteous indignation. In the

wake of his own "*ritual* fury," he storms through the hospital intending to assault his sister's doctor, telling the reader,"…I was learning how to be an Isaacson. An Isaacson does things boldly calculated to bring self-destructive results. It is a way of making the world do your bidding" (207).

Simultaneously a national, religious, cultural, and familial marker, Rochelle's "communism" encompasses all aspects of the Isaacson's identity, and by this very nature precludes any possibility for Daniel's American identity. As an exclusionary identity, Doctorow suggests, their communism functioned as another "puritanical civil religion" driven by the same ideological zeal as Chambers' Cold War nationalism. Carol Iannone refers satirically to these ideas as "Doctorow's 'Jewish' Radicalism."[12] The quotation marks around the word "Jewish" call into question both Doctorow's definition of "Jewishness" and the notion of political radicalism as a specifically Jewish orientation. According to Iannone, Doctorow "uses" Judaism to confer status through a kind of virtuous martyrdom. Citing a referral to *Hard Times* as "a Jewish fable," Iannone comments, "Given Doctorow's *flexible* definition of Judaism, and his desire for that touch of *pious prestige*, this is a characterization he no doubt welcomes" [italics mine] (54). Not surprisingly, Iannone's criticism of *The Book of Daniel* is particularly pointed. Here too she objects to a "flexible" (which is to say, secular) definition of Jewishness, an identity she links again to false piety. In her view, the novel is "Doctorow's major

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[12] Carol Iannone, "Doctorow's 'Jewish' Radicalism" *Commentary* 81 (March, 1986): 53-6.

treatment of the theme of "Jewish" radicalism and, by implication, of the Jewish function in history (i.e. to suffer for idealism)" (54).

Iannone's reading of these novels, in its very hostility, is quite useful here. Her oddly personalized critique of Doctorow's Jewish identity reveals classic cold-war anxieties about the parameters of American identity. Not only does Iannone's critique insist upon a very limiting concept of Jewishness, but it contains two faulty assumptions: The first is that the cold-war marginality of American Jews was entirely chosen rather than conferred, a choice that she imputes to Doctorow as well. The second is that Doctorow's elegy for the Isaacsons is an uncomplicated bid for their victim status. Doctorow's actual analysis is far more complex. While he quite accurately establishes Daniel's alienation as a function of American Cold War politics, he also reveals the extent to which the Isaacsons (and hence the Left) constructed their own identities in opposition to the nation, and were thus inadvertently complicit in their own undoing.

The fact that Iannone takes exception to a secular or cultural concept of Judaism suggests that she has profoundly misread *The Book of Daniel*, and in ways that exemplify conservative Cold War thinking. In fact, she couldn't have reversed Doctorow's thesis more perfectly. Iannonne apparently misses Doctorow's use of his narrator's voice as a *critique*, not only of Cold War politics, but also of the very political martyrdom of which Iannone accuses him. In Doctorow's novel, the Isaacsons, and by extension, what Iannone refers to as the "Jewish" Left in general, have chosen to identify with the dispossessed, but not solely as a form of virtuous self-sacrifice. Instead, the Isaacsons' self- positioning is also is an expression of their core values as Jews and as Socialists. In this sense their marginal status and their "suffering" is both the impetus for and the

inevitable result of such a choice. As a result their eschewal of power and embrace of the dispossessed are simultaneously self-destructive and a form of agency. What the novel establishes is not the virtue of their sacrifice so much as its inevitability. Because the Isaacsons (and hence the left) have based their identity on sacrifice, its true fulfillment must inevitably negate them. This is not to say that in Doctorow's novel the Isaascons bear no responsibility for their fate. However, by emphasizing their (and Doctorow's) "relish" of victimhood, Iannone neutralizes Doctorow's indictment of a political system in which the defense of the weak confers weakness:

> Nothing had gone right. No cause had rallied. The world had not flamed to revolution. The issue of the commutation of the sentence, their chance for life, had turned on the quality, the gentility, and the manners, of the people fighting for them. The cause seemed to have been discredited as a political maneuver. As if there was some grand fusion of associative guilt – the Isaacsons confirmed in guilt because of who campaigned for their freedom, and their supporters discredited because they campaigned for the Isaacsons. (296)

Contrary to Iannone's assertions, the novel is profoundly ambivalent in its treatment of the Isaacsons. As I have demonstrated, Daniel repeatedly casts aspersions on the "purity" of his family's marginal status, which he both admires as heroic and reviles as self-destructive. Much of his bitterness lies in the inevitable coexistence of these two emotions: Like his parents, Daniel is forced to make an impossible choice between his personal (Jewish/ Socialist) and national (American) identities. Unlike his parents, Daniel chooses to be "American" and rejects the personal sacrifice that forms an

essential part of his family identity. When he and his sister are adopted he is briefly relieved of the burden of his former identity. While he feels guilty, he is also liberated: "Embarrassingly, Daniel and Susan adjusted to the rise in their fortunes…It was a life in the middle class and it was unbelievably good…There was an absence of ideology and relentless moral sentiment. They had a new name, which was like being high." (62)

The tragedy of the novel is that, in the context of Cold War democracy (and in Iannone's framework) Daniel's identities are mutually exclusive. Try as he might, his middle- class "American" identity cannot be willed. His family identity, however configured, cannot be shed:

> …And so Susan and Daniel slipped into the indolent rituals of the teenage middle class. In order for them to do this there had to be dialectic of breaking free: you asked yourself why live in faith or memorial to the people who had betrayed you…But it was all a counterrevolutionary illusion. It seemed so easy to break free because it was what the world wanted of you. The world wanted you to forget who you had been and what had happened to you…If, in their proud, snotty, tormented adolescence, he and his sister tacitly came to the conclusion that Paul and Rochelle Isaacson were not worth their loyalty, there was, however, nothing they could do to squander it…Whatever they did, whatever view they took, it was merely historical process operating. And even faithlessness in their hearts…could not dissolve that (63).

As Iannone's indictment of Doctorow makes clear, there are less neutral forces than history and family loyalty dictating Daniel and Susan's freedom. In Iannone's view, "The 'Jewish influence' in [Doctorow's] work has little to do with any desire to embody specifically Jewish ideas in art and everything to do with a desire to secure religious credit for pre-conceived religious commitments, as when Christians quote Jesus to further Marx" (53-4). The quotation marks Iannone places around the phrase "Jewish influence" suggest that it is somehow false, hence her characterization of its presence as a hypocritical bid for some kind of piety. Iannone's comparison of "Jewish ideas" to quoting Jesus is inexact, given Doctorow's secular self-positioning, but her interest in limiting the parameters of Judaism to theology is clear.

The critic Leslie Fiedler objected to the Rosenbergs' identification with their Judaism on remarkably similar grounds. In his essay *Afterthoughts on the Rosenbergs* (1953), Fielder accuses the Rosenbergs of a similarly false piety, and rather sanctimoniously, of being fair-weather Jews:

> When he [Julius] and his wife carefully observe the coming of each Jewish holiday, and sentimentalize over their double heritage as Jews and Americans, they are not deliberately falsifying, though they neither know nor care what Judaism actually is about; they will use as much of it as they need, defining it as they go (42).

Fiedler's controversial essay was reprinted in two anthologies of his work.[13] The second of these, *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler*, was published by Stein and Day the same year as *The Book of Daniel.*[14] Doctorow was clearly familiar with the essay,

and not surprisingly takes it on in his novel. Thinly veiled as "a Jewish literary critic… who wrote about Paul and Rochelle," Daniel paraphrases Fiedler's comments in the essay quite accurately: "[He] said that they were so crass and hypocritical that they even called on their Jewish faith to sustain sympathy for themselves in their last months." (119)

Fiedler's concern with the fact that the Rosenbergs "neither know nor care what Judaism is really about" seems overdetermined, given his own secular orientation to Judaism. Like Iannone, Fiedler seems to revile the protean nature of the Rosenbergs' identity. This suggests that neither Iannone's exaggerated neither concern with "the Jewish role in history" nor Fiedler's personal concern with the nature of the Rosenbergs' Jewish identity are what they seem. While both critics claim to be affronted by their subjects' configuration of Jewish identity, their true concern would seem to be its ramifications for American identity. In Fiedler's framework, the Rosenberg's Judaism is demonstrably "false" because by "using as much of it as they need" and "defining it as

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[13] The essay was originally published in *Encounter*, which Sam Tannenhaus' Slate obituary for Fiedler calls a "CIA-funded magazine conceived as a highbrow weapon in the war for the 'hearts and minds' of the European intelligentsia. See "Fear and Loathing" http://www.politics.slate.msn.com 2/4/2003.

[14] See *An End to Innocence*(1955), and *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler* (1971).

they go," it is chosen, which is to say, can be embraced or rejected at will. For Fiedler, the same logic that requires the Rosenbergs' religious beliefs to be "natural" balks at the notion that their national identity is not. Thus, the very trait that makes them bad Jews makes them dangerous Americans, for unlike their Jewishness; the Rosenberg's particular "kind of treason" is innate not chosen. This recasts the Rosenberg's crime as inevitable, not because they chose *incorrectly* between the "rival allegiances" of the Soviet Union and the United States, but because "[t]hey did not know such a choice existed." In Fiedler's formulation, then, they are not disloyal to the United States per se, but incapable of any loyalty at all. The Rosenberg's "double heritage" implies to Fiedler a confusion of loyalties that makes them worse than "poseur[s] and…hypocrite[s]…but something much more devious" (42).

As "proof" of this "deviousness," Fiedler quotes from one of the widely circulated *Death House Letters* from Julius to Ethel. In one sentence, Julius Rosenberg draws a parallel between the Jews and the American founding fathers. Correctly reading Julius' analogy as a broadening of the parameters of "American" identity, Fiedler carries the comparison to its opposite "logical" conclusion, which establishes unacceptable common ground between the United States and the Soviet Union: "…[I]n another place he [Julius] remarks that 'the culture of my people, its fight to rid itself from slavery in Egypt' is astonishingly like 'the great traditions in the history of America' ---and, one understands though it is left unsaid, like those of the Communist Party" (42).

Fiedler's comments , like Iannone's, reflect Cold-War anxieties about the basis of national identity. Because American identity, by its very nature, is adopted and not "inherited." (i.e. not based in ethnic homogeneity) it must inhere in a form of the same

"deep horizontal comradeship" as that of the Soviets. As a result, the stakes of defining American identity in opposition to the Soviet Union are high. This suggests that Iannone's exaggerated concern with "the Jewish role in history" and Fiedler's personal concern with the nature of the Rosenbergs' Jewish identity are not what they seem. What offends, or really threatens Fiedler most, then, is the Rosenbergs' notion of the solidarity of the oppressed, in this case, between the Jews and the founding Americans. It is this pan-national common cause that Fiedler "understands" as "Communist". And in a literal sense, he is correct. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm points out, "Marxists as such, are not nationalists… since nationalism by definition subordinates all other interests to those of its specific nation."[15]

Irving Howe shares certain elements of Doctorow's "radical Jewish" perspective. Although Doctorow's ideological agnosticism would seem to place the two at odds, Howe's moral orientation, like Doctorow's, is toward an innate sense of fairness: championing the cause of the weak, and despite his protests to the contrary, protecting their personal hopes and fears from political accountability. Howe's comments on Fiedler's essay are not focused on the Rosenberg's accountability for their crimes, but instead, on society's moral and constitutional responsibility for mercy. In referring to Fiedler's attack as "heartless", Howe implies not only cruelty, but also moral cowardice. Against the Rosenbergs, Howe claims, Fiedler easily "…scored points: who against the Rosenbergs could not…[W]hat counted much more was that innocent or guilty they were

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[15] Eric Hobsbawm, "Some Reflections on 'The Break-Up of Britain'" *The New Left Review* 105 (Sep-Oct 1977): 9.

waiting to be killed. Was it not heartless to write in this spirit…? That the Rosenbergs were innocent I very much doubted; that they were helpless, anyone could see." [16]

If there is a figure in the novel that embodies Doctorow's (and perhaps Howe's) vision of American democracy, it is the Isaacson's lawyer, Jacob Ascher. A man who "could wear a homburg and a tallis at the same time," (117) Ascher is both an observant Jew and a "pillar of the Bronx Bar." For him there is no conflict between Jewish and American identities. This is why, as Daniel comments

> This writer [Fiedler] could not have understood Ascher. Or the large arms of ethical sanctity he could wrap around an atheistic Communist when in the person of a misfit Jew as ignorant as my father of the real practical world of men and power. Ascher understood how someone could forswear his Jewish heritage and take for his own the perfectionist dream of heaven on earth, and in spite of that, or because of it, still consider himself a Jew. (119)

Ascher espouses no specific political ideology; he is neither a radical nor particularly liberal. In fact, Daniel writes, "Ascher was not a political man...." Instead, he is, like Doctorow, guided by an internal code of ethics: "…[Y]ou could imagine him voting for anyone he found morally recognizable, no matter what the party. If anything he was a conservative" (119). Also like Doctorow, Ascher sees the Constitution as a secular code of ethics: "He perceived the law as a codification of the religious sense of life. He

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[16] Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Biography*. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982) 216; quoted in Walkowitz,146.

was said to have worked for years on a still unfinished book demonstrating the contributions of the Old Testament to American law." (119) Although Ascher is a religious man, his values are shared by his secular counterparts. Like Edgar's grandfather, Ascher reviles bigotry, superstition, and parochialism. In Ascher's case, however, these are associated with a *lack* of religious belief: "For Ascher, witchunting was paganism. Irrationality was a sin…For Ascher; my parents' communism was easily condoned because it was pathetic and gutsy at the same time…" (119).

In Doctorow's framework Ascher inhabits precisely what Fiedler "could not have understood" and Iannone rejects: An American identity that does not preclude all others. Iannone and Fiedler's rejection of the co-existence of secular Jewish, Socialist, and American identities perpetuates a narrow and exclusionary Cold War American nationalism. While both critics invert the nature of the relationship between left-wing Jews and American culture, Iannone specifically misunderstands Doctorow's depiction of the relationship between secular Judaism and the left as exclusionary, and hence, a rejection of a civic nationalism. Contrary to her argument, Doctorow does not claim that the Jews have either a privileged or exclusive relationship to the Left, but merely a very *specific* relationship. Doctorow's depiction of the meaning of communism to the Jews is based on a historical context that Iannone does not take into account. Communism offered to secular Jews a creative solution to the long-entrenched problem of Jewish national identity. For European Jews, the Communist ideal and the American ideal were oddly similar in that they both offered the dream of a civic nationality (a "deep horizontal

comradeship") that did not exclude them on the basis of their Judaism.[17] In Doctorow's ideal of civic nationalism, neither the enduring attraction of American Jews to socialism and communism, nor their maintenance of both identities need be antithetical to American identity (as Iannone implies) or inassimilable into American values.

As the novel makes clear, Cold War America was inhospitable to what it saw as mutually exclusive loyalties. For an already vulnerable group, the fear of guilt by association was assumed. According to Daniel,

> [n]obody wanted to come near us. In this Jewish neighborhood, Paul Isaacson was bad for the Jews. Had not McCarthy made a speech describing the great battle between international atheistic communism and Christianity? There was no question in anyone's mind where the Jews belonged, according to Joe McCarthy. (120)

Doctorow's depiction of the Isaacson trial underscores its role as an opportunity for the Jewish prosecutors to demonstrate their loyalty to the nation. While Doctorow makes it clear that the key figures in the trial (the judge, prosecution and defense attorneys, the critics) were Jews, the reason for their drive to make their individual (and Jewish) relationships to the trial explicit goes without saying. In addition to its negative depiction of Fiedler, the novel invokes several other historical figures that he suggests, as Jews, had a vested interest in condemning the Isaacsons/Rosenbergs. But along with "anti-communist expert Boris Brill" and B'nai Brith president Tom Flemming ("known

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[17] See Howard M. Sachar, *The Course of Modern Jewish History*, Chapter 14, 352.

as Talking Tom because he testified for the government at no less than four different spy trials" [228]), Doctorow includes Daniel's meeting with Jack Fein, a reporter "who did the reassessment piece in the *Times* on the tenth anniversary of the execution" (211). Fein is fictional, which suggests that he was invented to provide Doctorow with a mouthpiece for a very specific view (possibly his own) of the trial. During Daniel's meeting with Fein, the reporter suggests that the unusually aggressive prosecution of the Rosenbergs by fellow Jews was motivated by the desire for upward mobility: "Red Feuerman walks up behind me, the chief prosecuting attorney. He's now Judge Feuerman…it was a career-making case, baby, everybody did well." (211) [18]

While Doctorow presents the Isaacsons' downfall as useful to variety of personal and national interests, he does not, as Iannone argues, depict them as wholly innocent victims. Nor is the novel concerned, as Harter and Thompson argue that it should be, with their guilt or innocence. Rather than merely recapitulating what by 1971 was already the widely accepted left-wing interpretation of the trial, the novel includes this reading in the broader context of its critique of epistemology. Excluding the final moments of the novel, which seem to jolt the reader back to "real" time, the frame narrative of Daniel's dissertation casts the first pages of his narrative as the most recent.

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[18] In *The Myth of Moral Justice* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), legal scholar Thane Rosenbaum cites this scene in *Daniel*. While he doesn't explicitly support Doctorow's interpretation, he does note that " [i]n the actual Rosenberg case...Judge William Kauffman eventually became the chief judge of the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit," and concludes that " Whether [Kauffman's] sentencing decision was motivated by legal principle or cynical, self- serving politics, he wound up profiting personally from [their execution] although he claimed that the case had the opposite effect, prejudicing him professionally" (174).

In this context, his meeting with Fein (and later Artie Sternlicht) is read in retrospect as instrumental in his progress toward the disillusionment he feels by the beginning of the novel.

Daniel's meeting with Fein introduces Daniel to the elusive nature of "truth." While Fein casts doubt on the motivations of the prosecutors, he is equally skeptical about those of the Isaaccsons and their affiliates. After Daniel alludes to his " responsibilities" to "settle" "certain family things" (presumably the clearing of his parents' name) Fein wryly dismisses the last vestiges of his idealism, calling him a "beautiful baby" and casually assuring him that "of course it can't be done"(213). Ultimately, Fein rejects the claims of all the parties concerned as motivated by some form of self-interest. "Between the FBI and the CP your parents never had a chance," he tells Daniel (212), adding,

> Your folks were framed, but that doesn't mean they were innocent babes. I don't believe they were a dangerous conspiracy to pass important defense secrets, but I don't believe either that the U.S. attorney, and the judge, and the Justice Department, and the President of the United States conspired against *them*…Those guys had to bring in a conviction. That was their job. But no one would have put the finger on your parents unless they thought they were up to something…[but] maybe what they were doing was worth five years. Maybe. But that would have been in the best of times, and in the best of times nobody would have cared…enough to falsify

> evidence. No one would have been afraid enough to throw a switch. (213-4)

In addition to dashing Daniel's hopes of exonerating his parents, Fein discredits the notion of innocence itself. When Daniel counters with his campaign for a mistrial (claiming that his parents' guilt or innocence "is not the purpose"), Fein carries his argument to its logical extreme, pushing Daniel to accept history as choice of available versions: "Listen kid. A radical is no better than his analysis. You know that." (213)

From the retrospective vantage point of his narrative, Daniel does "know" that. And it is precisely this indeterminacy that leads Daniel to introduce introduces himself to the reader as he "searches, too late, for a thesis" (7) in the Columbia library. As a historical analysis, Daniel's dissertation represents his attempt to impose order, and hence meaning, on his family's past. What he discovers, however, is that facts only illuminate a particular version of the truth. Over the course of the novel, then, Daniel abandons his search for a single "accurate" version of events in favor of a more nuanced history. While recounting the events of the Isaacson trial, a third-person narrator (possibly Daniel) proposes the idea of "the novel as a series of analyses" (281). Thus, Daniel's analysis, like the novel's three conclusions, is merely one of a series. Alone, it cannot, nor is it intended to, "exonerate his parent's" or "provide a clear perspective for judging American society" (47). If judged in the context of others, however, it can present its own compelling version of events that speaks for itself.

Like Fein, (and the postmodern critics who will follow) Daniel ultimately rejects both "truth" and its vehicles. In his dissertation Daniel attributes both the defeat of his parents' lawyer and his sister's suicide to "a failure of analysis" (301). Much of the

reader's understanding of the novel depends on the way this pun is interpreted. Daniel's characterization of Susan's psychiatrist, Dr. Duberstein, as weak and ineffectual establishes its most literal meaning, that therapy did not alleviate her suffering. However, in the context of Daniel's critique of Artie Sternlicht's (and his parents') brand of radicalism, the phrase seems to discredit the twin poles of Freudian (psychological) and Marxist (historical) analysis as models for understanding the world.

But while Doctorow's novel may seem to cast doubt on empirical models, a careful reading reveals that the most disastrous "failures of analysis" in the novel arise from the abdication of rationality. As ideological models, the novel presents both Psychoanalysis and Marxism as "alternative faiths" rather than rational frameworks for evaluation. In this context, the failure of analysis is suggested to be Susan's. Susan, unlike Daniel, whose defensive cynicism protects him, is destroyed by the betrayal of her blind faith in the Left. (Daniel, mocking Marxist rhetoric, calls her a "dupe of the international moralist propagandist apparatus" [10]) Similarly, Ascher's and (ironically) the Isaacsons' downfall inheres in their "failure to make [the] connections" (226-7) that would have cast doubt on their faith in the protective power of the Constitution. As Daniel remarks, "I am prepared to accept the idea that to the extent that Ascher bought the premises of the cold war he made mistakes" (227).

Doctorow's comments in a 1978 interview suggest that Daniel's disillusionment bears some relationship to his own. Claiming "… the clear, definitive ideologies have all discredited themselves by their adherents," Doctorow reiterates Daniel Bell's thesis almost exactly: "Surely the sense we have to have now of twentieth-century political alternatives is a kind of exhaustion of them all…Certainly everything…has been totally

discredited: capitalism, communism, socialism. None of it seems to work" (EC65). The only alternative, in Doctorow's opinion, to what Bell called "the exhaustion of political ideas," is "the philosophical position of anarchism" which "stands out clean and shining because it has never really been tested in any serious way" and "which at this point seems to be so totally utopian in character as not to be seriously attainable" (*EC* 65).

Doctorow's comments offer a gloss on his ambivalent depiction of Artie Sternlicht. Representing "the philosophical position of anarchism," Sternlicht has no intention of working within the bounds of traditional models of social activism. Instead, he is bent on destroying political and social structure as a whole. Given Daniel's personal ideological disaffection (and Doctorow's argument), Sternlicht's revolutionary stance is not without appeal. His attempt to replace the civilized resistance strategies of the Old Left with the confrontation politics of the New initially promises Daniel a self-constructive rather than -destructive form of political agency. Ultimately, however, the novel depicts Sternlicht as a media-savvy reactionary rather than a political visionary. Sternlicht's response to the failure of the Old Left to put its theory into practice is an equally ineffectual "plan" that is revealed to be empty rhetoric. In his apartment in Alphabet City, Daniel watches as Sternlicht grandstands for a *Cosmopolitan* reporter:

> OK. I went to this coalition meeting to plan for the Convention next year? And these are good kids, New Left kids who knew the score. And you should hear them spin out this shit: Participatory democracy, Co-optation. Restructure…Man, those aren't words. Those are substitutes for being alive. I got up and I said 'What the fuck are you all talking about..? I mean you don't need the

> establishment to co-opt you, man. You are co-opting yourself. And I break this fucking chair to splinters…And I hold up the pieces. 'Let's fuck. Let's fight. Let's blow up the Pentagon! A revolutionary is someone who makes the revolution'…Well, I started a riot! *It was a gas*...You've got to put down anything that's less than revolution. You put down theorizing about it…All that is less than *being* it… A revolution happens …It's a new animal. A new consciousness! It's me! I am revolution! (137)

Doctorow, in sharp opposition to his hyper-articulate narrator, underscores Sternlicht's anti-intellectualism ("put down theorizing about it…All that is less than being it"), and his lack of interest in substantive political change. In place of a new world order, Sternlicht's revolution proposes a new "consciousness" with which to relate to it. Most tellingly, in equally sharp opposition to the Isaacsons self-abnegation, Doctorow emphasizes Sternlicht's narcissistic relationship to the movement ("It's me! I am revolution!") that confers on him a powerful and glamorous selfhood.

Sternlicht's "rap" in *Daniel* bears a remarkable similarity to the rhetoric of Abbie Hoffman's *Revolution For the Hell of It* (1968) and *Steal this Book* (1971). Not surprisingly, like Charles Reich's *The Greening of America*, which Sternlicht explicitly refers to, their publication dates place them squarely in Doctorow's orbit during the writing of Daniel. In fact, *Revolution* was published by Dial Press during Doctorow's

tenure as editor-in-chief.[19] Sternlicht shares a number of characteristics with the actual Hoffman, including his apartment in Alphabet City and a girlfriend referred to only as "Baby." A look at the text of Revolution reveals that Doctorow has reproduced Hoffman's rhetorical style quite faithfully. Like Sternlicht's, Hoffman's political analysis veers between incisive and inane. Like Sternlicht, he describes a conflict with a political coalition, and his similarly anarchic response:

> I am ready for the struggle. As far as the Revolution goes, it started when I was born. Broke with the Mobilization coalition for Washington…At one meeting I declared, "The truth lies through insanity." They are scared shitless of the mystery. They suppressed an article…because of the word "suck". My Lord, what fucking prudes. Our suck magic is much too strong medicine for the middle class peace movement…Many wild happenings are planned in preparation: we will dye the Potomac red, burn the cherry trees, panhandle embassies…girls will run naked…sorcerers, swamis…witches…warlocks…and speed freaks will hurl their magic at the faded brown walls…We will dance and sing and chant the mighty OM. We will fuck on the grass and …raise the flag of nothingness over the Pentagon… (39-40)

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[19] Doctorow was Editor-in Chief of Dial Press from 1964-1969, and its Vice President from 1968-1969. See Harter and Thompson, xi.

Hoffman's political analysis doesn't hold up well, particularly four decades after the fact. On the other hand, its true appeal was probably never intellectual. The real power of Hoffman's rhetoric lay in its liberation of the individual. His prose, which reads like beat poetry, is exciting and personal. More than exhorting his readers to organized political activism, it frees them to throw off social strictures to pursue authentic experience. Much of this experience, Doctorow implies, is sexual. Hoffman repeatedly links political liberation with (hetero-) sexual liberation. But Hoffman's sexual politics were apparently more limited than his confrontation politics; *Revolution* is peppered with anxious references to masculinity, frequently his own:

> Last night at Hudson Institute think tank…We know we're right. One of the members confesses to me, "We're glad you brought your girl friends. They are a lot prettier than ours" Of course they are, they are beautiful women, and we are beautiful men. You guys are fags, machines." (38)

In addition to associating social conformity ("machines") with a lack of masculinity (as his use of the word "fag" apparently connotes here), Hoffman also uses the term "fag" to denigrate the anti-war movement. Only a page later he declares that, "The Pentagon shall not survive, neither for that matter, will the fag-ridden peace movement" (39). Doctorow's satire is accomplished once again by reproducing Hoffman's language almost exactly in Sternlicht's. After whistling at the "girl interviewer," a "honey-haired blond…in false eyelashes and a jumpsuit," Sternlicht describes his rebellion from "[c]orporate liberalism…and *the fag peace movement* [italics mine]"(137).

While Doctorow's depiction of Sternlicht sends up Hoffman's gender politics and his male vanity, Daniel's scorn for Sternlicht (and hence, the New Left) is complicated by envy. In Doctorow's depiction, Sternlicht's narcissistic self-assurance stokes Daniel's sexual insecurities and plays on his longing for meaning. Daniel's imagination of his wife's attraction to Sternlicht reveals the sense of guilt and inadequacy that counterbalance his sense of superiority: "I am thinking if my wife Phyllis had met him she would have gone with him and made the right choice…I am glad my wife never met Sternlicht. He is probably a champion fucker. He does not put a woman in bondage." (152)

Daniel views Sternlicht's political faith with similar longing. Sternlicht's sense of purpose, free of Daniel's political disaffection and existential angst, suddenly strikes Daniel as "amazing grace…there is still in this evening someone who knows what he says or does is important. With importance his life or self concerned, and the surroundings are suddenly not obscure…" (139) This perception is confirmed as unironic by a sudden shift in narrative voice that describes Daniel's perceptions in the second person: "The bar across the street is crowded and Daniel can see through its window the old polished wood…He suddenly sees the Lower East Side with Sternlicht's vision: It is a hatchery, a fish and wildlife preserve. It seems created for him. 'With the poor people of this earth I want to share my fate [author's italics].'"(139)

The rapid shift in point-of-view (between the first and second person) suggests a moment of unity between Daniel's observing and participating selves, and (like his interview with Fein) throws the depth of his cynicism into question. As a result, the passage provides a glimpse of Daniel's yearning for the solidarity and connectedness

promised by the political ideology in which he has lost faith. Sternlicht's dictum that "everything that came before is all the same" is similarly ambivalent. Although Sternlicht identifies the problem, he is part of it. Thus, it reads as both truth and irony. After insensitively rendering the Isaacson's death as meaningless ("They blew the whole goddam thing…the revolution has more martyrs than it needs."[151-2]) Sternlicht teaches Daniel the same lesson as Fein, that pragmatism trumps idealism every time. Instead of self-sacrifice Sternlicht advocates expedience, freely admitting that "if [Susan] had all that bread to pass on for a bail fund…or any good shit like that…I would gladly change every opinion I have about the Isaacsons and I would gladly become a beneficiary of her Foundation. Fuck me if I'm ever consistent" (153). Here Daniel understands his sister's suicide: "First everyone else and now the Left. The Isaacsons are nothing to the New Left. And if they can't make it with them who else is there?" (153) After denying the legacy of Daniel's family, Sternlicht and his girlfriend sing him a song, charging him with the impossible responsibility to choose a side: "They Broke themselves up. And I went home reacquainted with the merciless radical temperament." (154)

Daniel's reacquaintance through Sternlicht, with "the merciless radical temperament" establishes his alienation from both generations of the Left. But the march on the Pentagon crystallizes his alienation from American culture as a whole. Although his long hair and political disaffection suggest commonality with the war protesters, they represent here another cultural consensus from which he is barred:

> I feel the concussion of crowd assent. I come under the awful conviction of everyone's greater right to be here. I feel out of it. It seems to me that practically everyone here…has taken possession of

> the event in a way that is beyond me. I feel as if I have sneaked in, haven't paid, or simply don't know something that everyone else knows. That it is still possible to do this, perhaps. Or that it is enough. (254)

Daniel's existential loneliness is painful, but tempered by his ambivalence. His description of the demonstrator's solidarity as "a concussion of crowd assent" suggests not simply unity, but also a kind of forced mindlessness. In eliciting the crowd's unconditional "assent," the march draws upon a faith that Daniel cannot share. What he "doesn't know," and what lies at the root of his guilt is what he doesn't *believe* in: the possibility of a true American democracy, in this case configured as the right to dissent. For Daniel, this is no longer possible.

Daniel's alienation at the March suggests the conflict between his personal and national identity to be politically irresolvable. While Daniel's identity crisis is central to Doctorow's critique of Cold War America, it creates a similarly irresolvable contradiction between the form and content of the novel. *The Book of Daniel* is, above all, a political novel, and not a political tract. As a novel it demands, by definition, the very resolution it must not provide if it is to be faithful to its content. This contradiction is most evident in the novel's flawed final moment, in which Daniel is forced from the library (the repository of the past) by a student protest, and resolves to "…walk out to the sundial and see what's going down" (302).

From the point of view of a number of critics, this moment suggests that Daniel has resolved his inner conflicts, and is prepared to enter into contemporary politics. Here, the critic Sam Girgus sees Daniel as "ultimately rescued and saved" (176). Girgus

claims this reading is given credence by the fact that Daniel's exit from the library directly follows his hiring of Jewish mourners at Susan's funeral. According to Girgus, Daniel turns to his Judaism to provide what politics cannot. But such a reading flies in the face of Doctorow's (and Daniel's) vision of American identity, and even Girgus' own reading of the final moment. At the end of the novel, he claims, "Daniel is free…because of his ability to complete his book he achieves a form of liberation" (177). But Daniel does not (and cannot) "complete" his book. It is really Doctorow who is liberated by the close of the narrative, unless the reader is willing to accept Daniel's reconciliation with his Judaism and the New Left as a satisfying resolution of all of the issues raised by Doctorow's text. And in a narrative sense, it is. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to accept as Doctorow's a reading in which an uncomplicated embrace of Judaism is possible, let alone the solution to the complex problem of American national identity.

A closer look at the text suggests that it is neither Judaism nor New Left politics that "free" Daniel from his existential dilemma, but rather his creative integration of the disparate parts of his identity. This notion of integration is played out at the level of text in the novel's three endings, "The House," "The Funeral," and "The Library." As Harter and Thompson point out, these three endings are not only compatible, they are one" (46). This is not to say that the novel proposes to "solve" either the personal or political dilemmas it presents. On the contrary, Doctorow claims he wrote the novel as an exploration of the issues "without knowing what conclusions I was going to come to" (Trenner, 61). According to Harter and Thompson, the conclusion of the novel is so open-ended as to render its "significance and resolution…almost entirely perceptual"

(47). But this is only fitting, given the extremely subjective nature of the issues it queries. The triptych ending preserves the novel's integrity precisely by recapitulating these dilemmas, and refusing easy solutions.

"The Library" is the "final" ending. Contrary to Girgus' argument, the student radical's entrance into the library interrupts Daniel's (and hence the novel's) conclusion: "I had hoped to discuss some of the questions posed by this narrative. However, just a moment ago, while I was sitting here writing this last page, someone came through announcing … 'Time to leave man, they're closing the school down …We're doin' it, we're bringing the whole motherfucking university to its knees!'" (303) At the level of plot, forcing Daniel from the library is a useful and even clever move on Doctorow's part because it solves the problem of bringing an open-ended narrative to a close, while avoiding a didactic recitation of its themes. But while Girgus sees Daniel's exit from the library as a symbol of his freedom, the tone of Daniel's comments (coupled with the novel's satire of revolutionary rhetoric) casts his reaction to the student's exhortation to "close the book, man…*don't you know you're liberated*?" as ironic. Daniel responds, "I have to smile. It has not been unexpected. I will walk down to the sundial and see what's going down" (302).

Daniel's amusement is double-edged. While his personal experience renders the students' enthusiasm ironic, he also realizes that he has fallen into the trap of his own hermetically sealed argument. Daniel's critique of radical thought sees the radical as someone who ultimately will fail because his own analysis "discovers connections between available data and root responsibility" and in doing so "[f]inally… connects everything." When "[n]othing is left outside the connections…it has achieved the

counterinsurgent rationale that allows it to destroy him" (140). In the final moments of Doctorow's novel, Daniel reveals his own failure of analysis: In making the connection between radical thought and its inevitable doom, he too has left nothing outside the connections: "I have searched and searched for one story from history that is invulnerable to radical interpretation."(141) As Daniel himself points out about the radical, "it is not that he has incorrectly connected everything, but that he has shut down the possibilities for politics as an avenue of change." (141).

From this point of view, Daniel's exit from the library to "see what's going down" suggests neither the thesis that he searches for at the outset of the novel (or that Girgus advances), nor the antithesis that informs much of the novel, but rather a form of synthesis. Contrary to Girgus's reading, in which Daniel's smile suggests an unreserved embrace of New Left politics (he smiles, and *therefore* goes down to the demonstration), Daniel's analysis of radicalism suggests the same passage should be read as qualified (that he will go to *despite* his skepticism). In this context, Daniel's exit from the library reads as *negotiation* of the present borne of his forcible ejection from the past, represented here by the library and his history dissertation.

Daniel's journey toward integration begins with the settling of unfinished business. Until his meeting with Selig Mindish, who denounced his parents, Daniel has been essentially frozen in his past. But Mindish's affectionate kiss on the forehead is not the expected kiss of the betrayer, but that of a senile man for whom the past has no meaning. In this moment Daniel realizes that the past is closed to him, both literally and figuratively. It is this realization that informs the first ending, "the House," in which Daniel returns to his childhood home.

Daniel's neighborhood at first suggests an endless cycle in which the people change and the problems remain. The neighborhood is still poor, "[t]he old apartment houses…stand in their own soot like a ruined city filling with dirt. But people still live here… [and] [t]he garbagemen are on strike" (299). Harter and Thompson claim, "throughout his work, Doctorow employs the theme and images of historical repetition, suggesting, at the cosmic level as well as the human, a hopeless round" (47). But Doctorow's vision, however uncompromising, is never hopeless. If the problems remain, so does the potential of human agency. Daniel's use of the qualifier in "*But* people live here," suggests not merely the ongoing cycle of poverty, but also the residents' defiance of their difficult circumstances. In turn, while the garbagemen's strike may point to the entrenchment of bad conditions, their protest also represents a means for change. Finally, when Daniel is inadvertently shut out of his childhood home by its current residents, a black family, his displacement does not reflect the family's stagnation so much Daniel's progress. While tempted to reclaim his past, Daniel decides instead to cede it to the present. He writes, "I would like turn and ask the woman if I can come in the house and look around. But the children…go inside and their mother shuts the door. I will do nothing. It's their house now" (299).

The second ending, "The Funeral," superimposes the two funerals of Daniel's parents and sister. At first, his mourning for his parents is powerful but oblique, because it is intellectualized. Daniel remembers his parents' funeral as purely ceremonial, an occasion based on social and religious ritual: The cortege "stretched for miles" and includes "buses cars and even city taxis." Police direct traffic and limit the influx of people. "It was a long stifling day, but not without its social aspects" (299). Beside the

graves, "an enormous crowd presses," and "the prayers are incanted." (299-300). Daniel's ruminations circulate around the violation of purity and innocence as he imagines the spring-like weather as "blood seeping into milk" (300), and his parents as the first crocuses of spring. Like his parents, who were doomed by their failure to understand the cultural weather, the crocus is "the first flower, dead flower, flower of revolutionaries…It is the kind of day the crocuses get fucked, exposing their petaled insides of delicate hue…to the spring. And it is too soon. It is a miscalculation" (300).

At Susan's funeral, Daniel hires mourners to say Kaddish for her and their parents. As the mourners begin the commemorative prayer for his family, Daniel "holds [his] wife's hand," and finally confronts the emotional impact of his loss: "I think I am going to be able to cry." (302) Girgus correctly reads the funeral as "an act of integration of his Jewish and American selves," (177) but his assertion that "the moment reveals Daniel's sense of himself as a Jew, as well as his ability to use Judaism to confront his experience" (177) is too sentimental, or perhaps too theological. In this context, Daniel's description of himself standing hand in hand with his wife, finally "able to cry," rings oddly false. Daniel does receive comfort from the hiring of the mourners and the repetition of the Kaddish, but perhaps not in the context Girgus intended. Before her death, Daniel's mother refuses a rabbi, calling out, "Let my son be bar mitzvahed today. Let our death be his bar mitzvah" (298). Here Rochelle isn't simply rejecting Judaism, but pointedly substituting state law for religious**,** as the state has already done in taking her life**.** In hiring the mourners, Daniel both recapitulates and rejects his mother's "curse," and restores the relationship of church and state to its proper balance. Like Rochelle, he dismisses "the company rabbi" (301) hiring instead "little old Jewish men,

the kind who come along for a fee to say the prayers the younger Jews don't know" (301). Tellingly, neither the depiction of the mourners nor their prayer is particularly devout. They are "bums, misfits…some of them are drunkards…[H]alf a dozen stand there, ignoring each other and racing through prayers…in their singsong rituals, rocking back and forth on their heels with their eyes closed, chanting and simpering their nasal prayers. It's a bonanza" (301-2).

While Harter and Thompson underscore repetition as a source of despair in Doctorow's work, repetition is, in this context, specifically meaningful. For Daniel, it is neither the mourners nor the prayers themselves that gives meaning to his parents' death or provides "hope for the future" (Girgus 177). Instead, the "bonanza" of Kaddish repetition is a ritual, the repetition of which ensures not simply the survival of Jewish culture in America, but *within* American culture, which is to say the coexistence of Jewish, secular, left wing, and American identities.

In this context, Daniel's tears of reconciliation suggest Doctorow's vision of a multi-faceted but integrated American identity large enough to encompass, but not limited to the parameters of Girgus's. Any hope for the future presented by the novel is contained in this vision. As Daniel "closes the book" and exits the library, his future is uncertain. It still seems unlikely that joining the student movement will truly address the political issues raised in the novel, but Daniel's decision to "see what's going down" now suggests a new openness to possibility. While not prescriptive, the final moments of the novel achieve a kind of hard-won stasis.

Though presented through Daniel's personal narrative, *The Book of Daniel*'s exploration of political dilemmas is every bit as "uncompromising" as Irving Howe could

have wished. Like its narrator, who is left in a moment of transition, Doctorow's novel represents a kind of midpoint in the trajectory of the American political novel. If the novel depicts existing ideologies as failed vehicles for progress, neither are they yet replaceable. As Daniel walks out of the library, he has left them behind, but has only just begun to envision their alternatives. In this sense *The Book of Daniel* has not fully entered the 1970s. At the time of its publication American troops were still in Vietnam, and the Watergate scandal still in the offing. It may be that, like Daniel, the country was still emerging from the sixties, and the social and political changes that would characterize the decade had yet to assert themselves. In any case, the publication of Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* in 1979 would crystallize a wholly different and wholly American notion of progress that would reveal the accuracy of Daniel Bell's predictions nearly twenty years earlier. In Mailer's post-ideological seventies, this notion is no longer centered in the state or in any collective entity, but rather, in the individual. It does not require individual sacrifice for a common good, but instead focuses on a personal and idiosyncratic pursuit of happiness. For better or for worse, Mailer would locate his critique of this notion in the story of two-time murderer Gary Gilmore.

Chapter Two: "A Novel Approach to the Pursuit of Happiness: *The Executioner's Song*

There is no single American Dream left other than the banal one that you come here, you sink in your roots…you work hard all your life and you're rewarded at the end. This is the American Dream that very few people believe in any longer…My American Dream is that we become what we could be, which is we… develop a more fabulous sense of what the real American possibilities are…
Norman Mailer, 2005 [1]

Prosperity and privatization broke up what poverty and collectivity in the public place had welded together.
E.J. Hobsbawm [2]

In her 1979 review, Joan Didion comments, "*The Executioner's Song* did not suggest, in its inception, the book it became" (78). Didion's comment is apt on a number of levels. Based on the transcripts of Lawrence Schiller's interviews with "thief and murderer" Gary Gilmore, and the many people whose lives were affected by him, Mailer's "true life novel" is ultimately far greater than the sum of its parts. Despite being dismissed by Pearl K. Bell as "slavishly faithful to the banality of the speakers" (66), the resulting "narrative that would seem to yield no further meaning" (Didion 78) became a Pulitzer Prize-winning meditation on the American Dream. In its dystopian vision of the "banal" Dream, "that no one believes in anymore," The *Executioner's Song* is an expressly political and expressly American novel. It is not, however, "political" in any traditional sense. Despite its concern with the death penalty it is neither a liberal critique of capital punishment, nor a progressive bid for social reform. Nor, despite its ambivalent relationship to the notion that "you work hard all your life and [are] rewarded at the end,"

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[1] Academy of Achievement Website, <*http//achievement.org*> , accessed 9/4/05.

[2] *The Age of Extremes*, 307.

is it an explicit critique of capitalism. But through the story of Gary Gilmore, *The Executioner's Song* performs a critique of American culture that, while implicit, is no less trenchant than that of its expressly socialist precursors.

Like *The Book of* Daniel, *Executioner* rejects the left-wing ideologies of earlier political novels in favor of a broad-based critique of the state. But Mailer's "Big Book" of the late seventies (Didion 78), carries the political disaffection of *The Book of Daniel* to its logical extreme. While both novels view the state as innately adversarial to its citizens, *Executioner* accepts this relationship as an inevitable condition of American life. As a result, Mailer's 1979 "documentary novel" lacks the elegiac tone of Doctorow's 1971 "false document." *Executioner* replaces *Daniel's* tragedy of lost ideals with a politics of pure pragmatism that places the onus for survival solely on the individual.

In its concern with individual experience The *Executioner's Song* would seem to be a creature of its time. And in a sense it is, for in the face of the economic crisis that followed so close on the heels of Vietnam and Watergate, Americans had apparently lost faith in politics to solve the issues that confronted them in their daily lives. So much so that a number of contemporary critics argued that America was facing the end of the progressive era. In "America's Poseidon Adventure," William Graebner locates the decade's defining moment in Jimmy Carter's July 1979 address to the nation. In the famous "crisis of confidence" speech Carter identified a "'growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives,'" commenting that Americans were experiencing "eroding

confidence in the future," and more importantly, "in the idea of progress" (158).[3] Irwin Unger makes a similar point in his 1975 introduction to *The Progressive Years*. There he argues that "much of the promise of American life seems to have been unfulfilled," and that "[b]y now, in the 1970s, the picture is so confused that one young American historian has…proposed to chuck out the whole concept of progressivism as a meaningless convention" (v,vii).[4]

The bracketing of the decade by Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (1970) and sociologist Daniel Yankelovich's *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside-Down* (1981) suggests that rather than disappearing, the notion of progress had merely shifted from the field of party politics to the internal landscape of the self. As Daniel Bell predicted, the loss of faith in politics to solve the problem of "how to live" had given rise to a wide variety of personalized "micro-deologies" designed to address the "doubt about…meaning" and the sense of "unfulfilled promise" that permeated American life in the 1970s. Not surprisingly, many of these ideologies were geared toward personal fulfillment. But while *The Executioner's Song* may be a veritable encyclopedia of the social changes wrought by the 1970s, its worldview is unmistakably Mailer's. And in Mailer's universe, all individualisms are not created equal. Reading the novel as a celebration, or even a straightforward reflection of what Tom

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[3] Quoted in William Graebner, "America's Poseidon Adventure: A Nation in Existential Despair," *America in the Seventies,* eds. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004) 157-77.

[4] Unger does not identify the "young American historian" to whom he refers. See William L. O'Neill, *The Progressive Years: America Comes of Age* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1975).

Wolfe called "the Me Decade" misses the powerful critique Mailer locates in the story of Gilmore's life.

Not surprisingly, Mailer's critique and is informed by his obvious (though not wholly uncritical) admiration for Gilmore Both Mailer and Gilmore were creatures of the nineteen fifties. [5] While they each had a reputation for social and sexual iconoclasm, their notions of individualism were rooted in the early postwar years; far from rejecting traditional social roles, Mailer and Gilmore embraced a stringent moral framework and the social conservatism that characterized the 1950s. Despite superficial similarities, then, Gilmore's struggle with the law was fundamentally different from the bid for personal freedom that characterized the 1970s. While many readers saw Gilmore as a counter-culture hero, his anti-authoritarian stance was not(like Abbie Hoffman's for example) specifically anarchic, but rather, arose from his immutable alienation from mainstream culture.

Thus, while the conflict between the individual and society is perhaps the central preoccupation of Mailer's work, his championing of the individual both predates and rejects Bach's paean to self-actualization. In this sense, there is nothing particularly new or necessarily "political" about Mailer's choice of Gilmore as a protagonist. Both Gilmore's crimes and his pursuit of the death penalty cast him as an embodiment of the Hipster, White Negro, and Psychopath that are by now familiar figures in the Mailer

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[5] In "Norman Mailer in His Time" Louis Menand calls him "possibly the last man of the '50s." See *American Studies*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2002) 150.

landscape. And, although Mailer's rendering of Gilmore's life contains a social critique, his Gilmore is anything but a left-wing hero. The Gilmore of *The Executioner's Song* appears both racist and sexist. He has little political consciousness and no sense of social responsibility. While Mailer depicts Gilmore as charming and intelligent, he also presents him as narcissistic, manipulative, cruel and dishonest.

Not surprisingly, given Gilmore's less-than-appealing traits, Mailer's interest in Gilmore has typically been seen as an expression of his interest in Romantic /aesthetic values rather than his social conscience.[6] This has created an odd split in the novel's critical reception between text-based "literary" readings and materialist "social" readings. Mark Edmundson in particular has underscored Gilmore's determination to have his sentence carried out as a quintessentially Romantic impulse, noting that, "Romantic 'self-invention' frequently begins in a sort of potlatch, a ritual in which the subject is compelled to destroy his full accumulation and return to poverty, and to ignorance, that state on which, according to Thoreau, all growth depends" (434).

Edmundson's reading is insightful, but limits the scope of Mailer's novel by reinscribing the very dichotomy between politics and literature that *The Executioner's Song* works so ingeniously to collapse. Like most critics who reviewed the novel, Edmundson sees the Romantic championing of the individual and the Socialist/Marxist

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[6] See Mark Edmundson, "Romantic Self-Creations: Mailer and Gilmore in *The Executioner's Song*," *Contemporary Literature* 31.4 (Winter, 1990): 434-47, and Judith Scheffler, "The Prisoner as Creator in *The Executioner's Song," Norman Mailer*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986) 183.

emphasis on communal action as antithetical. But Mailer's Romantic/existentialist vision and his "social" vision are not necessarily incompatible. Both frameworks oppose the individual and the state and champion human agency in the face of oppressive forces. And, as Mailer himself points out in a 1979 interview, his Romantic sensibilities had always co-existed with his populist sympathies and interest in social issues: "…[T]here's always been a part of me that's a social novelist and [until *Executioner*] I…never found a way to write a large social novel. I always wanted to" (Bragg 259).

Mailer's collaboration with Schiller also added a new dimension to Mailer's "existential" framework that brought its nascent political possibilities to the fore. While Mailer's comments about the origins of the novel suggest that his initial attraction to Gilmore lay in the metaphysical possibilities of his situation, his inclusion of Schiller's transcripts imbues the final product with a more nuanced social critique than we see in Mailer's previous work. Mailer's explanation of his decision to tell Gilmore's story seems at first to validate Edmundson's reading, but the novel itself suggests otherwise. Here Mailer distances himself from the issue of Gilmore's personal qualities, stressing instead his existential courage:

> Apart from anything I might have felt about him personally, I couldn't remember a time when a man insisted upon his own execution and proceeded to carry it out…the impulse of his campaign-and his idea of victory –was his own execution. That goes beyond normal suicide [or] criminality. It goes into some of the deepest questions. (Bragg, 255)

Mailer's inclusion of Gilmore's death-row letters to his girlfriend Nicole Baker, suggests that the novel's "deepest questions" are not entirely metaphysical. In one of the most moving of these letters, Gilmore has a moment of clarity about his fate. Assuring Nicole, "No I ain't drunk or loaded," Gilmore writes, "… [T]his is just me writing this letter that lacks beauty—just me Gary Gilmore thief and murderer. Crazy Gary. Who will one day have a dream that he was a guy named GARY [sic] in 20th century America and that there was something very wrong" (*ES* 359).

By suggesting his "real" life to be a dream in which "something is very wrong" in America, Gilmore both acknowledges and distances himself from an unwelcome insight into his circumstances. While his rhetorical displacement of this insight onto a dream suggests that he is unwilling to cast himself as a victim, Gilmore's comment reveals a painful awareness that forces beyond his control have shaped his life. The fact that he sees these negative forces as social and historical (something very wrong in *20th century America*) rather than existential provides the novel with a nuanced critique of the relationship between the individual and American society not present in Mailer's more intellectualized renderings of the White Negro/ Psychopath.[7]

While the conflict between the individual and society, is familiar ground for Mailer, *Executioner* is his first novel that specifically illuminates the power of social forces over the fate of the individual. In this it sense it is arguably Mailer's most

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[7] See Robert Begiebing,"Nonfiction, Women and Promise," *Acts of Regeneration: Allegory and Archetype in the Works of Norman Mailer.* (University of Missouri Press, 1980) 166-203**.**

expressly "social" novel since *The Naked and the Dead.* The journalist Melvyn Bragg sums up the social realist aspect of Mailer's project succinctly. In an interview following the novel's publication, Bragg characterizes *Executioner* as

> an immensely powerful book where you're attacking the character of not so much one man as of a society, and of a society that represents various contradictory forces and is stalemating itself… always through character… in the way that the 19th-century novelist did : [T]he comparison that I would draw would be with nineteenth-century novels. (259)

Mailer agrees with Bragg's comparison of *Executioner* to a nineteenth-century novel, but tellingly, broadens the scope of Bragg's definition:

> …[I]t's been one of my thoughts that the documentary novel as such goes back to the nineteenth-century novel in many ways… what you get [in a documentary novel] is a study of people in society with their character impinging on society. Society impinging on them." (*Conversations* 259)

It is worth noting that Mailer foregrounds the individual's influence on society rather than the reverse. In any case, his establishment of a *mutually* influencing relationship between the individual and society represents a departure from Mailer's typical depiction of the Psychopath as divorced from his social circumstances.

But Mailer's use of the Schiller material is "political" in another way as well. Through the use of free indirect discourse Mailer makes the reader privy to the inner lives of almost every human being who comes into contact with Gilmore or his case.[8] Their personal mini-narratives present a vast panorama of American *sensibilities*: values, ways of life, ambitions, and fears. The presence of these subjective, or really *affe*ctive issues in counterpoint to the supposedly preeminent business of the story does not decentralize Gilmore so much as establish their equal importance to the " political" issues addressed in the narrative. The juxtaposition of the characters' "personal" struggles around poverty, loss, love and morality with the novel's treatment of its "political" issues - Gilmore's crimes, the function of the death penalty and the workings of the justice and penal systems functions in two closely related ways: First, it allows Mailer to establish public and private life in a direct and mutually-influencing relationship. Second, and more importantly, Mailer's elevation of "personal" issues to the level of political discourse, in addition to granting them equal status, challenges the law's authority to determine the scope of the discourse itself. As legal scholar Simon Petch points out, the "fictive methods" of *The Executioner's Song* "amplif[y] that which the law would suppress or exclude… [and tells] stories which the law suppresses because it apparently has no interest in them." [9]

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[8] In an interview with William Buckley Mailer stresses the fact that he spoke to all of the novel's subjects personally. See "Crime and Punishment: Gary Gilmore," *Conversations with Norman Mailer,* ed. J.Michael Lennon (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi 1988) 230 and 242.

[9] Simon Petch, "Norman Mailer, Gary Gilmore, and the Untold Stories of the Law," http://www.lib.Latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-March –1997/petch.html: p2 of

While returning the individual to a social context expands upon themes present in Mailer's earlier work, *The Executioner's Song* ups the stakes considerably. For the protagonists of *Barbary Shore, An American Dream,* and *The Armies of the Night*, the rejection of society is a voluntary act of self-creation. In *Executioner*, on the other hand, Mailer describes Gilmore as a man who is forced to "assume the role history has given him," casting Gilmore's determination to force the state to execute him as a kind of default. While the execution became Gilmore's cause célèbre, it was hardly his first "choice." In an interview with William F. Buckley shortly after the release of the novel, Mailer makes it clear that execution was preferable only to suicide: "[Gilmore's] first choice was freedom. Therefore he tried to escape the night before the execution. His second choice was execution. His third was suicide." After Buckley prompts him, Mailer adds "[Life in jail] was the worst" (*Conversations* 242). In this context, Gilmore's demand to be executed reads as a kind of negative agency-it is less a recouping of his own power than a tactic to deny power to the state. Rather than an end in itself, Gilmore's agency earns him nothing more than the right to define the terms of his own annihilation.

While Mailer clearly admires Gilmore's courage in facing his execution the final moments of the novel-- that include Gilmore's unsuccessful attempt to escape, and a grisly account of his autopsy -- rob Gilmore's "good death" of some of its triumph. But the main concern of the novel is not the quality of Gilmore's death, but rather, of his life.

5, accessed 4/26/2005. (Originally published in *Australian Humanities Review* 5 [March-May 1997]).

This may be its most "political" concern, and in a sense, Mailer's greatest departure to date. Arising so suddenly at the end of the novel, Gilmore's last-ditch escape plan is oddly disappointing because it thwarts the reader's expectations.[10] But, as the scene implicitly demonstrates, and Mailer explicitly points out in an interview, Gilmore's reluctance to die should come as no surprise. At this moment the reader is made to confront Gilmore's humanity. He is neither arch- villain nor existential hero, but subject to the same fears, desires, and basic rights of any *person.* And like anyone, Mailer explains in a 1996 interview, "Gilmore wanted freedom and love. The marvelous thing about Gilmore was that, even though he wanted to be executed, what he wanted even more was to live…He really had a love of liberty; he wanted to be with Nicole.[11]

Mailer's vision of Gilmore had softened in the nearly twenty years since his interview with Buckley, but his insight into Gilmore's basic wishes underscores their deep entrenchment in American ideology. The word "ideology" is used here in its most literal sense, which is to say, a value or belief that is assumed, and hence, goes without saying. Here, Mailer's projection of Gilmore's desire for "freedom and love," and his interesting conflation of Gilmore's "love of liberty" and his love for Nicole, strikes the reader as common sense. While it seems a foregone conclusion that Gilmore wants to be

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[10] Mailer uses a similar tactic to thwart the reader's expectations at the end of *Oswald's Tale*. See Chapter Three.

[11] Norman Mailer, interview with Peter DePree, *The Bloomsbury Review* 16.2 (March/April1996): 10.

happy, this understanding of happiness as an exclusive or inalienable right is the novel's gloss on the American Dream.[12]

Although it is a deliberately elastic concept, the tacit understanding of the Dream is that the freedom to pursue personal goals is itself conducive to happiness. In *Pursuing the American Dream*, Cal Jillson suggests that the national consensus on the definition of the Dream is so profound as to be "instinctive" (xi). The Dream, according to Jillson, has always included "a fair chance to succeed in open competition with fellow citizens for the good things in life. The grand promise of the American Dream has always been that those willing to work, learn, save, persevere, and play by the rules would have a better chance to grow and prosper…than virtually anywhere else on earth" (xi).

Schiller's pursuit of "the story," his rival Dennis Boaz's pursuit of himself, Nicole's involvement with a string of abusive lovers- even Gilmore's fatally destructive behavior- are all presented as desperate bids for some personal vision of happiness. But Mailer's division of the novel into Eastern and Western "Voices" suggests that while happiness is the inchoate longing of every character in the novel, the Dream is not equally accessible to all. Far from affirming the notion that "hard work will be rewarded at the end" the Western narratives highlight social class as integral to rather than eliminated by the achievement of the American Dream. The most obvious example of this inequality is presented by the existence of the novel itself: For the middle class

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[12] In a 1965 sermon, Martin Luther King invokes "'Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness'" as "the substance of th[e] dream." See *MLK Papers Project*/Sermons http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/sermons/650704The_American_Dream.html. Accessed 3/14/2006.

characters of “Eastern Voices” Gilmore’s case is a conduit to the best possible life; For Gilmore it represents the best possible death.

On the other hand, Gilmore is far from powerless. Within the parameters of his sentence, Gilmore exerts an impressive amount of control over his circumstances, through which he achieves the only success of his difficult life. By waiving his right to appeal, and demanding a prompt execution, Gilmore transforms his relationship to the state from supplication to a kind of privilege. From this position Gilmore goes from strength to strength. His attendant celebrity and savvy manipulation of the media, prove lucrative, thus conferring on him the ability to help others, and hence, the dignity which he has sought.

In place of Jillson’s Franklinian meritocracy, then, *Executioner* sees American life as competitive game that favors shrewdness, ingenuity and a certain force of character. But if the failure of equal opportunity demonstrates the “banal” Dream that “no one believes in any more,” the triangulation of Schiller, Gilmore and Boaz explores Mailer’s idiosyncratic American Dream of “becoming what we could be,” through embracing “a more fabulous sense of what the real American possibilities are.”

Mailer, as he has in all of his work, continues to champion the importance of individual agency in directing, if not determining, one’s fate. But casting Gilmore as the prize in an unevenly weighted battle between Dennis Boaz’s New Age naïf and Larry Schiller‘s battle-scarred media warhorse plays out Mailer’s amazingly consistent personal cosmology as a kind of social experiment with ‘real’ people living ‘real’ lives. The novel’s satirical depiction of the “more organic than thou” lawyer Dennis Boaz presents him as the antithesis of Mailer’s notion of true individualism. In place of Mailer’s (and

Gilmore's) theology of karmic responsibility and ethos of radical individualism, the "very Aquarian" (540) Boaz embraces a faddish spiritual enlightenment, the novel suggests to be an affectation. A dropout from a promising legal career, Boaz thinks of himself as a free spirit, but Mailer characterizes Boaz as an utterly conventional product of middle class "Me Decade"-ism.

Boaz's other unpardonable sin in the Mailerian universe is his fatal naïveté. Unlike Gilmore, whom Mailer approvingly describes as "a man who could kiss good luck on the mouth," Boaz "persistently refuse[s] to understand the stakes" of his business dealings. As a result Boaz has the most opportunity and the least success of any figure in the novel. Although he is the first of the Easterners to meet Gilmore, Boaz is easily bested by the novel's underdog, Larry Schiller. Schiller's hard-nosed pragmatism earns the trust of Gilmore and his immediate family members in a way that the sentimental and naïve Dennis Boaz cannot. Not surprisingly, Schiller functions in the novel as a kind of Mailer-surrogate. At the most obvious level, Schiller *is* Mailer: He is both an author of and a character in the novel. But more importantly in the context of this study, Schiller represents the "American possibilities" available through individual agency. As a shrewd businessman with a moral conscience, Schiller preserves the link between personal freedom and financial success promised by the American notion of individuality, while apparently "solving" its intrinsically alienating effects. Schiller's business and legal acumen provide him with a storybook happy ending (a book contract and the knowledge that he "was going to marry his princess"[1013]), while the guileless Boaz, after a brief ascendancy, drops out of the narrative.

Mailer's appropriation of the story of the Fall at the beginning of the novel establishes not only Gilmore's innocence, but the notion of innocence itself as

questionable. According to Whalen-Bridge, Mailer's reenactment of the of the Fall in the beginning of *The Executioner's Song* is essential to the reader's acceptance of Gilmore as a protagonist: "Without Brenda's memory of Gary before the Fall, it is hard to imagine why we should care about this murderer." (107). But it is Gilmore's cousin *Brenda* (and not Gilmore) who falls from the forbidden apple tree, and whose point of view is rendered in the episode:Thus, it is Brenda who configures Gilmore as a "heroic innocent," and who must "imagine why [she] should care about" him. In short, Whalen-Bridge fails to consider the possibility that it is not Mailer-as-narrator who casts Gilmore as Adam, but rather, Gilmore's cousin. While Mailer does to some extent obscure his authorial voice in those of his "characters," he makes it clear throughout the novel that their perceptions are not his own: "That was Brenda's earliest recollection of Gary." (17) Brenda is depicted compassionately, but her point of view is presented as sentimental and not necessarily reliable.

Mailer is obviously invested in the power of American myths, but his juxtaposition of Gary Gilmore and the figure of Adam is clearly ironic. The moment of Brenda's fall is so overburdened with symbolism it is almost satiric: "Brenda was six when she fell out of the apple tree. She climbed to the top and the limb with the good apples broke off. Gary caught her as the branch came scraping down. They were scared. The apple tree was their grandmother's…and it was forbidden to climb…" (17)

While Mailer's sly allusion the Fall is hardly a transparent invocation of the biblical myth, its presence at the start of the narrative does have several specific functions. The first is to establish the cosmology of the novel, which rejects the notion of innocence, and therefore, original sin. *Executioner* begins in Brenda's childhood, a state

of fundamental innocence. In the context of the novel her "fall" from the tree constitutes the narrative's entrance into the contemporary world of the reader. In Mailer's vision we are already there; *The Executioner's Song* begins *in medias res*: Brenda's fall from the tree is a childhood memory. Furthermore, even this memory resists interpretation as a tragic loss of innocence: Not only is there no actual fall (Gary catches her), the only innocence on display is Brenda's idealization of her troubled cousin.

The allusion the Fall also has a literary function that reveals a particular self-consciousness on Mailer's part. By incorporating into his novel one of the oldest American literary tropes, Mailer positions his politics (and hence his political novel) within a tradition of American letters. Reinterpreting what R.W.B. Lewis identified as the *ur*-myth of American self-imagining, Mailer creates possibilities for a multivalent American self-concept while maintaining his (equally American) position as innovator. Finally, just as Doctorow's "secular transformation" of the Ten Commandments informs his vision of American ideology, Mailer's appropriation of the story of the Fall allows him to address issues of morality and self-determination in specifically American rather than Judeo-Christian terms. Explored through the prism of Gilmore's crimes, the novel transforms of the notion of Original Sin to a debate about the limits of free will and personal responsibility, thus expanding the scope of the myth from an exploration of Gilmore's (human) nature to include the nature of the world into which he was born.

Whalen-Bridge's revision of the Adamic myth is not useful in this particular context because, when removed from Lewis's already ironic framework, it loses its power to critique the trope of innocence in American literature, and its potential to reconfigure individualism as a space for radical action. The myth of Adam is, after all an

originary myth. Returned to its New-Critical context, it fulfills the function it was originally intended to fulfill, which is to reconnect American literature to a common origin and reestablish the protagonist of the American novel as a tragic innocent. Such a move runs directly contrary to Mailer's goals in *Executioner,* and the post –Vietnam novel as a genre. They cannot be tragedies because,in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, they imagine a world in which innocence is already either non-existent or foolish.

Carter's 1979 speech underscores the timeliness of the novel's post-lapsarian worldview. The speech is a kind of jeremiad against the cynicism he felt was plaguing the nation. But rather than placing the blame on the nation's economic and political woes, Carter places the onus on Americans to rediscover their own sense of purpose. In Carter's view, "…all the legislation in the world can't fix what's wrong with America" because what the nation lacks is faith: "We simply must have faith in each other, faith in out course…faith in our ability to govern ourselves, and faith in the future of our nation."[13] Here Carter suggests a spiritual remedy for what he sees as a spiritual problem. However, in identifying the cause of American malaise as spiritual, Carter wrote (or rather, talked) himself out of a job. In William Graebner's view, Carter was not wrong, but he was perhaps fatally naïve. According to Graebner, pointing out the inadequacy of politics to address the most central human concerns is an act of political suicide: "Carter

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[13] The complete text of Carter's speech is available at http:wps.ablongman.com/wps/media/objects/31/32397/primarysources2311.html, accessed 10/23/2005.

had identified a real if somewhat shapeless problem. He understood that its historical origins were complex …" However, "in phrases such as 'longing for meaning' he reveals his concern that the problem was…beyond economics and beyond politics – certainly beyond the therapeutic power of a national energy policy." (158)

Here Graebner makes an important distinction between ideology and politics. He calls Carter's address "as politics, a mistake" but claims, "as cultural analysis the address fares better" (158). Graebner does not take issue with Carter's values that, in their metaphysical bent, are difficult to assail. Neither does he fault Carter's "cultural analysis", his assessment of the problems facing the country What Carter lacked, says Graebner, was far more pragmatic. Carter lacked savvy: "What [Carter] might have added had he had more time (and even less political savvy), was that many Americans …were bored by what they saw as the collapse of meaning and values; bored by the absence of meaningful work…" (159)

Graebner's privileging of the concept of "savvy" resonates deeply in the context of the 1970s; it suggests that Carter's presidency reveals more about the atmosphere of the decade than his abilities as a statesman. Suddenly innocence was not blameless, it was powerless. While Graebner sees Carter as a naïf who lacks (or cannot act out of) a sense of political expedience, it is important to note that his lack of "savvy" was equally responsible for his election and his loss of credibility as a political leader. As Graebner points out, Carter's earnestness and faith-based initiatives for social change were initially appealing to Americans disillusioned by Vietnam and Watergate. Ultimately, however, Carter's apparent failure to create concrete (i.e. material) improvements in American life

discredited him, and paved the way for the ascendancy of the Republican Party in the 1980s.

In Graebner's view, however, Carter's diagnosis of the nation's spiritual malaise was accurate. According to Carter, the search for meaning presented two unequal "paths to choose." One would require and foster a sense of community, while the other would free people to pursue personal goals. Carter warns Americans against the latter path: "Down [that] road lies a mistaken idea of freedom," because "such *individualism* leads to fragmentation and self-interest," (also quoted in Graebner 157) and presents "a false vision of the American Dream [which is] the right to grasp for us some advantage over others. That path would be one of *constant conflict between narrow interests* ending in chaos and immobility. It is a certain route to failure [italics mine]."

In "Seeking and Finding in the Seventies" Bruce Schulman locates the originary myth of seventies consciousness in Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. According to Schulman, the narrative provides a seamless shift in responsibility from the community to the self:

> Richard Bach understood that the search for authenticity had become detached from the radical politics of the sixties…The slender book lays out an appealing doctrine for the spiritual awakening of the seventies. It emphasized personal experience …encouraged self-exploration and self-discovery, and preached resistance against established institutions. (79)

As Schulman points out, Bach's tale recasts the search for individual happiness as a noble calling rather than an act of selfishness. Its protagonist, Schulman comments,

"could not content himself with the lot of ordinary seagulls. Summoned before the council flock, Jonathan defended his unorthodox conduct: 'Irresponsibility? Who is more responsible than a gull who finds and follows a higher meaning, a higher purpose for life?'"[14]

Like Bach's protagonist, Dennis Boaz sees himself as a man on a spiritual quest for authenticity. However, Boaz's existential dithering is presented as directly opposed to his ability to act on his own behalf. Mailer's depiction is subtly but devilishly satiric. As a young man, Boaz struggles with his choices between "all this middle class ethos…would he opt for a job as Assistant D.A., or go for an underground thing about the right to play and *the pursuit of happiness*? [italics mine]" (518). When Boaz offers to represent Gilmore his radical chic and fashionable spirituality initially resonates with Gilmore's generalized anti-authoritarianism and intellectual curiosity. However, the common ground between the two men erodes quickly when it becomes clear that Boaz cannot negotiate the legal and financial complexities of the situation he helped to create. Underestimating Gilmore's pragmatism, Boaz presents his spiritual enlightenment and lack of interest in legal matters and as a recommendation of his services. The flat tone of Mailer's simple declarative sentences provides a bit of humor at Boaz's expense: "Lately, he had not practiced much law…He was interested more in the consciousness movement, encounter groups, meditation …Sufi…Findhorn" (515).

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[14] *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, quoted in Bruce Shulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001) 78-80

Boaz also misreads Gilmore's oppositional stance as left-wing radicalism (partly because they are about the same age), and sets out to earn Gilmore's trust by establishing credibility as a radical. After Boaz drops some names that he thinks will impress Gilmore (Ginsberg, Kerouac, Mario Savio, Jerry Rubin and "the Berkeley movement in general"), Mailer underscores the two men's difference in attitude toward the radical Left. For Boaz such associations constitute an identity; Gilmore seems at best indifferent: Boaz "*pinpointed his life* with these names—Gilmore *knew* the names [italics mine]" (515).

Worse yet, Boaz sentimentalizes Gilmore's choices in ways that Gilmore himself can't afford. Idealizing Gilmore as a working-class hero, Boaz fails to see Gilmore's views for what they really are. Boaz is astute enough to recognize the contradictions in his client, accurately characterizing Gilmore's politics as a "peculiar mélange of right-wing ideas and left wing emotions" (590), but he explains away Gilmore's more distasteful ideas: "Gary hated blacks…but that, Boaz explained, was because they were a dangerous majority in prison…Gary also hated the ACLU. That was because they preached freedom of the individual but wouldn't give Gilmore the liberty to choose his death." (590)

Mailer's inclusion of Gilmore's own comments about his politics discredits Boaz's rationalizations. Gilmore's open letter to the ACLU and NAACP makes it clear that Gilmore is unwilling to see himself as disadvantaged, and disdains making common cause with African-Americans. Instead, his racial politics seem formulated specifically to maintain status quo power relations and recoup what he sees as his lost privilege: "NAACP, I'm a white man. Don't want no Uncle Tom blacks buttin (sic) in…You know as well as I do y'all ain't really disadvantaged lak [sic] ya used to be." (762-3)

While Mailer makes no attempt to sanitize Gilmore's behavior, he presents Gilmore's non-conformity as heroic in its authenticity; Boaz's is a pose. Unlike Gilmore and Schiller, whose dealings entail a certain amount of risk, Boaz's rebellion costs him nothing. In fact, it's culturally sanctioned among the middle class members of his generation. Boaz smokes marijuana with celebrity journalist Geraldo Rivera before going on the air, and even as an attorney in the Prosecutor's office, where such transgressions are suggested to be generational rather than revolutionary. In the office, "the younger ones smoked pot all the while they were working under bosses with narrow attitudes and that FBI mentality" (518).

In Mailer's narrative Boaz comes off as a caricature of a cultural phenomenon rather than a fully developed character. However, William Graebner and Tom Wolfe's analyses of the 1970s to a large extent bear out Mailer's assessment of Boaz's personal ideology. Boaz's concern with "consciousness" exemplifies the reawakened 1960s interest in Eastern philosophies and mystic practices such as numerology, Sufism, and personal gurus; such practices also provided the impetus for Esalen, est, and a variety of new psychotherapies to which Boaz refers in the novel.

Graebner's analysis of the 1970s has a distinctly conservative slant, betraying anxiety about divorce, the women's movement, and the increase in social freedoms that came about during the decade. His conflation of "gays, feminists, African Americans," and oddly, "environmentalists…" into a single special- interest group that "experienced the seventies as an exhilarating moment of progressive change," opposed to a "white middle class" that felt "the events and developments of the decade…coalesce to mock their dreams and ambitions and to deflate [their] expectations" (158) glosses over a wide

variety of fallout from a perceived loss of white middle class status.[15] Conservative bias notwithstanding, Graebner's distinction of the white middle class is important because it was this group that formed the core of what Tom Wolfe coined the "Me Decade."

In "The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening" (1976), Wolfe identified two phenomena that bear out Daniel Bell's prediction of the early 1960s.[16] The first, which Wolfe called "plugging in" was a shift in the basis on which Americans formed their identities. Instead of seeing themselves as members of families, religious groups, or professions, they were beginning to form identities, both communal and individual, based in personal affinity rather than traditional (religious or familial) ties. The second was "an eclectic religious revival" (Schulman, 80) that Wolfe saw as a "Third Great Awakening." The Awakening of the seventies, Wolfe points out "was built up from more diverse sources than the first two, from therapeutic movements as well as overtly religious ones" (290).

Unlike the activism of the 1960s, the impetus of the Me Decade was aimed at feeling good rather than doing good. The embrace of personally tailored identities in tandem with a therapeutic vision of spirituality worked to unify what Carter's speech suggested to be irreconcilable problems. Both the metaphysical problem of "the meaning

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[15] Not to mention that only one of the above categories excludes whiteness, and none necessarily excludes being a member of the middle class.

[16] See Chapter One for a more complete discussion of Bell's thesis.

of our lives" and the "political" problem of the failure of the progressive movement are "solved" in the transferring of the good of the community to the good of the individual.

Like Graebner, Wolfe believed a great deal of the impetus for the personal fulfillment boom was economic. However, Wolfe did not see the social changes of the seventies as driven by middle class disappointment, but by middle class success. Under the rubric of "Human Potential," the growing interest in "Eastern religions, encounter sessions, est, yoga, and the New Age (Shulman 80) simply reflected a privatization of well-being that provided for happiness the same way free-market capitalism had always allowed for material success**.** According to Wolfe, the post-World War II prosperity allowed "millions of middling people" the "unprecedented American luxury…of dwelling on the self" (291). But wealth alone was not enough. In Wolfe's framework, the pursuit of personal fulfillment, "something that only aristocrats (and intellectuals and artists) were supposed to do" (293) is also driven by a rejection of "man's age old belief in serial immortality" (291). Serial immortality, as Wolfe conceives it, informs most of human altruism, from parental self-sacrifice to the institution of wills: "The soldier who risks his life…the man who devotes his life to some struggle for 'his people'…people who buy life insurance or leave wills…are people who conceive of themselves, however unconsciously, as part of a great biological stream" (291-2).

Most importantly, in the context of *Executioner*, the shift taking place in the America of the 1970s heightened individualism by freeing human beings from Freud's biological destiny, and hence, from the responsibility to the future. If, as Wolfe quotes from an advertising campaign, there's "only one life to live" there is no reason to defer pleasure, which takes on the transcendent meaning of life's sole purpose. In such a

cosmology, religion would seem to have little place, functioning as it does to bind human beings together in a common, and externalized cause. However, the confluence of the Me Decade and a Third Awakening is not contradictory because, as Wolfe pointed out, this particular Awakening rejected "the most rational, secularized, modernized, religions" in favor of those that embrace highly emotional, charismatic, "non-rational or even anti-rational practices" (283). This religiosity- the search for ecstasy—was the ideal complement to the Me Decade because it imbued the here and now with transcendence and meaning.

Although Mailer's interest in Eastern philosophy, particularly the notions of Karma and reincarnation, is well known,[17] his understanding of these concepts is directly opposed to the ethos of the Third Awakening. In the first place, as Wolfe noted, the search for personal freedom and fulfillment is essentially utopian in character. Mailer on the other hand, has never been expressly invested in the perfectibility, or even the improvement of human life. More importantly, as Louis Menand asserts, Mailer was never really a liberal, which is to say, particularly interested in the movement toward broad-scale social, sexual, or spiritual freedoms that began in the 1960s (Menand 150). For Mailer such freedoms actually defeated the possibility of true individuality because, as Menand points out,"[L]iberal movements…that made life fairer" (150) removed the very social strictures that made transgression possible.

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[17] See Joseph Wenke, "From *Marilyn* to *The Executioner's Song*: Charisma and Estrangement" *Mailer's America.* (University of Connecticut Press, 1987)

Far from underwriting the abandonment of social strictures and the value of temporal continuity, Mailer's embrace of individual freedom is situated within a rigorous moral (and specifically Karmic) framework that demands personal responsibility and, according to Joseph Wenke, "serves as an elaboration of Mailer's eschatological existentialism, with its emphasis on moral economy and its relation of death and judgment" (197). Thus, for Mailer, the social permissiveness of the seventies robbed individualism of its stakes, and hence its meaning. Mailer's problem with liberalism is what he saw as its moral *carte blanche*. As Menand asserts, "Anything goes did not mean that all is permitted on the understanding that the wrong move would will cost you a piece of your soul. It just meant that all is permitted"(150-51).

Gilmore's vision of individualism, as it is presented in the novel, is remarkably similar to Mailer's Like Mailer (and in direct contrast with Boaz), Gilmore was a product of the 1950s:

> I came out [of reform school] looking for trouble…I had a tough-guy complex, that sort of smart-aleck juvenile delinquent attitude…Juvenile delinquent-- remember that phrase? Sure dates me, don't it…I had a ducktail haircut, I smoked, drank, shot heroin, smoked weed, took speed, got into fights, chased and caught pretty little broads. The Fifties were a hell of a time to be a juvenile delinquent. I stole and robbed and gambled and went to Fats Domino and Gene Vincent dances at the local halls. (*ES* 775)

Like Mailer, Gilmore is nonplussed by the advent of social freedoms that negate his oppositional stance. Although he exempts himself from moral stricture, he is

surprisingly censorious about contemporary mores and gender politics: "When I was a teenager…girls didn't have the sexual freedom they do now…They even talked different. You never heard a girl say 'fuck'. Just wasn't done…morals were different." (407-8)

While Mailer and Gilmore share an unconventional moral framework, Gilmore's alienation from contemporary culture is far more profound. Like all of the "Western Voices," Gilmore is separated from mainstream American life in ways that transcend, or perhaps precede class. Devout or lapsed, their experience as individuals is mediated by their Mormonism. Despite its dissenting theology and bloody origins, the Mormon church of Gilmore's lifetime had shed its reputation as a fringe "sect". As Wolfe points out, the relationship of Mormonism to mainstream culture had shifted in response to its growing power: "A sect… is a religion with no political power. Once the Mormons "settled built and ruled Utah" it "became a *religion*, and eventually wound down to the slow firm beat of respectability." (Wolfe 290) By Gilmore's childhood, then, the religion was associated less with iconoclasm and rebellion than morality, responsibility, and continuity through time. In short, the Mormon Church embraced as its core values the very notions of community, responsibility, and serial immortality that the seekers of the Third Awakening rejected. As Wolfe claims, "there is no ecumenical spirit in within this Third Great Awakening. If anything, there is a spirit of schism" (291).

Ironically, however, the Mormon Church's contemporary legitimacy only compounded Gilmore's outsider status. While Mormonism formed his values in opposition to contemporary secular culture, his (and his family's) history of anti-social

behavior made him an outcast from the church.[18] Thus Gilmore found himself alienated from two dominant but opposing cultures: While the middle class whites of "Eastern Voices" were looking to be released from the confines of traditional roles, Gilmore sought a place in the very cultural tradition from which his behavior denied him membership.

Gilmore's preoccupation with karma and reincarnation, then, is not antithetical to, but specifically aligned with, the values of the Mormon Church. Although Mormonism, Hinduism and Buddhism would seem to have little in common, they share a sense of mutuality that binds human beings to one another and actions to their consequences. For Gilmore, this sense of *personal* moral responsibility both precedes and obviates the moral code established by the institutions of church and state. In this way, Gilmore's cosmology privileges the goals of the individual over those of society, but like Mailer's, is directly *opposed* to the spiritual questing of the Me Decade. Rather than rejecting the notion of order itself, Gilmore's investment in karma and reincarnation provide him with a cosmology and a moral framework outside the mainstream respectability of the (Mormon and American) cultures from which he was excluded.

Gilmore's dialogues with prison cleric Cline Campbell make it clear that the authority of social institutions is subordinate to Gilmore's personal vision. When Campbell appeals to Gilmore's sense of social responsibility, telling him "… it's better not to kill yourself…[b]ecause…you can test the law," Gilmore addresses him somewhat flippantly as "Preach," answering that "The law means nothing to me…[I]f there's a God,

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[18] See Mikal Gilmore's memoir, *Shot in the Heart* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

and I believe there is, I'm going to have to face Him.…I know this creation we live in doesn't end up for nothing. There's got to be something over there. I'll come back on a higher plane" (604-5).

Gilmore's determination to force the state to carry out his execution, then, recapitulates the dichotomy Carter identified between individual freedom and community responsibility. Interestingly, rather than presenting this dichotomy as a dispute between liberal and conservative visions, the novel makes it clear that the "real" dispute was confined to two notably left-wing factions. In presenting his appeal to overturn Gilmore's sentence, ACLU attorney Richard Giacque ultimately thwarts Gilmore by upholding the primacy of society over the individual. According to Giacque, "Society has an interest in this wholly apart from Mr. Gilmore's wishes. It is not Mr. Gilmore's desire that is paramount here, and I would merely ask, Mr. Chairman, that the decision to utilize the death sentence not be made by Mr. Gilmore…but be resolved by the courts" (658). On the other hand, the Legal Defense Fund attorney retained by the Gilmore family acts to protect the interests of a marginalized client against the power of the state. In contrast with his depiction of the ACLU as a self-serving organization, he "was not about to subordinate Gary's interest to the service of ideology. He was not a man to sacrifice the individual for abstract issues" (682).

The corollary to the novel's debate about the meaning and limits of individual freedom lies in its vision of the potential for individual agency. While the Darwinist marketplace depicted in the novel virtually necessitates the "grasping of advantage over others" that Carter so vehemently abjured, *Executioner*'s critique also extends to its protagonists' negotiation of "the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest." In

the section entitled "Exclusive Rights" Mailer plants a seemingly flippant comment by the writer Stanley Greenberg, who comments about Boaz, "just give him a novel approach to the pursuit of happiness, and he was happiness itself" (592). Greenberg's description of Dennis Boaz functions equally well as a description of Mailer's project and the book the reader holds in his hands. The novel's explicit reference to the language of the Declaration of Independence suggests Mailer is merely laying claim to one of the three basic rights delineated by the Framers.[19] And, the fact that Greenberg's comment appears in a section entitled "Exclusive Rights" (561) suggests that its presence is designed to underscore Mailer's presentation of the pursuit of happiness as a fundamental and perhaps specifically American entitlement. However, Mailer's treatment of Boaz and the potential pun on the word "novel," awaken the ironic possibilities of the section's title. If "novel" is read as a noun, the "approach" to the pursuit of happiness allows for both the objectivity of documentary and the subjectivity of internal monologue-a reference to the novel itself. Read as an adjective, the word "novel" casts the pursuit of

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[19] As "the pursuit of happiness" does not appear in the Constitution, it is not technically an inalienable right, although Mailer suggests that it should be. According to "Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness,": "Although the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments, prohibit the federal government and any state from depriving a person of 'life, liberty, or property, without due process', nothing in the US Constitution specifically sets forth 'Life, Liberty & the Pursuit of Happiness' as unalienable rights which the federal government cannot take away… The Supreme Court has at times appeared to acknowledge this deficiency in the US Constitution in decisions made since the adoption of the Bill of Rights." See http://co-op.ibook.com/

davidotterstraw/yorkshireman'sjournal/u.s.constitution/lifelibertyandthe pursuitofhappiness/index2005/0620054912.htm. Accessed 3/15/2006

happiness as frivolous- as a pastime or hobby. In this context, the rubric of "Exclusive Rights" establishes a dichotomy between two pursuits of happiness: one, an inalienable right, and the other, a product of privilege.

While Mailer's satire of Boaz is harsh, Boaz's fate underscores the ruthlessness of the professional marketplace. In Mailer's universe, Boaz's worst crime is his failure to exert control over himself or his fate. Unlike Gilmore or (as we will see) Schiller, Boaz sees his role in the events of trial as passive- controlled by a force outside of himself, which is to say, as passive. While Boaz shares with Gilmore a notion of divine will, his relationship to its authority is directly opposed to Gilmore's. In an interview he describes himself as "a character in this thing I'm writing…so I don't plan out everything I do. I'm being acted upon by the real author of these events. Whoever or whatever that is." (610).

Mailer could not have missed the irony his presence in the narrative confers on Boaz's rhetoric, and in fact, on Boaz's choices throughout the novel. Not only does Boaz's reference to himself as "a character" point to Mailer, but his reference to "real author" of "these events" confers upon Mailer the omniscience that his choice of narrative technique abjures. But the temptation to read nearly all of Boaz's comments as puns both establishes and is established by the irony with which the novel imbues his choices. Unlike Schiller, who is characterized by his circumspection, Boaz is something of loose cannon. While Boaz claims that "One honest man with no impediments between his impulses and his tongue could turn the world around" (541), his interest in authenticity stems more from a lack of discipline than a belief in the liberating quality of truth. Ultimately, his impulsive behavior is his undoing. After making a moral platform of Gilmore's wish, to die, a stoned Boaz erodes any credibility he might have had by

bursting into tears on "Good Morning America" and reneging on his agreement to help Gilmore facilitate his execution. He claims, rather accurately, that he "can no longer be an effective advocate this execution" because his mind "has finally gotten in line with his heart" (593).

Boaz's change of heart is understandable, but his kooky rhetoric makes it difficult to take him seriously. And if such vacillations are problematic for his credibility, his squeamishness about profiting from his association with Gilmore proves fatal to his success. Like Graebner's assessment of Carter, Boaz discovers that while good faith is commendable, "absolute innocence is politically useless" (Whalen-Bridge, 108). Before Gilmore understands the full power of his position he offers Boaz all of the profits from his story. To his credit, and downfall, Boaz responds that splitting the money evenly "just seems fair." Unfortunately Boaz's principles have no political utility (as Whalen-Bridge puts it) because he fails to consider anyone else's interests. When they prevent him from pursuing money for Gilmore, Gilmore "get[s] businesslike" and begin to suspect Boaz of stealing from him (569).

Boaz's statement that "he didn't want to make too much and look…greedy" opens the door to his financial and personal trouncing by David Susskind and Larry Schiller. When Boaz tells the press that he's accepted only five hundred dollars for the sale of an interview, even a reporter questions the wisdom of his decision. Although Schiller offers him more money, and advises, in Boaz's interest, that Boaz get an agent, Boaz doesn't trust Schiller's unvarnished and unapologetic interest in money. Dismissing Schiller as a "super hard-sell salesman and a "professional," Boaz stalls him off in favor of David Susskind's more highbrow status. With a characteristic lack of savvy, Boaz makes the

wrong choice, reading Susskind's easygoing manner as high-mindedness rather than the condescension of a powerful man. Most excruciating is the fact that although he is a lawyer, Boaz, agrees to base an important financial agreement on faith. After Gilmore agrees to let Boaz publish a story about him (in addition to representing him in court), "[t]hey didn't even bother to draw up a paper. Just shook hands" (524). Later, Boaz insults Susskind by referring to Susskind's insistence on releases and quitclaims as "folderol."

In a last-ditch effort to stay in the game, Boaz finally overplays his hand. Attempting to thwart a burgeoning Schiller partnership with the journalist Barry Farrell, Boaz calls Susskind to pitch a story about himself. Here, Mailer displays perfect comic timing, both in plotting and in the rhythm of his language: "About then, Boaz called Susskind collect. He always called collect" (643). The period between the two sentences functions like a comedian's take to the audience, while Mailer's withholding of this information ratchets up the irony. As a respected and well-known journalist, Susskind is the closest thing to an aristocrat in Mailer's American Dream hierarchy. He has the power to bestow professional legitimacy on anyone who works with him. As a result, when Susskind delivers the final blow, the humiliation of Boaz's defeat is all the more painful. Rather than suggesting a partnership with Boaz, Susskind calls him "a poseur and a liar and a flaky man" and warns Boaz, "don't ever call me again, collect or otherwise" (643-44).

As a shrewd businessman with a moral conscience, Larry Schiller functions as a kind of Mailer surrogate- in perfect counterpoint to Boaz. In contrast with Boaz's relative privilege, Schiller is presented as something of an underdog. Also unlike Boaz, Schiller

values doing over being. As a man of action, he sees himself as the master of his fate. He is also flexible and resourceful, "consider[ing] it a sin not to learn from experience" (584). Not surprisingly, Mailer's rendering of Schiller's inner life is far more sympathetic and Schiller' success is an important subplot of the novel. Along with Mailer, Schiller is quite literally "the author of these events," an idea that is given credence not only by Schiller's obvious link to the book the reader has in their hands, but also by the importance of his movements to its " plot". While the brash and savvy Schiller embodies in many ways Mailer's vision of "American possibilities," the limits of his compassionate self-interest are constantly in question. Moral and financial concerns always co-exist in Schiller, and Mailer maintains the ambiguity of the line between opportunity and opportunism.

In a 1976 article by the well-established journalist Barry Farrell, Schiller comes off as a manipulator, politically savvy enough to cultivate the friendship of key figures and unashamed to profit from their mistakes. According to Farrell,

> When Schiller learned that Boaz had sold a Gilmore interview for $500, he knew he was dealing with an amateur…After a brief lunch for Boaz, he decided to maintain cordial relations with the lawyer, while privately developing what he intended to become a large relationship with [Gilmore's aunt and uncle] and with Mrs. Kathryne Baker, the mother of Gary's girlfriend, Nicole. (Farrell 113)

Farrell's article is pure New Journalism in that it is defined by Farrell's personal "angle" or point of view. Unlike *Executioner*, it explicitly passes judgment on

Schiller.But Mailer is first and foremost a novelist; he is more often descriptive than prescriptive. As a result, *Executioner's* depiction of Schiller presents Farrell's "carrion bird" as man with a conscience. Schiller is introduced to the reader ruminating about his professional reputation as an ambulance chaser while sitting in a hospital waiting room hoping for an interview with Nicole's bereaved family members.

While Schiller is preoccupied with getting the story, *Executioner* depicts him as haunted by the moral ramifications of his tactics. After his interviews with Susan Atkins interfere with the prosecution of the Manson followers, Mailer intercedes with Schiller's recollections that "[h]e was sick to his stomach over that" and that his acceptance of $15,000- "a quick sale for a quick and rotten book…was embarrassing to recollect" because, as he tells himself "with the profit you made on the original sale you could have done a definitive study of the entire Manson Family. You threw away what could have been an important book" (585).

Like Mailer's, Schiller's professional reputation varied widely. Although he had made a name for himself through a number of high-profile interviews (Madame Nhu, Marina Oswald, Jack Ruby, and Manson-case informer Susan Atkins) he was not particularly well respected in the world of journalism at the time of *Executioner's'* composition.[20] Mailer uses Schiller's dubious reputation to good effect. The pitting of a dark-horse Schiller against the front-running David Susskind is not only a skillful plot device; but also heightens the novel's ongoing conflict between the notions of fate and

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[20] See Chapter Three for further discussion of Mailer's collaboration with Schiller.

agency. While Schiller initially seems preoccupied with his questionable ethics and bad luck, his trajectory ultimately underscores the value of agency. Neatly expressing Mailer's vision of life as a competitive game, David Susskind uses football as a metaphor for his negotiations with Schiller. Susskind compares the status difference between himself and Schiller to "the gap between the Dallas Cowboys and a high-school football team." Schiller agrees with him, but ounters with his greater ambition: "Susskind's right…But here I am all suited up and ready to play. Where are the Dallas Cowboys? They're not even in the stadium"(*ES* 634).

In Schiller and Farrell's *Playboy* interview, Gilmore vacillates between these two interpretations of his life. In the first, he is the master of his fate; in the second, a victim of circumstance. First, Gilmore describes an early triumph of will as the defining moment in his life. After taking a shortcut, Gilmore got lost and had to fight his way out of a thicket of 30-foot briar bushes. Gilmore claims that the struggle "made him feel a little different about a lot of things" because he "never did get afraid…I knew if I just kept going, I'd get out…It was like a kind of overcoming of myself (74). In the same spirit of mastery, Gilmore takes sole credit for his untrained skill as an artist: "My great-grandfather Kerby was a pretty well-known painter…And people in my family have always said 'Gary's lucky, he inherited all Grandpa Kerby's talent'…but I don't agree. I think whatever talent I have is something *I earned on my own* [italics mine]" (74). On the other hand, when speaking about a negative outcome, Gilmore uses the word "talent" to imply something visited on him by external forces: "…I always felt like I was in for trouble. I seemed to have a *talent*…for making adults look at me a little different, different from the way they looked at other kids, like maybe…repelled" (74). Here

Gilmore implies that trouble with the law is the result of an inexplicably malign influence in his life. On a more pragmatic note, however, Gilmore also blames reform school for ensuring his criminal trajectory, and takes umbrage when Schiller and Farrell press Gilmore to address the contradictions in his thinking:

> *Playboy*: It sounds as though you were on the course you've always followed well before reform school…your life might have worked out the same even if you hadn't been sent to Woodburn.
>
> Gilmore: Look, reform schools disseminate certain esoteric knowledge. They sophisticate. A kid comes out of reform school and he's learned a few things he would otherwise have missed. And he identifies…with the people who share that same esoteric knowledge, the criminal element, or whatever you want to call it. (74)

The *Playboy* interview betrays evidence of Farrell's rigorous moral judgments; it seems invested in charging Gilmore with responsibility for his fate. But the context of the novel (in which Mailer reproduces the interview) grants Gilmore's assessment of his incarceration far more credence. Gilmore's comments about reform school also contain a critique of socio-economic issues that suggests their near- immutability in the face of agency. What Gilmore calls "esoteric knowledge" is a remarkably accurate characterization of the invisible assumptions that establish and enforce class divisions. The "knowledge" that informs Gilmore's reform school "sophistication" only equips him to function outside of the middle class life that it has forever closed to him. By its very

nature, such knowledge does not illuminate, but rather obscures from Gilmore the mysteries of class privilege.

In a seemingly disjointed conversation with his arresting officer, Gilmore's repeated references to prison deflect Nielsen's attempts to establish common ground and attempt to reclaim his incarceration as a source of status. But at the same time, Gilmore's "random" questions circle back again and again to the indicators of Nielsen's success: education, family, and career. Gilmore's almost-confession to his arresting officer reveals a touching fascination with Nielsen's path to success, and a somewhat baffled resentment of his own life of deprivation. Mailer's inclusion of their exchange suggests that he too read it as a complex negotiation of the two men's class (and hence, power) differences. When Nielsen asks Gilmore if he shares his interest in fishing, Gilmore responds that there isn't much fishing in *prison*. To Nielsen's stories about camping Gilmore responds with

> a few of his experiences in *prison*…a fat girl who died and the time they gave him too much prolixin…Spoke of how *prison* demanded you be a man every step of the way. Then he asked a little more about Nielsen's background. He seemed interested that Nielsen had a wife and five children [italics mine]. (288)

The questions Gilmore asks Nielsen are aimed at revealing the "esoteric knowledge" of how the middle class world works. He asks if Nielsen's wife is a "good Mormon," how Nielsen met her, and what her college major was "as if he were truly fascinated," because he is. Apparently testing his suspicion that middle class privilege is unrelated to merit (and perhaps surprised by Nielsen's kindness) Gilmore wonders how

Nielsen became a policeman although he "didn't seem much like a cop" (288). Gilmore stresses Nielsen's upward mobility, observing that "*now* he was a lieutenant [italics mine]." Nielsen answers, "Yes, in a little more than ten years he'd risen…" which Gilmore calls "interesting," commenting that "his mother had been a Mormon too" (289).

By highlighting the similarity of their religious backgrounds, Gilmore circles around their class differences. Despite the fact that, as Gilmore tells Nielsen, "not only was his mother a Mormon but all of her folks" (291), his fate has been radically different from Nielsen's. Nielsen too "identifies with the people who share his esoteric knowledge" but the nature of than knowledge is different. Gilmore's preoccupation with Nielsen's identity as a Mormon and a representative of the law also links his understanding of his fate to their obvious difference in "moral" status: Gilmore breaks the law; Nielsen upholds it.

While Mailer's ideas about agency seem relatively straightforward, his understanding of fate seems to be divided between a social and a metaphysical interpretation. Throughout the novel, in fact, Mailer veers between these two interpretations of Gilmore's life. At times Mailer seems to perpetuate the Gilmore mystique, presenting Gilmore and the events surrounding him as supernaturally influenced. This mystification runs the gamut from borderline-hokum (Gilmore's blood relationship to Houdini and his reputation as an incarnation of Satan) to what are most likely straightforward investigations into Gilmore's notions of karma and reincarnation. Ultimately, however, like its treatment of the biblical story of the Fall, *Executioner's* investigation of the metaphysical elements of Gilmore's life serves to illuminate its vision of American life, and not the reverse. Mailer counters each of the novel's anecdotes with

a more rational reading that locates causality in is the material, which is to say, social realm of Gilmore's actions and reactions to his circumstances.

In Gilmore, Mailer finds a perfect embodiment for his pre-occupation with the duality of good and evil. At different moments, Gilmore claims a privileged relationship with both heaven and hell. Soon after meeting Nicole, Gilmore tells her he has a guardian angel that once provided him with fur-lined mittens on a freezing day. The dramatic irony of Gilmore's upcoming murders causes this sweet story to take on an ominous tone, particularly because he uses it to manipulate Nicole into a more strongly dependent relationship. Gilmore is partially flirting, but also attempting to create a sense of obligation in Nicole. He tells her his Guardian Angel " came around when [he] needed him…" and "left a long time ago," but that "on the night [he met her] he found his angel again" (113).

More disturbing is Nicole's willingness to believe in, and her attraction to, the notion of Gilmore as an incarnation of the devil. Whatever its nature, Gilmore's power over her is obvious:

> Once she was running around…and he called to her. Something in his voice made her tear all the way down…Gary picked her up then… She had the odd feeling of an evil presence near her that came from Gary…. Said to herself, well if he is the devil, maybe I want to get closer. In the dark she asked: "Are you the devil?" (114)

Here Gilmore deliberately plays up his mystique. He "sets her down" and, with an actor's sense of timing, "didn't say anything" for a moment. It got really cold around them. He

told Nicole he had a friend named Ward White who once asked him the same question" (114).

While Mailer appears to foment the of myth Gilmore's supernatural powers, a closer reading suggests that Gilmore's reputation preceded him. Mailer, as he does with Brenda at the opening of the novel, recounts *Nicole's* very subjective perceptions of Gilmore. In a similar vein, Mailer reproduces, uncommented upon, an equally unreliable narrative by Gilmore's mother that suggests her son's unusual fate was destined by his magnetic attractiveness to the spirit world. According to Bessie, "an apparition attached itself to Gary" in babyhood. This spirit was the source of such profound chaos that the family had to flee their home: "She blamed it on the house in which they lived…[O]ne time they were in the bedroom…and they could hear somebody talking and laughing in the kitchen. When they ran down, nobody was there. Then a flood came and gas started bubbling up along the walls. Frank [Gary's Father] said 'That's it. We're getting out.'" (459) The inclusion of Bessie's story establishes only the Gilmore family's susceptibility to belief in the spirit world. In this sense it goes further to explain the origin of Gilmore's cosmology more than anything about Gilmore himself.

Mailer also gets a lot of mileage out of Gilmore's supposed blood relationship to Houdini, whom Gilmore believed to be his paternal grandfather. Houdini's love/hate relationship with the supernatural also runs remarkably close to Mailer's impulses throughout *The Executioner's Song*: Houdini's renown as an unmasker of false spiritualists, coupled with his fervent attempts to prove the existence of an afterlife parallels Mailer's attraction to "true" mysticism, and scorn of the huckster-quality of the Third Awakening (512). In *Shot in the Heart*, Mikal Gilmore's memoir of his brother,

Mikal claims the story is false.[21] The numbers of stories in *Executioner* that are retold in *Shot in the Heart* suggest that (in addition to its shaggy-dog quality) Mailer had concrete evidence that there was no truth to the Houdini story.[22]

As he does throughout the novel, Mailer ultimately debunks the supernatural associations he helped to promulgate. Directly after the transcripts of Gilmore's first hearing, at which he refused to appeal, Mailer reprints an item from the *Deseret News* that deflates the Houdini myth and forecasts the finality of Gilmore's death. Under the headline "Houdini Didn't Show" the article is a rather tongue-in-cheek report on a group of musicians waiting for a communication from Houdini on the anniversary of his death:"Hoping for a message from the master…all they got was interference from a local rock station. 'It's not even very good music,' said one magician.'" (485)

In the final analysis, Mailer's Gilmore is more canny than uncanny. Although Gilmore clearly exploited his reputation for supernatural abilities throughout his career as an inmate, the novel suggests that Gilmore's true power lay in his skills of manipulation and intimidation. The Ward White story provides a demystifying insight into Gilmore's reputation as a "devil" as well as a thumbnail sketch of the power dynamic at work in the penal system. Gilmore accidentally witnesses White's humiliating rape in reform school.

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[21]In *Shot in the Heart* Mikal Gilmore states, "I do not believe that he [Frank Gilmore] was the illegitimate son of Harry Houdini, though I suspect my father believed it" (72).

[22] Gilmore conducted his own research, some of which he claims was based on Mailer's. See his introduction to *Shot in the Heart* .

After meeting White in prison years later, Gilmore uses the knowledge to blackmail his "friend" out of a ring White had bought the materials to make:

> Ward told him he had just received some silver from a mail house and asked Gary to turn it into a ring. Out of a book of Egyptian designs …Gary copied a something called the Eye of Horus. When it was done Gary said it was a magical ring and he wanted it for himself. Never mentioned the old memory. He didn't have to. (114)

Despite Gilmore's deliberate nod to mysticism in choosing the Eye of Horus, there is nothing metaphysically significant or even surprising in Ward White's comparing Gilmore to the devil. Instead, the story really reveals two harsh political realities that contextualize Gilmore's trajectory: the first is the inevitability of prison, and the second is the unquestioned acceptance of victimization as a skill for surviving inside of its walls. Underscoring the point Gilmore makes in the *Playboy* interview, Mailer suggests that Gilmore is as well socialized as any member of society; the "problem" is that his society requires a different set of skills. What confuses Gilmore, perhaps rightly, is why the survival skills that are so successful in prison are met with such intense disapproval in mainstream society. Mailer's description of Gilmore and White's reunion ("He and Ward White were separated for years and then ran into each other again in jail" [114]) would be equally suitable for two college roommates meeting years later in the supermarket.

While *Executioner* is far from an apology for Gilmore's crimes, the novel casts doubt on both the psychiatric and legal interpretations of Gilmore's actions as wholly sociopathic. Barry Farrell charges Gilmore with sociopathy for his cynical manipulation

of the media, but also makes it clear that neither Gilmore nor his family will be its beneficiaries. Farrell's characterization of Gilmore's death as a business venture is accurate, but Mailer's narrative makes clear that Gilmore had little choice; he is powerless until he learns to use the power of the media as a propaganda apparatus, and the legal system against itself: "Gilmore had expected a lot of results from his hunger strike, got none, and had enough sense of public relations to go back to eating on a day when there was a bigger story to interest the public."(713)

The reader's first and last glimpses of Gilmore establish him as both abandoned and exploited by the state. In this sense, Mailer suggests, Gilmore's behavior is anti-social in only the most literal sense. Rather than a nihilistic attempt to destroy society, the supposedly "motiveless" murders read as an act of revenge against its power to destroy him. Gilmore enters the narrative with nothing and exits in debt When Brenda meets him at the airport he is free from prison for the first time in his adult life. He carries everything he owns in a small flight bag, telling his cousin, "This is it. This is all I have" (24). Gilmore's patrimony from the state consists of a mismatched polyester suit and a pair of plastic shoes. Yet even these items aren't really Gilmore's. As Mailer suggests, he must pay for them, quite literally, with his sole currency. After Gilmore's execution, the state quite literally gets its pound of flesh. It is difficult, if not impossible, to miss the critique in Mailer's graphic account of Gilmore's autopsy. Performed at the University of Utah, where all "Postmortems for the State were held," (981) Gilmore finally pays his debt to the state. Like an abandoned car, the transplant doctor strips him of his valuable parts and leaves "Gary open from above the pubic hair to his breastbone" (981). Then the Utah state coroner takes over. After he "skinned Gilmore right up over his shoulders…he

took out what was left of Gilmore's heart…then cut little pieces out of each organ…and sliced the brain like a meatloaf" (981-83).

As if even this were not enough, Mailer (somewhat sentimentally) stretches the metaphor of Gilmore's battered heart to the breaking point: "Not even half" is "left of Gilmore's heart…The thing was pulverized…Jerry didn't recognize it as the heart" (981). The metaphor of Gilmore's diminished heart—whether it explains or is explained by the course of his life--recapitulates the various interpretive dilemmas at the heart of the novel. Like Gilmore's "unrecognizable" heart, the novel's depiction of Gilmore's entropic life is available to both an existential and a social critique. But while Joan Didion reads "the field of negative energy" and "the vast emptiness at the center of the Western experience" (Didion 80) as primarily chthonic, there is no denying the social, and specifically political critique the novel locate in Gilmore's "broken" heart.

As *Executioner's* depiction of Gilmore's life makes clear, the "nihilism" and "emptiness" which Didion identifies in her review has a clear social and politically relevant counterpart. Both Farrell's article and Mailer's novel stress the formidable effort of will that for better and for worse, Gilmore brought to bear on his own behalf. Gilmore actually had considerable success determining the conditions of his death; what he couldn't determine was the course of his life. In Mailer's assessment it was this sense of impotence that fueled the murders and condemned Gilmore to death.

Mailer's depiction of the murders directly contradicts Gilmore's assertions that he had no specific reason for killing two innocent men. Although Gilmore's reasons for committing the murders vacillate wildly, Mailer's construction of the narrative casts all of them as the expressions of grief and rage. As though setting up the murders, Mailer

includes a conversation Gilmore has on his first post-prison date, with a woman upon whom he will take revenge for rejecting him. Gilmore tells Lu Ann, "Everybody's got something. I got nothing…you…all had it easy" (41). While Gilmore tells Schiller he murdered two men "because I did not want to kill Nicole" (672), He also brags to his cellmate Gibbs about avoiding responsibility for the crime without resorting to an insanity plea:

> I am telling them that the killings were unreal. That I saw everything through a veil of water… "It was like I was in a movie," I say to them, "and I couldn't stop the movie." "Is that how it came down?" asked Gibbs. "Shit no…I walked in on Benny Bushnell and I said to that fat son of a bitch, 'Your money, son, *and* your life.'" (356)

Gilmore's eschewal of an insanity plea demands that the murders be understood as a meaningful act, which is to say, as a rational response to his life experience. However, Gilmore's forced bravado only underscores the fact that his "lie" about being out of control is remarkably accurate, particularly in the context of his statements to Lieutenant Nielsen. In response to Nielsen's direct question about his motives, Gilmore responds, "Hey…I don't know. I don't have a reason." Nielsen observes that Gilmore "was calm when he said it, and sad. Looked like he was close to crying" (289). Mailer's inclusion of Nielsen's observation that Gilmore was near tears echoes Gilmore's supposedly fabricated state of mind during the killings. Anyone "close to crying" has experienced the "veil of water" that obscured Gilmore's crime from himself.

Furthermore, the specificity of Gilmore's assertion that he didn't want to murder *Nicole* suggests not simply his love for her, but introduces another important possibility:

that he claimed the lives of Jensen and Bushnell as recompense for his own losses. In *Shot in the Heart*, Mikal Gilmore explains his brother's refusal to appeal his sentence as an attempt to fulfill the Mormon precept of Blood Atonement. In Mormon theology, the crime of murder creates a blood "debt" that can be repaid only by the spilling of the murderer's blood in return. Unlike a state execution, Mikal Gilmore stresses that Blood Atonement is "a matter of redemption not vengeance" (17). In this way, Mikal shifts his brother's "voluntary" execution from negation (suicide) to restoration. This interpretation of Gilmore's motives also suggests his seemingly random murders of two fellow Mormons as the *victims'* blood atonement for the deprivation of Gilmore's entire life.

Gilmore's own comments in the novel suggest complex motives of both revenge and atonement: "I want to get even; to be made even, whole, have my debts paid (whatever it may take!)…I'd like to stand in the sight of God and know that I'm just and right and clean." (305) Gilmore's wish "to have [his] debts paid" supports his brother's interpretation; Gilmore expresses remorse a number of times in his interviews and letters. On the other hand, Gilmore also claims "I want to *get* even, to be *made* even, whole." Gilmore's wish to "get even" expresses a simple desire for revenge, while the twin desires to "be *made* even and "made whole" (both "even" and "whole" seem to modify "made") complicate his meaning. While "being made whole" is a common idiom for reimbursement, Gilmore's more idiosyncratic wish to be "*made* even" seems to express at once his desire for equal status with other men, and possibly (in his use of the passive voice) his inability to achieve this status through his own efforts.

Mailer's description of the privileged lives of the murder victims, which contrast sharply with Gary and Nicole's, supports revenge as Gilmore's motive. While Mailer is

not unsympathetic to Gilmore's victims, he does cast them as the innocent Squares opposite Gilmore's world-weary Hipster. As Mark Edmundson points out, the slightly satiric tone of Mailer's description of the Jensens and the Bushnells (Edmundson 442) suggests that their sheltered middle-class existence has left them naive and cut off from the harsh realities with which Gilmore has had to contend. Mailer also uses the dramatic irony in their sense of safety to set up the disasters to come While Debbie Bushnell "didn't know about matters outside the house…she was terrific with kids and would rather mop her kitchen floor than read. Since she didn't have a driving license, she couldn't go to the grocery store, the Laundromat, or anywhere else without Ben. She also didn't know their bank accounts, or their debts"(243). [23] Mailer use of dramatic irony implies that the Bushnells' innocence is willful, and foreshadows its high cost: "They never felt the need to mix with other people…Nor were they ever afraid of being robbed…he would do what the robber asked." (245)

The Bushnells are shortly to be introduced to a force that is irreconcilable to their orderly view of the world, and unaffected by rational action. "Doing what the robber asks" is useless if what the robber desires is murder. Mailer's depiction of Debbie Bushnell softens in the wake of the murder. Here he intercedes into the text to supply the insight that Debbie Bushnell cannot. The murders mark the end of her innocence:

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[23] On a possible note of irony, Mailer points out that the Bushnells "also managed to meet a $100 car payment…on their Pinto" (243). The Pinto was recalled in June of 1978, during the composition of the novel.

> She kept trying to get the new thing together, but there had been too many breaks. Seeing the strange man in the motel was a break in her understanding. Then the instant she saw Ben's head bleeding. That was an awfully large break. She never went back to the motel…It was the first time she traveled on an airplane in her life. (274)

Mailer depicts the Jensens similarly. Unlike either Gary's or Nicole's, Colleen Jensen's early life was not characterized by random beatings and sexual abuse, but rather by "things that centered on the church, and [the family] expected you to take on things and do well" (214). And unlike Gilmore, who did well in art school but was unable to finish, Colleen, "had been Yearbook Editor and School Artist. She had also done portraits…which enabled her to save money for college" (214). The stability of the Jensen's marriage contrasts sharply with the chaotic relationships in Gary and Nicole's world. The Jensens "have taught many a Sunday school class" about the unbreakable union of Mormon marriage. The flatness of Mailer's tone, suggested by his punctuation, conveys more than a touch of irony. Mailer writes: "Now they were marrying each other. Forever" (216).[24] The portentous weight of Mailer's "forever" is humorously countered by evidence of the couple's childlike innocence: "For their honeymoon they went to Disneyland." (216)

Colleen's husband, Max, is a bastion of American virtue. He is honest, hard working, and disciplined. He is also, Mailer suggests, a bit priggish, and morally rigid to a disturbing degree. Max is apparently viewed through Colleen's eyes, but Mailer has already questioned her reliability as a narrator by presenting her as provincial. An art education major who "hardly knew Botticelli" because "[t] hey did not teach a great deal

about the Renaissance at Utah State" (211). Colleen's admiration only increases the reader's distance from her (and Mailer's) perceptions:

> …[S]he kept feeling how strong a person he was. Max was strict and he wouldn't bend spiritually or mentally. She could see it in the way he felt obligated to tell her he was dating another girl…however…things were not going well with the other girl who was certainly not strong enough, in his opinion, about the church… Afterward, he drove her home in his car…that he kept sparkling clean. (214)…He was a perfectionist… and didn't worry about hurting her feelings. It was natural for him to tell her 'you made a mistake' and expect her to correct it. (216)

Here again, Mailer's slightly satiric depiction of the Jensens seems designed to establish a certain amount of sympathy for Gilmore. Mailer does not suggest that Bushnell and Jensen's terrible fates were deserved, but rather, that innocence and virtue offers no protection against its vagaries. Furthermore, as Mailer's juxtaposition of the characters' lives suggests, if the Jensen's and the Bushnell's fates were not entirely of their own making, neither was Gilmore's lot in life. The novel's depiction of Gilmore's reflexive self-destructiveness, played against the sense of entitlement it suggests in Jensen's character,makes sense of the murders as Gilmore's attempt to balance the scales. In Mailer's account, Gilmore shoots Jensen twice, telling him: "This one's for me" and "This one is for Nicole," after which he "…walked out of this *real clean* gas station [italics mine]" (227).

This passage is particularly significant because it betrays Mailer's presence (and influence) more than any other passage in the novel. *Executioner's* journalistic integrity was important enough to Mailer that he made specific reference to it in the afterword of the novel: "This book does its best to be a factual account of the activities of Gary Gilmore and the men and women associated with him…In consequence, *The Executioner's Song* is directly based on interviews, documents, records of court proceedings, and other original material…and the story is as accurate as one can make it." (1020) However, given that Gilmore never officially confessed to Jensen's murder (as he did to Bushnell's) and there is no evidence, either in the novel or published interviews, that Gilmore ever made such comments before shooting Jensen, they appear to be Mailer's recreation of the moment.

Unlike Jensen's, Bushnell's murder is narrated from the point of view of two witnesses. Although neither Debbie Bushnell nor Peter Arroyo actually witnessed the murder, both of them saw enough to associate Gilmore with crime. Furthermore, Mailer's recreation of Arroyo's thoughts is scrupulously faithful to Arroyo's testimony at Gilmore's trial. Mailer takes pains to establish that Bushnell's wife "heard a gunshot and actually confronted Gilmore moments before finding her husband dying from a gunshot wound"(252-3). Any doubts about Gilmore's association with Bushnell's shooting are removed by Mailer's immediate shift to Arroyo's point of view. Arroyo is described as passing by the motel office in time to see "a tall man with a goatee" holding a cash drawer and a pistol (254). A few moments later, he sees the same man leave the office, and "the motel manager on the floor, and the man's wife next to him …and blood all over the place" (255).

Mailer's view of the murders as Gilmore's revenge for the manifold deprivations of his life is notably compassionate. In his interpretation of the crimes, Gilmore was responding rationally to an irrational fate. Excluded from the "grand promise" of the American Dream, Gilmore survives the temporary deprivation of his liberty, but cannot withstand the unattainability of happiness. While Mailer does not excuse Gilmore from responsibility for his actions, he does view him as having grown, through experience, beyond the self-destructiveness and narcissism that characterizes him earlier in the novel. In his interview with Melvyn Bragg Mailer claims that "…[w] hat you see is...the man does have the capacity to grow. He's not simply that habit-ridden petty monster that he was in early stages who arouses our compassion because he was so trapped…"(Bragg 256).

"Seeing the growth of a man" (or woman) is arguably one of the functions of the novel as a genre. According to Mailer, Gilmore finally begins to assume "the role that history has given him …it's almost awesome. To see the growth of a man" (Bragg 256) In this sense the novel's depiction of Gilmore-the-man's (as opposed to the protagonist's) growth through time is somewhat artificial in that it is imposed by the function of the narrative itself. But *The Executioner's Song* is also an attempt to portray "true life." In the final pages of the novel, Mailer deliberately reveals that the order imposed by narrative is an illusion. After spending over eight hundred pages establishing Gilmore's wish to die, Mailer seemingly "undoes" the work of the novel. At the dry run of the execution procedure, Gilmore approaches one of his attorneys with an escape plan:

> A sense of death had come into the visitor's room. Things had quieted. It was then that Gary came over to Bob. "You wouldn't

> change clothes with me, would you?" he said, and Bob answered, "No I wouldn't." Gary began to describe how he would get out, if Bob would just give him the clothes. He could walk through those gates as Bob Moody, be out the door of Maximum and over that barbed-wire fence faster than you could ever believe… "I know," said Gary, "that I can get out of here if you will do it…" (887)

Mailer's inclusion of this scene would seem to cast his entire narrative into doubt. Not only does Gilmore want to live, he seems to be afraid of death. Prefacing Gilmore and Moody's exchange with the completely subjective perception that "a sense of death" hung over the room suggests that Gilmore is motivated by fear. Mailer's sudden negation of the central assumptions of the narrative is, at first, unsettling. However, the moment is shocking only in that it recalls the reader to the unmediated chaos of "real" life. Gilmore's desire to escape is actually much less surprising than his determination to die. The sense of betrayal created by his perfectly human desire for life and fear of death reveals not Gilmore's anxiety, but the readers'. The final pages of *The Executioner's Song* force its readers to confront the surprising vestiges of their own willful innocence.

Mailer's analysis ultimately bears out Carter's, with a notable exception. In the late 1970s, Americans may well have lost their faith in ideology, in politicians, and even in the nation. But, as *The Executioner's Song* reveals, they had not yet lost their faith in faith. The dissatisfaction inspired by *Executioner's* conclusion suggests the enduring power of narrative to impose order, and hence meaning, on life. The most disturbing

aspect of the novel is that, while it presents a number of rational possibilities, it refuses to affirm that its events are ultimately intelligible. [25]

Ironically, it is Gilmore himself who provides the best gloss on Mailer's analysis: "Murder is thing of itself, a rage and rage is not reason…that's the first time. I've consciously acknowledged that insane truth. Perhaps I'm beginning to grow." (404) The "insane truth" that Gilmore acknowledges, and that represents his true growth, is the presence of chaos just outside the organizing principles of narrative. Gilmore's life story and the stories of those around him question the narrative order imposed by the American Dream— both its guarantee of opportunity and its promise of self-determination**.**

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[25] Mailer suggests as much in his interview with Buckley, in which he refers to a shift in his ideas about the function of literature: "I've always leaned on the side that literature, finally, is a guide-that it explains complex matters to us, it gives us a deeper understanding of our existence. And I felt that maybe the time had come…to do a book where I don't explain it to the reader, and in part I *can't* explain it to the reader." See Lennon, 234.

Chapter Three: "Secret Agency": *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale*

In 1979 *The Executioner's Song* explored the life of a man "who assumes…the role that history has given him" after he murders two private citizens. In *Libra* (1988) and *Oswald's Tale* (1995) Don DeLillo and Norman Mailer follow the trajectory of a seemingly unremarkable man who claims a role in history by killing the president of the United States. Although DeLillo and Mailer's accounts differ stylistically and perhaps thematically, both works place Oswald's assassination of John F. Kennedy in their respective contemporary context. Unlike the more obviously "empirical" accounts of the assassination (the Warren Commission Report, scholarly histories and newspaper articles) DeLillo and Mailer's narratives posit for Oswald a culturally significant motive that is at once personal and expressly political: When Lee Harvey Oswald fires on Kennedy he doesn't just end the President's life, but begins his own. In that moment Oswald transforms himself from "a zero in the system" (*Libra* 106) to "a prime mover, a man who made things happen…" (*O.T.*605).

If, as Myra Jehlen comments, "projections of the future generally sum up the past" (49), Mailer and DeLillo's projections of the past clearly comment on their present. The journey from "a man" who assumes an *assigned* role in history to "a zero" who changes it points to a profound shift in the perception of individual agency that came to fruition in the 1980s. The nature of the shift is not contained in Oswald's desire to transcend his marginality (which he shares with Gilmore), but his response to it. While Gilmore and Oswald are sometimes (and in some ways accurately) compared (Olster, DeCurtis) their cosmologies and senses of self were in fact diametrically opposed. Gilmore was a fatalist. Although he contended mightily with his immediate

circumstances, he accepted their strictures as inevitable. Oswald was quite the opposite. Rather than submitting to "fate," Oswald cast himself as its agent. By assassinating the president he removes himself quite literally, from subjectivity (to fate) and confirms retrospectively his grandiose sense of himself as an important man.

In Mailer and DeLillo's view then, Oswald's act is not essentially self-destructive; it is in some sense self-*con*structive in a way Gilmore's crimes were not. As Richard Poirier argues, this act of self-creation, of *individuation*, is not only personal, but innately political: "…[A]ny effort to find accommodation for human shapes or sounds is an act that partakes of political meaning." (viii). Poirier's notion of the "performing self" as a political self encompasses both DeLillo and Mailer's depiction of Oswald and the specific goals of their authorial projects: "… [T]his activity, when it is found in writing, offers a traceable exemplification of possible political and social activities." (viii)

But *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale* are also political novels in a more concrete sense. Oswald's bid for selfhood only complicates *Executioner's* nuanced critique of the role of individualism in American life. As an Emersonian act of self-making, Mailer reads Oswald's act as both audacious and peculiarly American. As an act of murder, however, it adds an unsettlingly literal dimension to Gilmore's last-ditch negative agency: For DeLillo, the predication of Oswald's life on Kennedy's death suggests a kind of zero-sum game in which celebrity confers personhood.

In both works, the exaggerated faith in the transformative power of personal agency suggests not confidence, but a profound anxiety about the real possibilities for individual action. Frank Lentricchia, like Linda Hutcheon and Barbara Foley, sees the disillusionment that informs *Libra* as the implicit context of post-Watergate America.

("Libra" 438). While Watergate is not its sole source (see Chapters One and Two), the presence of a broad-scale loss of faith in political institutions was by he end of the 1970s a foregone conclusion. What is more important in terms of understanding the provenance of DeLillo and Mailer's neo-Emersonian Oswald is how this loss of faith paved the way for the return to conservative (as opposed to progressive) values and in turn, the election of Ronald Reagan.

In short, despite DeLillo and Mailer's reliance upon the historical record to render Oswald's inner life, both "Oswalds" are in different ways products of the Reagan era. While the ascendance of Reagan's particular ideology was linked to a variety of political and economic changes, its core values represented an extreme rightward shift in the deeply entrenched American debate over the competing roles of individualism and communitarianism. In its most basic form, Reagan's vision of the atomistic individual as the sole repository of social "good" directly opposed Jimmy Carter's progressive agenda, which envisioned the role of government as the overseer of social welfare. As Sean McCann points out, the 1980s saw Carter's agenda steadily reveresd: "for nearly the past two decades 'social welfare' has been an ever-dwindling aspect of our political order." (296)

To the extent that Oswald embodies the best and worst of the American ideals of personal freedom and agency, his life story functions as a kind of case study-in it he is *both* villain and hero. DeLillo and Mailer's biographical narratives are unsettling not merely in what they allege about Oswald, but in what Oswald suggests about the nature and formation of American identity. As their depictions make clear, the existence of such a figure as Oswald, or more accurately, such a peculiarly unmoored Oswald, has broader

and perhaps more ominous ramifications than Poirier may have supposed. As Marita Sturken has pointed out, “Within the national discourse, the stakes of biography are high; the meaning of certain life stories helps to shape the way the nation and its history are defined” (Rhiel and Suchoff 45).

Of course, *Libra and Oswald’s Tale* are not merely products of the Reagan era. They are also incisive responses to specific events of the period. Despite Frank Lentricchia’s assertion that the impetus for *Libra* was the Iran-Contra scandal, DeLillo’s 1983 essay in *Rolling Stone* suggests that its true origin lies in John Hinckley’s attempt on Reagan’s life. DeLillo’s essay also provides a window into his imaginative process by tracing the evolution of the parallel between the events that *Libra* will eventually build. What makes the essay particularly fascinating is the sense it communicates of DeLillo feeling his way toward his next novel. DeLillo’s original point of departure for addressing the Kennedy assassination was the American penchant for violence, and its power to produce social cohesion. DeLillo’s comments in the essay seem to indicate that he was considering a novel about the assassination of American public figures. In addition to his discussion of John F. Kennedy and John Hinckley, DeLillo begins to draw a parallel between the assassinations of JFK and Malcolm X:

> The bloodspray and chaos in Dealey Plaza and at the Audubon Ballroom are brought to a sameness and stillness that make us want to find a consoling harmony somewhere out there in the vast strange vapor we call the nation…Beyond this…we don’t know where to look for a connection not made in a moment of sudden blood. (1983 74*)*

The finished novel suggests that by 1988 DeLillo's focus had shifted away from the theme of violence *per se*, in favor of the critique of the American obsession with media imagery that Lentricchia will find so trenchant. In the *Rolling Stone* essay DeLillo also suggests that both the Kennedy assassination and the attempt on Reagan's life were media events. If, he claims, "[t]he Kennedy assassination was a home movie…called the Zapruder film…[t]he Reagan shooting was pure TV, a minicam improvisation" (24). In the *Rolling Stone* essay DeLillo makes a distinction between Oswald and Hinckley, but *Libra's* depiction of Oswald will ultimately be an amalgam of the Oswald who was "put together by others, a secret pawn" and the Hinckley that DeLillo characterizes as "media-poisoned, a man drawn toward murder by a movie he saw…" (24). As DeLillo will later suggest in *Libra* about Oswald, Hinckley is "a self-created media event…There is an element of performance in such acts of violence. Hinckley sees the act on television even as he commits it…This is a self-referring event. The man who performs the act comments on it at the same time" (24). DeLillo stages this very moment in *Libra*, although it is reversed. It is not his own act of violence that Oswald watches on television, but Jack Ruby's. Playing on the nuances of the sound "oh," DeLillo suggests that Oswald's life only becomes real to him when he sees his own death on television. At that moment, it seems, he understands how he has been cheated: "He could see himself shot as the camera caught it. Through the pain he watched TV… He knew what it meant to be in pain. All you had to do was watch TV. Arm over his chest, mouth in a knowing oh." (*Libra* 439-40)

Oswald's Tale is also the product of concrete historical forces, as well as more pragmatic goals. Glasnost allowed Larry Schiller, and therefore Mailer, the dual rewards

of exclusive "scoop" and almost guaranteed profitability. The novel was Mailer's third collaboration with Schiller, whose reputation as an ambulance chaser and "carrion bird" doesn't appear to have improved much, despite the Pulitzer Prize he and Mailer won for *The Executioner's Song*. In an article on the state of the news media as a whole, Schiller is sniffed at as "entrepreneurial" and characterized (in a perhaps vaguely anti-Semitic manner) as someone who "always had a nose for big-bucks journalism". [1] Mailer, who has been similarly accused of pandering and writing "pop journalism," refers quite matter-of-factly to his attraction to the material's novelty. According to him, "One stimulus to the writing of this book was an offer from the Belarus KGB to allow a look into their files on Oswald…[I]t was…the equivalent of an Oklahoma land-grab for an author to be able to move into a large and hitherto unrecorded part of Oswald's life"(349). But Mailer's comments also suggest a journalistic verve for investigation, and the inborn skepticism that makes many of his analyses so incisive: "Of course, the task in Russia had not been to search for an answer…This was not a search for a smoking gun…it was more of one's aim …to set up base camp on the slopes of such a mystery." (*O.T.* 349) More importantly, Mailer underscores the role the huge political changes of the early 1990s played in gaining access to the information that made *Oswald's Tale* possible:"[T]he end of the Cold War encouraged Russian and Byelorussian acquaintances of Oswald to loosen the habits of discretion formed under Stalin and preserved by Brezhnev…" (349) In a 1997 *Playboy* interview, Schiller (this time the subject) explains

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[1] "Insight on the News." Quoted in Literature Resource Center Author Resource Pages http://galenet.galegroup.com. Accessed CUNY Graduate Center, 4/19/2006.

how a bit of his own self-reliance earned him access to formerly top-secret KGB files: "I had a name in Russia. I was invited to Mikhail Gorbachev's peace summit, and then to be a negotiator on the bilateral talks in Russia between the U.S. Government and the U.S. Information Agency." (*Playboy* 47)

The implicit question posed by both narratives is whether Oswald represents an aberration, or the logical conclusion of American individualist values. For Mailer, whose abiding interest in the figure of the Sociopath-as-heroic- individual is central to his work, the ambiguity of the boundary between the two (when "the best choice is closest to the worst") is nothing new. What is new is the *political* specificity of Mailer's metaphor. In *Executioner,* he compares Gilmore to Houdini, dangling him between Romantic self-sacrifice and Karmic responsibility. In *Oswald's Tale*, Emerson and Hitler represent the twin poles of Oswald's self-perception. As in Gilmore's case, Mailer clearly admires Oswald, but doesn't shrink from revealing the will-to-power that informs the moral duality he identifies in Oswald's character. But Mailer's critique of Oswald is not simply an isolated psychological portrait, but also a social critique. Although he deliberately avoids answering the question of Oswald's "normalcy" or aberrance, his suggestion that the reader consider Oswald a kind of everyman places the onus for the creation of such a person, for better or worse, on American life. In summing up the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, Mailer suggests that the fundamental desires of a presidential assassin are not so far removed from our own: "Let us, then, say farewell to Lee Harvey Oswald's long and determined dream of political triumph, wifely approbation, and high destiny. Who among us can say he is in no way related to our own dream?" (790-1)

Libra's critique of Oswald is similarly inextricable from its critique of American culture. As Frank Lentricchia points out, "The question, who or what is responsible for the production of *Lee Harvey Oswald* [italics Lentricchia's]…is inseparable from the question of where DeLillo imagines power to lie in America". ("Don DeLillo" 16) In referring to Oswald as a cultural "production" Lentricchia also posits him as a metonymic American. But while Mailer brings Oswald to "America" (Oswald is like all of us), DeLillo brings the nation to Oswald (we have become like Oswald). In *Libra* it is not Oswald that is aberrant, but Americans themselves. According to Lentricchia, "DeLillo does not…imply that all Americans are would-be murderous sociopaths. He has presented a far more unsettling vision of normalcy, of an everyday life so enthralled by the fantasy selves projected in the media…that it makes little sense to speak of sociopathology or a lone gunman. Oswald is ourselves painted large, in scary tones, but ourselves" ("DD" 17-18).

Lentricchia's acute reading of *Libra* reveals the ways in which DeLillo and Mailer's accounts part company. While critics have read both *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale* as "postmodern" works, they are more accurately critiques of the political, cultural, and economic changes that comprise the notion of Postmodernity. Put simply, the two works locate their critiques of "late capitalism" differently. *Libra* is a critique of a newly minted American self, most understandable in psychoanalytic terms, while Mailer's critique centers on the environmental (social and political) factors that made a figure like Oswald necessary. As such, DeLillo's psychological portrait of Oswald differs substantively from Mailer's temporal contextualization of Oswald's ideology. In DeLillo's Oswald Lentricchia sees the birth of the postmodern individual, a media- created American, who

truly exists only in the bright lights of the camera. For Oswald, whose assassination attempts are a way to "make his existence felt" (*Libra* 373), the enthrallment with what Lentricchia calls "the charisma of the media" is fueled by his drive for recognition. Most importantly, as Lentricchia suggests, the powerful social cohesion provided by this media "charisma" substitutes for the community and solidarity of the Marxist ideal. Referring to the moment in which the dying Oswald sees his image on a television monitor Lentricchia writes, "*Marxist Oswald* will become, in his last moment of lucid consciousness…*Postmodern Oswald*—a man who wants to, and does enter 'the world in general,' not through striking a blow in class warfare…but by entering the aura [italics mine]"(*Libra* 435).

DeLillo's critique of the postmodern self, so skillfully analyzed by Lentricchia, enacts Lacan's theories of identity formation. Like a child suddenly recognizing himself in the mirror as an entity separate from his mother, Oswald's sight of himself on the television monitor provides his first purely objective sense of himself. As he looks into the camera and "could see himself shot…and watched himself respond to the augering heat of he bullet"(439), he finally "feels" himself in the self-other relationship that, according to Lacan, is necessary to define individual identity. Dying, he enters "the white nightmare of noon, high in the sky over Russia," where he finally feels the defining sense of "Me-too and you-too. He is a stranger, in a mask, falling" (440). Lacan describes the mirror stage as "an identification." and as "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (*Ecrits* 2). According to Lacan, it is the moment in which "the I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it…its function

as the subject" (2). Oswald is conflicted. While he is drawn to assuage his loneliness by subsuming his identity into a larger consciousness (to "merge himself in…history" [*Libra* 87]), his narcissistic drive to escape the pain of being quite literally subjected to history proves stronger. According to Marshall Alcorn, "Lacan's Subject is best described as the one who suffers" (199), and indeed, Oswald finds his subjectivity, in both senses of the word, humiliating. In *Libra* he is repeatedly referred to and thinks of himself, as "a zero". Not coincidentally, In Book II of *The Seminars*, Lacan defines the subject as "not an entity" and as "no one". Instead of taking on what Lacan seems to suggest is a mature (though fraught) sense of self, Oswald rejects the "subject" position imposed by language in favor of "the primordial I" that is desired but removed from the pain of desiring. Watching a John Garfield movie, Oswald replaces Garfield-as-movie-star with himself: "Lee felt he was in the middle of his own movie. They were running this thing just for him." (*Libra* 370) It is this role into which Oswald casts himself in both of his assassination attempts. As he aims at General Walker through the window of Walker's office, "Lee caught the general's eye and smiled as if to say, Bet you don't know who I am. Untouchable. He had his hand inside of his jacket, gripping the .38, just to do it…show how simple, how strangely easy it was *to make your existence felt* [italics mine]"(*Libra* 373). Again, DeLillo underscores Oswald's self-objectification as Oswald fires his first shot at Kennedy: "There was so much clarity Lee could watch himself in the huge room of stacked cartons…He fired off a second shot." (398)

Lentricchia, paraphrasing DeLillo, refers to Oswald's bid to transcend subjectivity as "the desire for the universal third person," which he claims DeLillo sees as "primal for his imagination of America" ("Libra" 431). Lentricchia's point is well taken; Oswald's

struggle to shift from "first person consciousness to third" (431) is apparent, in both the act of envisioning his somewhat grandiose Historic Diary (also capitalized in the writings of the "real"[historical] Oswald), and in the slippery pronouns of DeLillo's narration: "*He* wanted to explain *himself* to posterity. People would read these words and understand the fears and aspirations of a man who just wanted to see for *myself* what socialism was like [italics mine]." (211) However, as DeLillo makes clear, the shaky sense of self evidenced by his Oswald's reversion to the personal pronoun "myself" recasts the hubris of composing such a portentous document as compensation. Veering between the first and third persons, Oswald's dyslexia simultaneously intensifies and thwarts his determination to fill the void of his identity with language: "Always the pain, the chaos of composition. He could not find order in the little field of symbols. In every direction he came up against his own incompleteness." (211) [2]

Ultimately the distinction of "postmodernity" in reference either to text or authorial stance is not particularly useful beyond their temporal context because DeLillo and Mailer's authorial goals are quite different. Such a distinction is also unsatisfying because the relationship between the works' representative strategies and their arguments is somewhat counterintuitive. Because *Libra* is more obviously a novel than *Oswald's Tale* it is not surprising that it is more formally innovative than Mailer's "journalistic speculation"(*O.T.* 353). And, as David C. Courtwright points out, for the purpose of

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[2] See Lacan's discussion of the symbolic order, which is outside the scope of this paper.

depicting a person who "constantly changes allegiances, aliases, jobs, residences," *Libra*'s form serves its content well: "Oswald and narrative discontinuity, the perfect marriage of subject and form." (77) On the other hand, despite *Libra's* rejection of narrative order, DeLillo offers a surprisingly clear, and for some, satisfying theory of the assassination. In an interview, DeLillo explains that although his version of the story may not be "an argument that this is what really happened" (DeCurtis 57), it does attempt to provide the reader with a meaningful possibility. According to DeLillo, "…*Libra*…attempts to provide a hint of order in the midst of all the randomness" (56).

In a similar vein, while Mailer's more journalistic study of Oswald's life is by nature a chronology, he points out that its narrative ordering and reliance on empirical fact only deepens the mystery and underscores the sense of chaos surrounding the assassination. The nature of this mystery in turn invites the same act of authorial imagining that informs DeLillo's novel:

> Let me propose, then, that a mystery of the immense dimensions of Oswald's case will, in the writing, *create a form of its own, somewhere between fiction and non-fiction.* Technically this book fits into the latter category—it is most certainly not fiction. The author did his best to make up no dialogue himself and attribute no private motives to his real characters unless he was careful to label all as speculation. Still, it is a peculiar form of non-fiction, since not only interviews, documents…intelligence files…and letters are employed, but speculations as well. The author's musings become

> some of the operative instruments. Of course, speculation is often an invaluable resource of the novelist. (*O.T.*353)

As will become clear, Mailer's speculations and attributions of motive to his "real characters" are often less carefully delineated than he claims. Furthermore, the act of "fictionalizing" is not confined to inclusion ("making up dialogue"), but is equally susceptible to exclusion. Ultimately, however, *Oswald's Tale,* like *Daniel*, rejects the power of empirical evidence to convey a reliable image of "truth." Unlike DeLillo, Mailer denies the reader the comfort of narrative closure or the promise of meaning. After following Mailer through almost 800 pages of interviews, testimony, and authorial speculation, the reader is confronted by a mischievous hook: "Did Oswald do it?"(775) What follows is not a piece of formerly withheld evidence of Oswald's innocence or guilt, but a disquisition on the opacity of evidence itself:

> O]n one can go, trying to explore into every last reach of possibility, only to encounter a disheartening truth: Evidence, by itself, will never provide the answer to a mystery. For it is the nature of evidence itself to provide a counterinterpretation to itself…It will be obvious to the reader that one does not (and should not) respect evidence with the religious intensity that others bring to it…
>
> (*O.T.* 775)

DeLillo's stance is diametrically opposed to Mailer's. In both the DeCurtis interview and the author's note at the end of the novel, DeLillo makes it clear that he views the role of fiction (and that of writers) as not merely descriptive, but redemptive. Not only can fiction "rescue history from its confusions" by "filling in its blank spaces,"

but “the fiction writer tries to redeem the despair” (56) that arises from the failure to construct, like his fictional librarian Nicholas Branch, coherent narratives.

DeLillo and Mailer present indeterminacy as an escape from opposite problems, but both writers ultimately reinscribe the power of the authorial voice to order an otherwise unmanageable universe. In both novels, the stakes of agency are stratospheric. For DeLillo, indeterminacy is a “refuge” from “being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities” (*Libra*, Author’s Note), while for Mailer it provides an exit from self-delusion. At its core, *Libra* functions as a gloss on Oswald’s famous protest that he was “just a patsy,” presenting Oswald as a victim of the Debordean spectacle, falling prey to an illusion of mastery that ultimately robs him of consent. Although Oswald believes that, through Kennedy, he is controlling his fate, his path is pre-ordained in the plotting (both the characters’ and the author’s) of *Libra.* Mailer too explores the notion of the assassination as a kind of fool’s game, but in *Oswald’s Tale* the true “patsies” are seekers of the truth, who, to the extent that they may have come looking for answers, are metaphors for the reader

By placing the story of Lee Harvey Oswald in their respective contemporary contexts, *Libra* and *Oswald’s Tale* cast Oswald—retrospectively—as a curiously postmodern, or (in Mailer’s case) post- Cold-War individual. As Lentricchia points out, the peculiarly apolitical and solipsistic Oswald of these novels could never have been “written” in the early 1960s, but is instead “a contemporary production” (“DD” 16). This is why DeLillo and Mailer’s depictions of Oswald have a disorienting “back to the future” quality. In them he appears both an avatar of future American selves and an anachronistic “throwback to modernist alienation” (Olster 48). In this way, Oswald both

creates and is created by the Kennedy assassination, or what Thomas Carmichael calls "the first postmodern historical event" (Carmichael, 207).

One of the reasons for the temporal disorientation of *Libra* is that the perception of the Kennedy assassination as the primal loss of American innocence is by its very nature a retrospective notion. Although DeLillo sees the Kennedy assassination as he point of origin for Bell's "end of ideology," [3] it is likely that the opposite is more historically "true," that DeLillo's perception of Oswald is itself a product of the post-Vietnam period. This is why Carmichael characterizes the assassination as a kind of year zero that alters the future and reframes the past, referring to it as both "the original site of a contemporary nostalgia," and "the moment at which all that follows in the postmodern period was violently interjected into contemporary experience"(207).

Not coincidentally, both DeLillo and Mailer pinpoint the Kennedy assassination as the origin of a kind of existential crisis for the nation. In the *Rolling Stone* interview DeLillo claims that the true legacy of the assassination was a loss of meaning: [W] hat has become unraveled since that afternoon in Dallas is not the plot…but the sense of a coherent reality most of us shared. We seem from that moment to have entered a world of randomness and ambiguity…" (22). While Mailer may not share DeLillo's "big bang theory" of contemporary consciousness, he does suggest that the enduring attraction to the conspiracy theory of the assassination (and the attendant status it confers upon Oswald), stems from the nation's need to impose meaning on the event. In *Oswald's*

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[3] See Chapters One and Two for a more complete discussion of Bell's use of the phrase.

Tale he points out that if Oswald was indeed a lone gunman,"… a petty figure, a lone twisted and pathetic killer who happened to be in a position to kill a… president, then…[t]here was no logic to the event, and no sense of balance in the universe…(606). This sense of "randomness and ambiguity" permeates both *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale.* Its attribution of causality to unpredictable and uncontrollable forces renders political ideology irrelevant and the notion of centralized power an illusion.

In contrast to DeLillo's psychoanalytic portrait of Oswald's relationship to his unformed ego, Mailer's depiction concerns Oswald's interactions with an increasingly ambiguous power structure. As Mailer makes clear in his interview with Robert Begiebing, his perception that power is no longer centralized in the traditional political organs began in the 1980s. According to Mailer, "In the sixties I used to see it as the FBI and the CIA being sinister. Now I suppose it has moved over to the idea that such things as television and plastics are getting us much closer to totalitarianism that the FBI or CIA ever would" (Begiebing 321). Mailer's indictment of television and "plastics" is not unlike DeLillo's in spirit, but differs in its focus on specific political changes that had become apparent in the 1980s:

> There are certainly signs that we are in a period that's not like other periods. One of them…is that in the last twenty or certainly last ten years, we've come to a point in this country where people no longer believe that the president knows the answers. I think part of Reagan's vast appeal in the media is because he's probably the most relaxed president we've had…So people feel, well, he seems secure. Maybe he does know the answers…[T] here's nothing more

> disconcerting to the average American than the thought that the president doesn't know the answers, doesn't really know where we're going. (Begiebing 323)

The source of Mailer's comments about Reagan's "vast appeal" to the media and the American public is most likely Reagan's 1981 inaugural address. In it Reagan invokes both Emerson and the "city on the hill" as symbols of the limitless possibilities for those Americans willing to "believe in themselves." As Cyrus Patell points out, Reagan's rhetoric cleverly reconfigures Emerson's call for self-reliance and personal responsibility into an unapologetic paean to personal gain (Preface, ix-xxii). Most tellingly, Reagan's opening gambit as president replaces Carter's jeremiad against Americans' cynicism and materialism with praise for their self-reliance and entrepreneurial spirit, which he specifically couches as patriotism. While Carter placed the onus for the nation's spiritual malaise on Americans themselves, Reagan casts the crisis of faith as a failure of Democratic nerve. In an introduction to the speech, written for an anthology of his speeches, Reagan states its message explicitly:

> I do think…that my faith in the American people and what they could do had a special resonance in 1980. The Democratic Party's leaders would never admit this, but the simple fact is they had lost faith in the citizens of our country. They couldn't see this, but the American people did, and they elected me the fortieth president of the United States. (Reagan, 1989 59-60)

As this passage suggests, Reagan's true appeal was sentimental rather than explicitly ideological. According to Patell, Reagan was elected "not because he rendered the complexities of policy comprehensible to the average citizen (he did not)" but because he articulated a "consistently individualist interpretation of what it means to be an American" (x). As Patell points out, Reagan misinterpreted and oversimplified Emerson's notion of self-reliance, underscoring individualism as a path to "freedom," while downplaying the ethos of personal responsibility that counterbalanced it. (xi-xiii). More important, perhaps, was the sense of tradition and destiny with which Reagan imbued this interpretation. In a speech, Reagan relates a humorous anecdote that locates him in the realm of the "original" and hence unquestioned spirit of the Constitution: "At a dinner party recently, Teddy Kennedy said that Averell's age was only half as old as Ronald Reagan's ideas. And you know, he's absolutely right. The Constitution is almost two hundred years old. That's where I get my ideas." (Reagan 419*)*

Although Reagan's semi-joke presents his vision as a transparent embodiment of the Constitution, Patell reads it as merely timely: "What Reagan was offering in its most simplified form was a story about the idea of individualism that seemed to have attained a hegemonic force in U.S. culture…[and became] one of those official stories that serve as cultural consensus." (Patel, x- xi) Along with the Reagan administration's skillful use of Emerson's ideas against affirmative action policies, Reagan's linkage of self-reliance, "spiritual genius" and "prosperity," valorizes "entrepreneurial" pursuit rather over the pursuit of social welfare:

> The business of our nation goes forward…If we look to the answer as to why for so many years we achieved so much, prospered as no

> other people did on this earth, it was because we unleashed the energy and spiritual genius of man to a greater extent than had ever been done before. Freedom and the dignity of the individual have been more available and more assured here than in any other place on earth. (1989,63)

But Reagan's speech makes another powerful connection, one that broadens Chambers' linkage of faith and national identity to include personal wealth. Through the two possible interpretations of "the *business* of our nation", Reagan proposes Capitalism as the nation's true purpose. He goes on to conflate Chambers' spiritual notion of faith with the Emersonian notion of self-reliance, casting this new "faith" as a conduit to wealth. Most significant, this particular "faith" is the lifeblood of the nation: "There are entrepreneurs with *faith in themselves* and faith in an idea. They're individuals…whose… values sustain our national life [italics mine]." And far from Carter's censure of a kind of pernicious individualism, Reagan's speech casts the pursuit of personal gain as both a virtue and a right. According to Reagan, "We have every right to dream heroic dreams. Those who say that we're in a time where there are no heroes…don't know where to look". In a *coup de grace* Reagan co-opts the concept of progress, effectively erasing the ethos of Carter presidency. Here he narrows the definition of "progress" to purely economic terms: "Can we solve the problems confronting us?..[T]he answer is an unequivocal and unqualified "yes."…Progress may be slow, but we will progress. It is time to reawaken this industrial giant, to get government back within its means, and to lighten our punitive tax burden."(63-64)

DeLillo and Mailer's neo-Emersonian Oswald is a product of the Reagan era; unlike the "historical" Oswald of the early 1960s he is not driven by traditionally ideological concerns. In neither novel is Oswald hostile to Kennedy's politics, or particularly enamored of those of the Soviet Union. Instead both accounts present Oswald's Marxist ideology as the logical vehicle for both the expression and maintenance of his sense of alienation. That this oppositional status is crucial to his sense of himself is indicated by his rejection of both systems. In the United States Oswald idealizes the social and economic cohesion of the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union he yearns for the economic and personal freedoms of the U.S. But in DeLillo and Mailer's critique, Oswald's "disloyalty" is also evidence of the failure of ideology itself. Being among the small minority of people who had lived under both systems gave Oswald a unique vantage point on what would later become a received sentiment. Among Oswald's papers is a tract containing what might be described as a mission statement. In it he writes, "I have lived under both systems. I have sought the answers, and although it would be very easy to dupe myself into believing one system is better than the other, I know they are not" (*O.T.*302).

In an interview in *The Bloomsbury Review* Mailer characterizes Oswald as a Libertarian (De Pree 3), but the material in *Oswald's Tale* actually presents him as a reactionary. In spite of its (somewhat warranted) respectful treatment of Oswald's political writings, Mailer's account suggests that Oswald's opposition to centralized power is less a bid for negative liberties than a protest against any externally-imposed structure In the same interview Mailer comments, "[Oswald] didn't believe in the Soviet

Union, didn't believe in America, didn't believe in capitalism, didn't believe in government" (3).

By the 1980s, Oswald's political disillusionment looked remarkably contemporary. As Mailer points out, " A lot of his ideas are held by people *today* [italics interviewer's]" (3). Mailer and DeLillo's accounts of the events surrounding the Kennedy assassination are the logical conclusion of a broad-based move away from a notion of politics as a source of progressive action. Their novels of the 1980s and '90s are characterized by the emergence into this seemingly post-ideological world. Unlike its later counterparts, *The Executioner's Song* addresses the failure of a specific ideology (in this case the ideals of the American dream); in this context, *Executioner's* critique of "the system," is still a left-wing critique, and the disillusionment it expresses is still a product of the lost "coherent reality" to which DeLillo refers. DeLillo and Mailer configure Oswald's ostensibly "political" act as highly personal, but only superficially linked to either ideology or the specific circumstances of his life. In this sense Gilmore's crimes of passion are in some ways more rational and more "political" than Oswald's pre-meditated "hit." Despite the media's depiction of Gilmore's shootings as "motiveless", Mailer presents them as a direct response to Gilmore's monstrous sense of thwartedness. By casting the murders as vengeance for the denial of Gilmore's basic rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, Mailer imbues them with a political significance that Oswald's act ironically now seems to lack.

Despite their rather obviously political subject matter, the novels' depiction of their "prime mover" as both apolitical and solipsistic would seem to argue in favor of Howe and Karl's view of the American political novel as a kind of mythic beast. And,

between their "postmodern" assertion of the ultimate meaninglessness of both facts and events and the attendant discrediting of internally political content, it would be worthwhile to ask why either *Oswald's Tale* or *Libra* should be construed as political novels at all. This again raises the vexed question of whether the political nature of a work lies in its content or its representation of that content. However, to the extent that one of the central assumptions of postmodern criticism is the equation of ideology with its socio-economic effects, a distinction must be made not only between the "real" Oswald and the Oswald of DeLillo and Mailer's imagining, but also between Oswald's ideology and that of his "authors'" representational strategies.[4] And while the issue of Postmodernity as it pertains to either representative strategy or temporal positioning is itself "political", the location of its "political" nature is so confounding as make the argument moot. Is Delillo's "TV" Oswald, whose protean identity, or "absence of substantial and autonomous selfhood" ("Libra" 447) more "postmodern" than Mailer's ideologically cipher-like master-manipulator? Or, is Mailer's self-conscious meta-narration and interrogation of the "characters'" testimony more truly "postmodern" than DeLillo's fictionalized faith to what he felt was the "truth" of the historical record?

The ironic "problem" with attempts to assimilate both notions of the political nature of texts is that while they may not be mutually exclusive in terms of political goal, they are so in terms of political "content". This problem is exemplified by a curious

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[4] According to Zizek, "The most elementary definition of ideology is probably the well-known phrase from Marx's *Capital*: 'they do not know it, but they are doing it'…. The very concept of ideology implies a kind of basic, constitutive naïveté." See Slavoj Zizek. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 28.

reversal evident in critical discussions of *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale*. While there are dozens, if not hundreds of scholarly articles that address *Libra* as an avatar of some aspect of a new postmodern consciousness (either of literature or of the self), *Oswald's Tale* has been virtually omitted from academic discussion.[5] Although Mailer's novel was widely reviewed in the popular and literary press (*The Nation, The New York Times, The Atlantic*), it was barely discussed in peer-reviewed literary journals. The simplest explanation for this omission could be the sheer volume of Kennedy assassination narratives in publication by 1995. The perception of these accounts as a kind of cottage industry was already dogging DeLillo's novel seven years earlier [6], and very likely contributed to the vaguely disreputable impression of Mailer's novel as a species of pop journalism rather than "serious" literature.

More important, and more likely, is the perception of *Oswald's Tale* as dated, or at least peculiarly devoid of critical subject matter. To put it simply, in a universe in which "context is now text" critics found DeLillo's indictment of our subjection to mass media a richer source of cultural critique than Mailer's exhaustive account of the workings of human passions and political institutions. In such a critical climate, Mailer's very rationale for the writing of *Oswald's Tale* excludes it from the category of political"

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[5] A notable exception is Sean McCann's 2000 article "The Imperiled Republic Norman Mailer and the Poetics of Anti-Liberalism," (*ELH* 67(2000): 293-336) discussed later in this essay.

[6] Thomas Carmichael refers to Kennedy assassination narratives as a "continually proliferating chain of texts." See "Lee Harvey Oswald and the Postmodern Subject: History and Intertextuality in Don DeLillo's *Libra*, *The Names*, and *Mao II*" *Contemporary Literature* 34 .2 (Summer, 1993): 107.

critique. As a self-described "close reading" of The Warren Commission Report, Mailer's narrative embraces the very critical mode and faith in representation that post structural literary criticism rejected as de-politicized:

> For two generations of Americans, the Warren Commission's twenty-six volumes…have become a species of Talmudic text begging for commentary and further elucidation...[T] he twenty-six volumes will also be a Comstock Lode of novelistic material, not of much use in solving a mystery…but certainly to be honored for its short stories, historical vignettes and vast cast of characters…" (*O.T.* 351*)*

Mailer's offering of *Oswald's Tale* as a straightforward assessment of the political climate of the Cold War reads as similarly outmoded. In his view the political nature of *Oswald's Tale* is more or less transparent:

> If we obtain nothing else, we can count on gaining a greater understanding of the dominant state of our political experience in these decades of the Cold War, for Oswald, willy-nilly, became one of the leading actors in this tragicomedy of superpowers who, with limited comprehension, lived in dread of one another." (*O.T*. 353)

Ironically, however, the very "postmodern critique" that Frank Lentricchia suggested made *Libra* so powerful and so topical in 1988 makes it strangely limited in 2006. *Libra*'s occasional one-note quality is neither Delillo's "fault" nor seemingly his

intention, but rather a product of changing social and critical times. It is also a testament to Lentricchia's great influence as a critic.[7] In any case, *Libra's* reception as a specifically "postmodern" novel has had the unfortunate effect of obscuring the more concrete elements of its political analysis. Perhaps because DeLillo engages less than Mailer with Oswald's specific ideology, critics have virtually ignored its role in the novel, preferring to focus on the novel's critique of his susceptibility to the heroic fictions of pop culture. Ironically, in post-structural terms, DeLillo's depiction of Oswald's ideology and Jack Ruby's motivations is remarkably apolitical in that, unlike Mailer's, it hews remarkably close to received interpretations of the historical record.

In the case of these two novels, the most useful way to address the relationship of "the postmodern" to "the political" would be to see them as co-existent rather than mutually exclusive. Despite the temptation to oppose "internal" political content (*Executioner's* critique of the late 1970s, or that of the proletarian novels of the 1930s) to "external" or "contextual" political content (the nature of representation), it is more accurate to see both ways of reading as serving the same ends. What is more important than the *location* of a political critique is its *function.* In terms of their "postmodern" representational strategies, *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale* are both "political" in that their rejection of structure—the reassuring frameworks of ideology, empiricism, and government—challenges official (state) versions of the event. Both novels lay claim to extensive empirical evidence surrounding the Kennedy assassination (the Warren Report

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[7] Lentricchia appears to have written one of the first scholarly articles about the novel, setting the tone for those that followed.

and personal interviews) without reaching any conclusions regarding its "truth" or meaning. This stance questions the reassuring order represented by the testimony of solid citizens and ideologically transparent FBI men, and by implication, the legitimacy of the Warren Commission as representative of the state. This challenge to the staus quo is one of the defining characteristics of what John Duvall calls "productive postmodernism," [8] but it is also the central assumption of any left-wing political novel.

Thus, in spite of their "postmodern" metacommentaries on Oswald as a cultural signifier, *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale* have more in common with the socialist /proletarian novels of the thirties and forties than might be supposed. Mailer and DeLillo's reading of Oswald as both a producer and a product of social forces, rather than simply as "a private individual operating in the 'private sector'"("DD" 2) forms a clear link to the more "traditionally" political novels of the first half of the twentieth century. While their narratives propose a more complex vision of individualism (both isolating and liberating) than their precursors, neither Oswald nor the other figures in the novels is ever presented as truly divorced from their social and cultural circumstances. In contrast to the novels of "the new regionalists of and for the Reagan eightie,s" DeLillo and Mailer "offer us no myth of political virginity preserved, no 'individuals' who are not expressions of—and responses to—specific historical processes" ("DD"2). More important than the question of whether Oswald is a "modern" or a "postmodern figure" is the fact that both novels foreground individual agency as a specific response to social and political forces. In both

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[8] See Duvall's anthology of the same name: *Productive Postmodernism: Consuming Histories and Cultural Studies*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

Libra and *Oswald's Tale* Oswald is driven by the need to negotiate his identity between what they argue are mutually exclusive poles of individual and community.

The fact that these works discredit the possibility of a purely empirical account of the assassination suggests that their "meaning" lies not in what they may allege, but rather, in their power to reveal what is at stake for "the way the nation and its history are defined". This is why the most obvious divergence between the two narratives is surprisingly easy to overlook: In DeLillo's version of the assassination, Oswald is not the assassin. Although he hits Kennedy, he does not fire the fatal shot. On the other hand, in *Oswald's Tale* Mailer avoids explicitly linking Oswald with the definitive bullet (using caveats such as "Innocent or guilty" and "…*if* one supposes that he did shoot Kennedy"), but systematically shoots down most of the evidence to the contrary. David Courtwright is one of the very few critics to take up what would seem to be an important argument on DeLillo's part: that Oswald was innocent. In "Why Oswald Missed" Courtwright addresses the very point that the notable absence of other commentary makes clear. In both narratives, the nature of the fatal shot is treated as an incidental rather than central element. Although Glen Thomas lumps *Libra* (and presumably Oswald's *Tale)* into the hundreds of "reevaluations of the assassination," (Thomas 107) neither work is "about" Oswald's guilt or innocence, or even whether he acted alone or as part of a conspiracy.

In interviews, both Mailer and DeLillo have made it clear that their own judgments concerning Oswald's role in the assassination are not only surprisingly unchallenging to the final conclusion reached by Warren Commission, but immaterial to their novels. DeLillo has reportedly dismissed Oliver Stone's sensationalizing

conspiracy film *JFK* as "Disneyland for paranoids," and rejects the plotting of *Libra* as nothing more than a plausible device: "'I don't think there was any orchestrated attempt by established offices in any intelligence agency…I purposely chose the most obvious possibility-that the assassination was engineered by anti-Castro elements-simply as a way of being faithful to what we know as history.'" [9] Mailer also leans toward the theory that Oswald acted alone, but interprets the terms "conspiracy" and "secret agent" rather broadly. When asked, by a *Newsweek* journalist for "the bottom line," Mailer responds, "I think he did it by himself, but I think he was leaned on by the FBI and the CIA, which is why there was that tremendous effort at cover-up. Oswald was a do-it-yourself guy. It's hard to see him giving his gun to someone else. It would have been like him giving his wife to someone else" (Sawhill 60).

Mailer implies, as Doctorow does about the Isaacsons/Rosenbergs, that for state purposes, empirical evidence was far less important than bringing in the necessary verdict. Although he favors the Lone Assassin theory, Mailer suggests that the evidence alone wouldn't have been enough to convict Oswald:

> In my mind there's a 75 percent probability that [Oswald]'s the lone assassin, but I don't consider the case closed. If *I* had been his lawyer, I could have gotten him off. I'll bet any decent lawyer could have gotten him off. Unless you had a hanging jury, the jurists would have to have a reasonable doubt. There's too many loose

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[9] Courtwright 84. Quoted from Kim Heron, *New York Times Book Review*, July 24, 1988:23.

> ends. The biggest loose end would have been the magic bullet. That…alone is enough to get a guy off! (*Bloomsbury Review* 3)

The same argument appears in *Oswald's Tale*, in a slightly more pointed form. While Mailer stops short of accusing Hoover of a blatant miscarriage of justice, the implication is clear: "Given Hoover's conclusion in the first twenty-four hours after JFK's assassination that Oswald did it all by himself, the word passed down the line quickly: FBI men would prosper best by arriving at pre-ordained result." (612)

A 1977 article in *Foreign Policy* confirms Mailer's assertion. In the article Donald Schulz asserts that the lone gunman theory was the official position of the State Department almost immediately after Oswald's death. According to Schulz, "the evidence strongly supports that there was an overwhelming predisposition on the part of the White House, the Justice Department, the FBI, the CIA, and the commission itself to accept Lee Harvey Oswald as Kennedy's lone killer, without adequately investigating other hypotheses and leads that might have led to different conclusions" (58). In support of this claim, Schulz cites a statement apparently issued shortly after the assassination, in which Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach refers explicitly to the need for government-wide support of the lone-gunman theory:

> It is important that all of the facts surrounding President Kennedy's assassination be made public in a way which will satisfy people in the United States and abroad that all the facts have been told and that a statement to this effect be made now. *The public must be satisfied that Oswald was the assassin*; *that he did not have confederates* who are still at large*; and the evidence was such that*

> *he would have been convicted at trial.* Speculation about Oswald's motivations ought to be cut off, and we should have some basis for rebutting the thought that this was a Communist conspiracy or (as the Iron Curtain press is saying) a rightwing conspiracy to blame it on the communists [italics mine]. (58-9)

Schulz's article also lends credence to Mailer's depiction of a communication gap between the various arms of the government. In fact, the "extreme compartmentalization of knowledge within the bureaucracy" that Schulz assigns specifically to the CIA is demonstrably applicable to the government as a whole. Not only does he contend that the various case officers within the CIA withheld information from each other that might have drawn a "connection between the AMLASH (Castro assassination) plot and the Kennedy assassination," but the CIA saw to it that a report on its assassination attempts against Castro "never reached Earl Warren's desk" (60). Furthermore, Hoover's relationship with the Warren Commission was similarly strained. According to Schulz, the FBI "volunteered very little" information to the Warren Commission (60), which Hoover "viewed as an adversary," claiming that Warren "'was seeking to criticize' and 'find gaps' in its inquiry" (59).

In "*Libra* as Postmodern Critique," Lentricchia argues against the novel's basis in the elements of traditional social critique: "*Libra* is a fiction of social destiny, but one which largely sets aside the usual arguments of determinism based on class, social setting, ethnicity and race." (435) Here Lentricchia dismisses the novel's very real engagement with issues of race and class, claiming that the role that these forces played in naturalist (and presumably socialist) novels is replaced by the more totalized

oppression of "the charismatic environment of the image"(436): "DeLillo's American tragedy is classless, not because he refuses to recognize the differences that class can make, but because the object of desire, what is insistently imagined in *Libra* as the conferrer of happiness, is never located in the privileged social space of those Fitzgerald called 'the very rich'…" (436) In other words, the object of aspiration is no longer material, but rather, to become the object of aspiration itself. Lentricchia's reading is extremely sharp, but it also has the potential to reduce many of the characters in the novel to ethnic stereotypes, and to cast their struggles as a "modernist" anachronism. For example, Lentricchia writes:

> In the voice of Jack Ruby, DeLillo appears to have opened an escape hatch back to the earth of the robust ethnic life. The illusion of the essential health and purity of the ethnic voice—its self-possession—is strengthened by DeLillo's narrative strategy in the Ruby sections of the book, his virtual disappearance as a narrator: not into "DeLillo" but into the objective dramatist who writes pure dialogue…The illusion is of the ethnic voice's accessability, its sincere public thereness. It feels good to be released through Ruby from 'the world within the world' …the ethnic familiarity and charm of Ruby's voice is a sort of code that tells us we are at last outside of the subterranean world of power… ("DD" 26)

While the subsuming of racial, ethnic, and regional identities by the media spectacle is clearly DeLillo's point, and the source of his critique, Lentricchia doesn't acknowledge the degree to which *Libra* depicts these elements as co-existent rather than

mutually exclusive. In fact, it is the irresolvable tension between these two forms of identification that is reflected in Oswald's schizophrenic ideology. And, as Lentricchia himself points out, it is Oswald's point of view that dominates the novel: "The disturbing strength of *Libra*—and DeLillo gives no quarter on this—is its refusal to offer its readers a comfortable place outside of Oswald."("DD" 17) Thus, the relief the reader feels upon being "released" into Ruby's voice equates *Oswald's* worldview, and not DeLillo's, with the "subterranean world of power" that makes the novel so claustrophobic.

The most obvious refutation of Lentricchia's assertion is DeLillo's invention of Bobby Dupard, Oswald's African-American cell-mate, and confederate in the attempt on the life of General Edwin Walker. While Dupard's lively and often funny commentary could be read as possessing the "ethnic familiarity and charm" and "accessibility" to which Lentricchia refers, its potential as comforting stereotype is belied by its cynical bite. As DeLillo suggests, the brig's shifting power relations defeat any lasting form of solidarity. Such an analysis of power relations has more in common with a traditional left-wing critique than Lentricchia owns. Furthermore, DeLillo credits this analysis to Oswald. As Oswald watches Dupard's beating, he can't help but imagine ways to avoid his own. Nevertheless, he reflects on his own reaction:

> [h]e hated the guards, secretly sided with them against some of the prisoners, thought they deserved what they got, the prisoners who were stupid and cruel. He felt his rancor consistently shift, felt secret satisfactions, hated the brig routine, despised the men who could not master it, although he knew it was contrived to defeat them all. (100)

As DeLillo points out, the power structure of the brig is not equally oppressive to all; its cruelest divisions are along the lines of race and masculinity. Dupard is harassed with racist epithets and beaten for no apparent reason, while Oswald's harassment is intended to impugn his masculinity. Although Oswald and Dupard are allied through their shared marginal status and desire to disrupt power relations, their political common cause never breaches the racial divide. Dupard's solidarity with Oswald is real, but uneasy; his conversations with Oswald are marked by a good-natured but satiric wit. Instead of the mentor that Oswald is searching for, the "artful old con who would advise the younger man…a grizzled figure with kind and tired eyes," Oswald "wasn't sure what he had here in Bobby R Dupard" (99). DeLillo underscores the divisiveness of race contained in the two mens' differing perceptions of the military. While both men joke about their mothers' misguided faith in the armed services, it appeals to Oswald in ways in cannot to Dupard. Dupard comments: "I definitely get the idea they want to send me home in a box. The first minute I put on the green service coat, I look like I'm dead. It's a coffin suit for a fool. I seen it on the spot." Poor and disenfranchised though he is, Oswald is white. In his army uniform, where Dupard sees a dead man, Oswald sees an idealized self: "I liked the uniform…It was great how it looked. I was surprised how great I felt…I looked in the mirror and said it's me." (106)

Similarly, while Oswald emphasizes his and Dupard's oppression by a common and faceless enemy ("it" vs. "we") Dupard underscores the isolating effects of racism ("they" vs. "me"). Oswald tells Dupard, "it's the whole huge system; *we're* a zero in the system". Dupard responds,"*[t]hey* give *me* their special attention. Better believe" [italics mine] (106). Unbeknownst to Oswald, the two men are also divided in their

cosmologies. Dupard's ideology is religious; Oswald's political. In response to Oswald's comment about *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a book about "us here and now," Dupard responds, "I used to read the Bible." In turn, Oswald's version of a faith from which he's fallen away is the Marine Corps manual: "…I read the Marine Corps manual…Then I found out what it's really all about. How to be a tool of the system. It's the perfect capitalist handbook."(106)

Ideology, and later the brig, provide for Oswald the sense of destiny and meaning for which Dupard once turned to the Bible. As DeLillo points out, his atheism is intolerable for mainstream Americans. In the service

> He'd once told Reitmeyer [that} communism was the one true religion. He'd been speaking seriously but also for effect. He could enrage Reitmeyer by calling himself an atheist. Reitmeyer thought you had to be forty years old before you could claim that distinction. It was a position you had to earn through years of experience…maybe the brig was a kind of religion too. All prison. Something you carried with you all your life, a counterforce to politics and lies. This went deeper than anything they could tell you from the pulpit. It carried a truth no one could contradict. (100)

Despite Stacey Olster's characterization of DeLillo's Oswald as "almost a *throwback* to modernist alienation" (49), DeLillo reads Oswald's peculiarly cipher-like sense of self as a *precursor* of postmodern consciousness. As Lentricchia himself points out, the other figures in the novel have a concrete quality that Oswald does not. Not coincidentally they also have a connection to specific moments in history that, for better

or worse, anchors their frames of reference in time and space. Thus, it is not Oswald, but the other characters in *Libra* who exhibit the modernist alienation of Olster's argument. Unlike Oswald's, the disillusionment of Jack Ruby, David Ferrie, Guy Bannister, Wayne Elko, and Raymo stems from the failure of the ideological frameworks upon which they based their lives.

In the experiences of Raymo, a disillusioned Castro revolutionary who takes part in the assassination plot, DeLillo underscores the inextricable relationship between religion and ideology.[10] Raymo is embittered not only by the betrayal of the United States, but by Castro's as well. His memories of the revolution reveal the qualities that made Castro such a powerfully inspiring, and devastating, figure:

> He was with Castro in the movement…Fidel was some kind of magical figure then…Tall, strong, long-haired…mixing theory and raw talk…explaining everything…He made the revolution something people felt on their bodies. The ideas, the whistling words, they throbbed in all the senses. He was like Jesus in boots, preaching everywhere he went, withholding his identity from the campesinos until the time was dramatically right. …From the first minute, Castro was inventing a convenient history of the revolution

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[10] See Chapter One's discussion of Whittaker Chambers' notion of communism as "the great alternative faith of mankind." *Witness*. (New York: Random House, 1952) 9.

> to advance his grab for power, to become the Maximum Leader. (184-5)

As a kind of "Jesus in boots" Castro's "mixing theory and raw talk" and "explaining everything." seems to unify the most painful and insoluble dichotomy in human experience. Earthy and pious, simple and intellectual, Castro marries the bodily to the spiritual. His "preaching" of communist ideology explains the origin of people's suffering, and like a religion, brings meaning to their lives. The mixture of "theory "and "raw talk" which translates the revolution into "something people felt on their bodies" makes the link between the personal and political manifest, and closes the gap between political theory and its practice. Finally, however, even Castro is revealed to have feet of clay. Not only does he rewrite history in order to achieve the power he supposedly eschewed, but his ideals are revealed to be hollow. Later, Raymo explains to Oswald,

> I used to believe the great thing of Castro was the time he spent in prison…I used to say this is the man's honor and strength. He comes out of prison with authority if he is sent there for his beliefs. It is completely different in Castro's own prisons. We came out of La Cabana with anger and disgust. We were the worms of the CIA. (293)

In response to Oswald's proud claim that he was sent to prison in the military "for politics…Just like Fidel" (293), and that going to prison for one's beliefs is "a necessary stage in the evolution of any movement that cuts against the system..." (294),Raymo points out the extreme naiveté of Oswald's idealization of Castro and of his faith in revolutionary ideology:

> Castro spent fourteen months in an isolation cell. He read Karl Marx. He read Russian. He told us he read twelve hours a day…Always studying, always analyzing. Years later I saw the executions of men who fought by his side in the mountains…I thought about it a lot…and I'll tell you my beliefs. I believed in the United States of America. The country that could do no wrong. With the great U.S. behind us how could we lose? They told us, they told us, they promise…We have the full backing of the military. We went to the beaches thinking they would support us with air, with navy…What happens? We find ourselves in the swamps, lost and hungry, eating tree bark…They disarmed us and fastened our hands in one big looping chain and put us in troop trucks to go to the nearest militia camp and there's a plane passing right overhead and I call out 'Don't shoot boys, it's one of ours.'" (*Libra* 294)

But Oswald is not quick to give up his faith in communism. In the brig he turns to communism to reconfigure his physical constraint as freedom from the constraints of his ego. There he relinquishes responsibility for his personal destiny. Instead of his own abasement,

> [h]e tried to feel history in the cell. This was history out of George Orwell, the territory of no-choice. He could see how he'd been headed here since the day he was born. The brig was invented just for him, It was just another name for the stunted rooms where he'd spent his life…He'd been headed here from the start.

> Inevitable…Maybe what has to happen is that the individual must allow himself to be swept along, must find himself in the stream of no-choice, the single direction. This is what makes things inevitable. You use the penalties and restrictions they invent to make yourself stronger. History means to merge. The purpose of history is to climb out of your own skin. He knew what Trotsky had written, that revolution leads us out of the dark night of the isolated self. We live forever in history, outside ego and id. (100-101)

In *Libra* Oswald is torn between two conflicting frameworks: that of the Marine Corps, which glorifies the individual, and that of Communism, which subsumes it within a larger agenda. While The Marine Corps champions individual agency, his contact with the Party "didn't see the individual," and "never talked to Lee in a personal way" (94). However, the Marine Corps also imprisons Oswald, first within it rules, and later, in the brig. As the guard in the brig reminds Oswald, "In this head we know our [Marine Corps] manual word for word…In the final assault it is the *individual* Marine with his rifle…who closes with the enemy and destroys him [italics mine]" (103-4).

For Oswald, the traditional "function" of ideology is reversed. Unlike the other characters in the novel, whose ideologies are an expression of their identities, which is to say, the sum total of their nationalities, ethnicities, and value systems, Oswald delimits his identity through the political ideology he adopts. If Oswald's ideology can be characterized, it is an ideology of opposition. In the United States, where he is poor, he is a Marxist, and fixates on a life in the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union, where his salary supplemented and his work light, he feels oppressed by the lack of social freedom and the

scarcity of high-quality consumer goods. As both DeLillo and Mailer point out in different ways, what looks like inconsistency in Oswald's politics is really a misperception of his true motivation. Because the ultimate goal of Oswald's ideology is establishing an identity rather than accomplishing specific political goals (i.e. being rather than doing) it lacks content in the traditional, or perhaps "Modernist" sense of the word. It does not, however, lack context. For Oswald, Marxism serves several functions, the least of which are its ideals of collectivity and equality. More importantly, in the 1950s it was an obvious choice for someone looking, as Oswald was, to define himself in opposition to his environment.

In both *Libra* and *Oswald's Tale,* Marxist ideology offers Oswald an opportunity to reconfigure his alienation from his peers as a positive choice. Its narrative of economic oppression and the subjugation of the weak by the strong confer meaning on Oswald's marginal status. As a high school student, his discovery of the writings of Marx, Trotsky and Lenin open up a " world within the world" that simultaneously assuages his loneliness and frees him from the insularity of his peers and the stifling domesticity of his mother's tiny apartment [11] DeLillo imagines Oswald as a high school student sitting "cross-legged on the floor, scanning titles for hours" in search of

> books that *put him at a distance from his classmates*, closed the world around him. They had their civics and home economics. *He wanted subjects and ideas of historical scope*, ideas that touched his

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[11] In an ironic moment, Oswald is given a "save the Rosenbergs" leaflet, 12.

> life, his true life, the whirl of time around him…He'd read pamphlets, seen photographs in Life…People of Russia, *the other world*. [italics mine] (33)

The young Oswald identifies with the loneliness of the revolutionaries, and their struggle against a common enemy: "These were men who lived in isolation for long periods, lived close to death through long winters in exile or prison, feeling history in the room, waiting for the moment when it would surge through the walls, taking them with it. History was a force to these men…they felt it and waited." (34)

Through the narrative of revolution, Oswald also makes sense of his daily life, and confers dignity upon his marginal social position: "He found enough that he could understand. He could see the capitalists, he could see the masses. They were right here, all around him, every day." (34) Later, when Oswald is stationed in Japan as a Marine, his fascination with communism is strengthened by its potential to confer upon him the trappings of adulthood. As a nineteen-year-old Private, teased for his small stature and high-strung personality, its association with intellectual, social and sexual sophistication is irresistible. Oswald's discussions with Konno, a mysterious figure he meets in a nightclub while stationed in Japan, again lessen his sense of isolation, and grant dignity to his personal struggles. Konno, suggested to be a Soviet agent, is master of a skillful totalizing rhetoric that taps into Oswald's hunger for meaning by the events of his life in the context of a common human experience. Soon, Oswald "counted on these discussions with Konno, who was able to argue Lee's own positions from a historic rather than personal viewpoint" (88). Through his association with Konno, Oswald also

has his first sexual experience, which breaks through his isolation and underscores his new sense of destiny and belonging. In the woman's room,

> [h]e felt different, serious, still. He was part of something streaming through the world…The moment had been waiting to happen. The room had been here since the day he was born, waiting for him, just like this, to walk through the door. It was just a question of walking in the door, entering the stream of things" (84).

Although Oswald craves connection, DeLillo and Mailer return repeatedly to his bid for singularity in the form of fame. In different ways, both authors see Oswald's fascination with fame as the result of the nebulous boundaries of his personality. He is driven quite literally, to distinguish himself by defining himself in opposition to his environment. Because of his competing needs to merge and individuate Oswald is most comfortable in anonymity, as an outsider. In Japan, where he is serving in the Air Force, Oswald walks alone, literally losing himself in the " mazes of narrow streets mobbed with shoppers." There, as DeLillo points out," [h]e was remarkably calm. There was something about being off-base, away from his countrymen, out of America, that took the edge off his wariness eased his rankled skin" (*Libra* 83).

Oswald's sense that he was an exceptional person who merited an exceptional destiny is the source of an unbridgeable rift between his political ideology and the personal desires suggested by his behavior. Unlike Gilmore, whose fatalism and belief in Karma complicated his individualism, Oswald "always felt that he was extraordinary personally and that he had to do something extraordinary" (Mailer/DePree interview, 3). In this way, Gilmore and Oswald's positions are oddly reversed. Despite Gilmore's

individualist and determinedly anti-social stance, he was primarily motivated by the desire for *affinity*. Oswald's self- perception on the other hand, was more conflicted. His desire to see himself as a Lukacksian Great Man runs contrary to his wish to "lose himself in history" "outside the borders of ego and id" and "to merge his life with the greater tide of history". In short, While Oswald claimed to abjure the notion of the individual in favor of community, both novels oppose his desire to merge history with the solipsistic desire to control it.

Both Mailer and DeLillo see Oswald's marriage as symbolic of the split between his personal and political lives. However, in keeping with their dissimilar worldviews, the two authors characterize the split differently. In a letter to his brother, quoted in the body of *Oswald's Tale* and on the frontispiece of *Libra*, Oswald claims that for him "happiness is not based on oneself, it does not consist of a small home…Happiness is taking part in the struggle where there is no borderline between one's own personal world and the world in general." For Delillo, Oswald's vacillation between the intimacy of domestic partnership and the broader fellowship of communism is not a choice between two mutually exclusive sources of belonging. As DeLillo makes clear, for Oswald the domestic life inextricably links belonging with consumption:

> He got Marina settled in bed, then sat next to her …he felt the power of her stillness…and of the child she carried. He would start saving right away for a washing machine and a car. They'd get an apartment …their own furniture for a change, modern pieces…these are standard ways to stop being lonely. (*Libra* 371)

But DeLillo also suggests a certain ideological naïveté on Oswald's part. Oswald is surprised to find that his Soviet friends place the most value on their private lives:

> He talked to his friends about Cuba, surprised to find they weren't passionate about the subject…Chocolate was expensive. These people had a vicious sweet tooth. Always a crowd at the local confectionery. Life was small things Chocolate, a record player, a meal at the automat. (*Libra* 199)

Mailer makes the same observation in *Oswald's Tale.* Like the young Soviets in *Libra,* Marina inhabits only the small-scale landscape of her personal experience: "Of course Marina's grandmother used to tell her, 'Politics is poop!' How Russian is such an attitude: My private life is my only wealth! She was in this sense the worst possible wife for Oswald." (*O.T.* 555) As Mailer's inclusion of Marina's testimony indicates, her derision of Oswald's activities spurred him on in his political pursuits and alienated him from their marriage: "You see when I would make fun of him, of his activity…he said that I didn't understand him and here, you see, was proof that someone else did, that there were people who understood his activity." (*O.T.*555/*WC*, v.1, 23) [12] As Mailer points out, the Oswalds' opposing orientations to life also creates conflicts in Oswald himself: "We come back to his basic dilemma: To which half of himself will he be faithful—His need for love, or his need for power and fame? " (*O.T.* 555)

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[12] Dual citations indicate the Warren Commission transcript (*WC*) referred to by Mailer. Single citations of the transcripts are mine alone.

DeLillo's fictionalized version of rogue agent David Ferrie is the mouthpiece for his shrewd assessment of Oswald's ideology. In the novel Ferrie sums up Oswald's attraction to radicalism: "I think you've had it backwards this whole time. You wanted to enter history…What you really want is out. Get out. Jump out. Find your place and name on another level." (384) Ferrie also tries to convince Oswald that the plan which has been conceived for Oswald to carry out is both Oswald's destiny and Oswald's own creation. Pointing out that Kennedy's motorcade will pass the building where Oswald works, Ferrie tells him, "There's no such *thing* as coincidence…it happens because you make it happen…You see what this means. How it shoes what you've got to do…There's something else that's generating this event. A pattern outside experience. Something that jerks you out of the spin of history" (384).

While *Libra* presents Oswald's Marxism as a kind of exoskeleton for his amorphous ego, *Oswald's Tale* configures his politics conversely as an expression of that ego's demands. But in many ways, Mailer's Oswald is also a vehicle for Mailer's concerns. In this sense *Oswald's Tale* is like a number of Mailer's other works of "entrepreneurial" journalism, which, as Morris Dickstein notes, must be read through the lens of "old Mailer obsessions, which sometimes obstruc [t] our view of the subject" (*Leopards* 161). These "obsessions," which include war, ethnicity, masculinity, and homosexuality, inflect Mailer's otherwise sharp critique of Oswald's radical individualism, and Jack Ruby's relationship to his Jewish and American identities.
In terms of his specific ideology, Mailer's Oswald is a far more protean figure than DeLillo's. Unlike DeLillo, Mailer depicts Oswald's political rhetoric as contradictory. Here he is on solid ground, particularly because his assertion is based on historical

documents to which DeLillo did not have access. Here Mailer cites KGB transcripts in which Oswald argues with Marina. Now that Oswald wants to return to the U.S. he argues in favor of the very elements of American life he denigrated when he renounced his citizenship. Ironically he presents the wish for property as his reason for returning to the U.S., and chides Marina for her disinterest in private ownership. In direct opposition to his statements in the letter to his brother, Oswald offers Marina the pleasures of a private life, which he implies should provide her with everything she needs:

> LHO: You'll never have anything here, but over there you'll have everything.
>
> WIFE: What will I do there? I'll sit at home the whole time and that's it.
>
> LHO: But you're going to live with me there. You'll have everything…What do you have here? One room…and even that isn't yours.
>
> WIFE: We live here, it's ours.
>
> LHO: …I don't sense that it's my own…I don't get any feeling it's mine….
>
> WIFE: Idiot, you don't understand anything. (*mimics him*) Property, property.
>
> LHO: You don't understand the concept of property…I want to live there because the standard of living is high. (*O.T.* 231)

Mailer doesn't attempt to resolve the contradictions inherent in Oswald's ideology. Rather he retrospectively reads in them the potential to underwrite an act like the one Oswald committed: "…[A] man who can have congress with Stalinist and Trotskeyite organizations at the same time when they have been implacable enemies for close to three decades, may be ready to deal with any political contradiction if it will advance his purpose." (515) More importantly, Mailer's comments suggest a certain amount of admiration for Oswald's *realpolitik.* Rather than understand Oswald's politics as contradictory, Mailer sees them in a dialectical relationship, and hence, in constant flux:

> I'm a great believer that if you advance an idea as far as you can and it's overtaken by someone who argues the opposite of you, in effect you've improved your enemy's mind. Then someone will come along on your side and convert your enemy's improvement of your idea and convert it back again. I'm nothing if I'm not *a believer in the dialectic*… The thought of everyone thinking the way I do is as bad as any other form of totalitarianism [italics mine].(Begiebing, 329)

Neither Oswald's politics nor his personality was particularly amenable to his environment. To a large extent this was due to his oppositional personality, but it is fair to say that this aspect of his "nature" was at least partially the result of socio-economic factors. As the son of a single mother who barely earned enough to pay the rent on their series of "small rooms," Oswald hardly felt the benefits of postwar prosperity. The "supermarkets, air-conditioning…and dishwashers" that could be "taken for granted by

middle class Americans by the 1960s…"(*Leopards*, 17) were not part of his experience. Morris Dickstein's depiction of postwar American society as a time of "peace, prosperity and galloping consumerism" (*Leopards* 17*)*, and when the advent of " the new therapeutic culture of psychoanalysis" was "gradually replacing the social consciousness" of the Depression (*Leopards* 53) suggests that Oswald's ostensibly left-wing politics were, in the affluent and contented atmosphere of the postwar, a throwback to the oppositional stance of the Old Left progressives of the 1930s. As a result Oswald was, like Gilmore, something of a fish out of water in his own time. But Oswald's real problem was that he was neither fish nor fowl: Generationally, he should have been a member of the New Left, but his social conservatism and enforcement of traditional gender roles would most likely have alienated him from his peers. Temperamentally, Oswald was suited to neither incarnation of the Left, for as Mailer comments, "[I]t is difficult for either movement to reconcile the contradictions inherent in Oswald's two ideological guides, Karl Marx and the U.S. Marine Corps manual" (*O.T.* 372*)*.

Mailer's personal "dialectic," creates its own inconsistencies in his depiction of Oswald, particularly when it papers over inconsistencies in his own values. Although Mailer will later hew to Oswald's self-identification as a Marxist, Oswald's political manifesto, "The Atheian Credo" eschews both communism and capitalism. Rather like Mailer's personal credo, it is arguably as right wing as it is left wing. In his interview in in *The Bloomsbury Review* Mailer points out,"…Oswald, ironically, was a libertarian rather than a leftist by the end…He was adamantly opposed to government, believing only small collective groups, by agreement, work" (DePree 3). Not only does Mailer later insist on Oswald's *rejection* of collective action, he also ignores the ramifications of

his comment that "some ultra-right wingers do not sound like reactionaries but Libertarians; that, on the evidence of the Atheian credo, appealed to Oswald" (515).

Apparently it appealed to Mailer as well, for his assessment of Oswald's politics aligns quite well with his own position as a "left conservative". True to Mailer's idiosyncratic values, Oswald's "Atheian System" creates "a truly democratic system" by assimilating what he felt were the best features of the world's two dominant economic systems and marrying them to American social freedoms. Oswald's personal utopia abolishes nationalism, a centralized State, and the taxation of individual citizens. It maintains freedom of speech, universal suffrage, and free compulsory education. Interestingly, while both private and collective enterprises are guaranteed, "monopoly practices [will] be considered capitalistic," while "the combining of collective *or* private enterprise into single collective units [will] be considered as communistic" (506-7).

Like Mailer's own work, the contradictions inherent in Oswald's system are intended to "mount a pincers attack on the status quo," but are both in spite of this and because of this, peculiarly American in stance. As Mailer points out, Oswald's credo is essentially populist. It is attractive to "the mass of Americans" (507), which is to say, a wide swath of working-and middle-class people. In rejecting both the "Soviet International Communist Movement" and State intrusion into private life (centralization and taxation) Oswald's politics are almost purely reactionary. However, no sooner does Oswald characterize his system as "opposed to Communism, Socialism, and capitalism [sic]," he makes it clear that his anticipation of "the final; destruction of the capitalist system" makes way for a new and specifically *American* Communist Party. Such a party must declare independence from the "domination and influence" of its Soviet motherland,

thereby acting to "free the radical movement from its inertia," and transcend its current status as a "weakened" and "stale class of fifth columnists of the Russians," in the service of "safeguarding an independent course of action…an *American* course"(quoted in *OT* 507).

In Oswald Mailer finds the perfect marriage of Emersonian hero and the prototypical autocrat, Adolph Hitler. Summing up Oswald's manifesto, Mailer cautions the reader against the inevitable outcome of revolutionary thought: " Has there ever been a dictator who did not issue comparable statements in the early years of his revolution?" (508) On the other hand, one of Mailer's most important authorial "speculations" casts Oswald's perception of the assassination as an Emersonian act. Extending Priscilla Johnson McMillan's thesis in her biography, *Marina and Lee*, Mailer claims that Oswald was "presented [with] a new conflict-to be the instrument of history *or* the leading man" (782). While Mailer admits "Oswald may never have read Emerson," he encourages us to read a passage from Emerson's "Heroism" as a primary source of insight into Oswald's character. According to Mailer, "[the passage] gives us *luminous insight* into *what had to be* Oswald's opinion of himself as he sat…waiting for the Kennedy motorcade—he was committing himself to the most heroic deed of which he was capable [italics mine."(783). Here Mailer appears to depict the assassination attempt as the result of Oswald's delusions of grandeur. Ventriloquizing Oswald's belief that "'It had become his fate to decapitate the American political process'" (782/McMillan, 518) [13], Mailer

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[13] Here Mailer quotes McMillan from *Marina and Lee*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 518.

cites Emerson on the heroism of dissent:"'[Heroism] works in contradiction to the voice of mankind, and in contradiction, for a time, to the voice of great and good. Heroism is secret obedience to the voice of an individual's character…'"(783)

On the other hand, Oswald did read *Mein Kampf*, which was lent to him by Russian émigré and possible CIA agent, George de Mohrenschildt. Although he comes off as more Machiavellian than libertarian, de Mohrenschildt and Oswald occupy a certain common ground:

> Possessor of an eclecticism that made him delight in presenting himself as right-wing, left-wing, a moralist an immoralist, …de Mohrenschildt could hardly have failed to see that there was a profound divide between Oswald's ideology and his character: Absolute freedom for all was the core of his political vision, yet he treated Marina as if he were a Nazi corporal shaping up a recruit. (*O.T.* 458)

It is difficult to say what de Mohrenschildt's attitude toward Oswald really was, or what his intentions might have been in presenting Oswald with Hitler's biography. However, Mailer quotes, as he does with the Emerson passage, several passages from *Mein Kampf*, with the understanding that they be read as a parallel to Oswald's thinking:

> …[O]ne can think of no moment in Oswald's life when he would have been more ready to …feel some identity with Hitler than in these weeks alone in Dallas working at a low-paying job while feeling within himself every presentiment that he was a man

> destined for greatness. So it is worth looking at a few of Hitler's remarks. (457)

Mailer chooses well, for the passages he quotes concerning Hitler's early loneliness and poverty and the comforts of reading exactly mirror Oswald's experience. Most importantly, Mailer quotes an italicized passage that was of particular importance to Hitler, and by association, Oswald:

> "It must never be forgotten that nothing that is really great in this world has ever been achieved by coalitions, but that it has always been the success of a single victor…Great, truly world-shaking revolutions…are not even conceivable and realizable except as the titanic struggles of *individual formations*."(457)

Mailer goes on to note "'Individual formations' are, of course to be understood as a synonym for *one man* [italics Mailer's]. (457)

Mailer is careful to limit his association of Oswald with Adolph Hitler to what he argues is their shared belief in the individual as historical catalyst. He takes pains to disassociate Oswald from racism or any other forms of extreme nationalism. To that end he reasserts for Oswald the very political positioning he earlier cast into doubt:

> *Oswald was a Marxist*. To relax his grip on Marxism would have been equal to an intellectual decomposition for himself. The concept of a fatherland was odious to him; can one imagine his "feeling inner pride in the privilege" [quoted from *Mein Kampf*] of

> being American? He would hate the concepts of race and historically destined folk [italics mine]. (459)

Oswald's political ideology is ultimately moot. The Great Man theory of history that Mailer imputes to Oswald is inassimilable into Oswald's Marxism without acceding to Mailer's central argument about him. Instead, the man Mailer claims was a Marxist but " not a leftist," casts as a libertarian but presents as a reactionary, is first and foremost, an embodiment his Hipster or Psychopath whose radical individualism Mailer sees as a courageous stand against the "the partially totalitarian society" ("The White Negro," 339) that determines the fate of American lives.

If we take into account Mailer's division of American society into a dichotomy between the Rebel,a "frontiersman in the Wild West", or the Conformist "a Square cell trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society"(339), his comparison of Oswald to Emerson and Hitler becomes problematic. While such a comparison immediately suggests itself as a critique of the dark side of American individualism, Mailer makes no attempt to address its ramifications. As a number of critics have pointed out (Menand, McCann, and Patell), Mailer's agon is with liberalism and not individualism. But in this case Mailer's failure to address the contradictions (and perhaps more importantly, the affinities) inherent in Emerson's individual and Hitler's Superman mar an otherwise sharp critique of American values in both the Cold War and the Reagan/Bush era.

Mailer's personal biases (or "obsessions") also cloud a potentially superb reading of Jack Ruby. Rather than illuminating the ways that race and class inform political power, Mailer's treatment of Ruby's testimony before the Warren commission and Ruby himself reveals the ways in which his "fetishization of racial difference"(*Leopards* 35)

and preoccupation with tribal identity encourage his reversion to stereotype. The vivid descriptions of Ruby are also some of the most compelling in *Oswald's Tale*. Mailer calls Jack Ruby "a spiritual brother to Oswald" (740), and (like Nicole in *Executioner)* Ruby functions as a kind of secondary protagonist in the novel. In a section entitled "The Amateur Hit Man" Mailer describes Ruby as

> A minor thug from the streets of Chicago…he is of the Mob in the specific values of his code, and yet never a formal member in any way—too wacky, too eager, too obsessed with himself, too Jewish even for the Jewish mob. All the same, he is pure Mafia in one part of his spirit—He wants to be known as a patriot in love with his country and his people. He is loyal. Select him and you will not make a mistake. (733)

Like Oswald's attraction to Marxism, Ruby's identification with the Mafia serves specific personal agendas that are at odds, both with each other, and with the organization itself. If Oswald cannot be loyal to any personal or political connection, Ruby is loyal to too many. As Mailer points out, this intense loyalty makes Ruby both a true member and an eternal outcast from the familial "nostra" of the Mafia. But this is also true of his relationship to American identity. Narcissistic ("obsessed with himself"), unapologetically ethnocentric ("too Jewish even for the Jewish mob") and self-consciously patriotic (painfully anxious to prove his love for "his country and his people"), Ruby's conflicting loyalties make him vulnerable to exploitation. His liminal position—neither insider nor outsider—makes him equally expendable to the Mafia and

the Warren Commission, and therefore, like Oswald, an ideal candidate for carrying out the political errands of opposing organizations.

Not surprisingly, Ruby also saw himself as a patsy; he tells Earl Warren “I have been used for a purpose" (*OT* 740/*WC* v 5, 211) [12] In Mailer’s novel, the tragedy of Ruby’s life is that, unlike Oswald, he *knew* he was “just a patsy” from the beginning, but had no power to prevent it. Mailer’s reconstruction of Ruby’s testimony before the Commission suggests that not only was Ruby more or less coerced to kill Oswald and accept full responsibility for the act, but that the Commission’s failure (or refusal) to recognize his position forced on Ruby a cover story that served its agenda. During his testimony before the Commission, Ruby petitions Earl Warren in vain for protection, claiming “ there will be a certain tragic occurrence happening if you don’t take my testimony and somehow vindicate me so *my people* don’t suffer because of what I have done [italics mine]”(*O.T.* 740/ *WC* v 5, 211).

Ruby, in his testimony, refers to either “his people” or “his “family” at least three times. While Ruby seems to use the terms to refer solely to his immediate family, Mailer interprets Ruby’s usage of both phrases as a reference to the Jewish people as a whole. Such an interpretation of Ruby’s reference to “my people,” while far broader than Ruby seems to have intended, illuminates Mailer’s view of Ruby’s position in the larger context of American identity. Mailer’s depiction of Ruby’s Jewish identity as a kind of tribal connection that subsumes American identity seems overdetermined. But, as Sean McCann reminds us, Mailer is no liberal. Rather than celebrating a civic identification,

Mailer's "fiction and social criticism emphasize the way that, in its celebration of "deep" and "familial" kinds of political obligation—of communities unified by "common history" and "bound by moral ties antecedent to choice-the republicanist vision lends itself to a fascination with racial exclusivity" (McCann, 298).

A more accurate sense of the nature of Ruby's concerns is indicated by his interchangeable use of the phrases "my people" and "my family." Earlier in his testimony, Ruby has told the commission "my whole *family* is in jeopardy" qualifying this with, "My *sisters* as to their lives [italics mine]" (737). Ruby goes on to list the members of his family by name, including his sisters and his in-laws, claiming again "they are in jeopardy…just because they are *blood-related to myself*…[italics mine]"(738). While the Jews are very arguably Ruby's "people," Mailer's contention that Ruby acted on orders from the Mafia and therefore feared its retaliation for "talking" contradicts, even without Ruby's references to his sisters, his own reading. While Mailer attempts to impute to Ruby a simplistic "tribal" loyalty "antecedent" to any other, Ruby's actual comments suggest a more basic and politically assimilable loyalty to the members of his immediate family.

Rather than Mailer's simplistic division of loyalties between competing tribes, Ruby's conflict arose from a far more complex negotiation of competing *loyalties* to various identities. While Mailer goes out of his way to defend his interpretation of Ruby as obsessed with paranoid fantasies of Jewish persecution, he is uncharacteristically silent regarding evidence that Ruby's fear of anti-Semitism was not wholly irrational considering the ethnic and racial stratification of the American South in the early 1960s**.** Mailer chooses to focus on Ruby's blood ties to his ethnic identity rather than explore the

disturbingly widespread (and documented) influence of pseudo "nationalist" organizations like the John Birch Society.

The basis for Mailer's assessment that Ruby is "all-but-insane" (740), which is to say, paranoid, is most likely an apparent non sequitur in Ruby's testimony in which he claims that "The Jewish people are being exterminated at this moment. Consequently, a whole new form of government is going to take over our country and I won't live to see you another time" (740). In order to explain this mysterious comment Mailer precedes it with a projection of Ruby's thoughts *before* he spoke. It is the novel's second prominent moment of authorial "speculation", and reads like pure invention. Ruminating on Ruby's predicament, Mailer suggests that Ruby associates the Mafia's retaliation against him and his family with the Nazi persecution of the European Jews:

> The people outside who will punish him if he rats on them are evil. And evil has no bounds, as Hitler proved. So if Jack Ruby tries to explain to the Warren Commission that he was only an agent in the death of Oswald, a pawn for the Mafia leaders who passed the order down the line…then there will be Mafia leaders rabid with rage…In retaliation, they will yet kill all the Jews. The safety of the Jews always hangs by a hair anyway. (739)

Ruby may not have been in an entirely rational state, but a number of sources, including newspaper articles and the testimony of General Edwin Walker, suggest that

his fear of anti-Semitism was not as paranoid as Mailer depicts.[14] It is more likely that Ruby's conflation of the Mafia with the Nazi party, and his references to "a new form of government" taking over is a *conscious* metaphor, which is to say, an oblique reference to something too dangerous to assert directly: that fringe elements (specifically the John Birch Society) are acting on the political fate of the United States—elements that Ruby apparently fears could someday hold legitimate power, as the Nazi party did in Germany. In fact, it seems more likely that the Jews that Ruby speaks of as being persecuted "at this moment" are not European Jews, but American Jews, whom he sees as vulnerable to extreme right-wing organizations like the John Birch Society.

Ruby in fact, makes an almost-explicit reference to his "use" by not only the Mafia, but also the John Birch Society. In what seems like another non-sequitur, Ruby abruptly changes the subject, commenting,

> …[T]here is a John Birch Society…in activity, and [General] Edwin Walker is one of the top men of this organization—take it for what it is worth, Chief Justice Warren Unfortunately for me, for giving the people the opportunity to get in power, because of the act I

[14] Ruby's somewhat breathless and disjointed style may be the result of amphetamine usage. In his testimony Ruby refers to his habitual use of the appetite-suppressant, Preludin. While long-term use of amphetamines at high doses is known to induce what psychiatrists call "amphetamine psychosis," Ruby's self-awareness and insight into his state suggest a certain degree of rationality. This is not to argue that Ruby's perceptions were entirely objective, but only that, in the service of arguing in favor of Ruby's tribal Jewishness, Mailer neglects compelling evidence that Ruby's fears may have had a basis in fact. See Warren Commission, *Hearings Before the President's Commission*. Washington, D.C.: United States Government Publishing Company, 1964 v 5, 196 and 199.

> committed, has put a lot of people in jeopardy for their lives. Don't register with you, does it?" (O.T.739/ *WC* v 5, 198)

Ruby goes on, claiming that "If certain people…want to gain something by propagandizing something to their own use, they will make ways to present certain things [so] that I do look guilty" (v 5, 209), and that "I am used as a scapegoat and there is no greater weapon you can use to create some falsehood about someone of the Jewish faith, especially at [*sic*] the…heinous crime of…killing…President Kennedy" (v 5, 211).

A number of sources indicate that Ruby's anxiety about being scapegoated, particularly as a Jew, was well founded, and not to be dismissed as wholly paranoid. In an article on the effects of presidential assassinations, Murray Edelman and Rita James Simon argue that the motives of political actors are frequently discounted in the service of national unity. This may be one reason why the Commission discounted Ruby's testimony so easily: "…[A]fter every assassination there are emphatic high level assurances that the polity is healthy…and that the assassination was the work of a psychotic or…whose actions in no way reflect a widespread movement of or extensive discontent." (202) Edelman and Simon also give credence to Ruby's fears regarding accusations of involvement in the Kennedy assassination. As they point out, accusations of ideological extremism are politically useful: "Like other efforts to interpret and use the shock of the assassination in order to influence public opinion, it casts the authors' adversaries in the role of *scapegoat* [italics mine]." Furthermore, they argue, "this relationship between accuser, accused and public opinion was even more apparent when the extremist groups were the accusers" (216).

Edelman and Simon's argument also supports Ruby's conflation of anti-Communism and anti-Semitism into a generalized right-wing agenda. Firstly, Edelman and Simon claim, "the charge that the assassination was a Communist plot came almost entirely from the extreme right wing" (216). This was apparently the official position of the John Birch society, which maintained that both Kennedy and Oswald's deaths were the result of a Communist conspiracy. According to Edelman and Simon, the John Birch Society approved a "statement by [a] former Congressman…that Oswald was a Communist and that when a Communist murders he acts under orders" (216). Edelman and Simon also quote a February 1, 1964 *New York Times* article in which Gerald G.K. Smith, whom they characterize as "long active as a right-wing extremist and anti-Semite," directly links Oswald's alleged Soviet loyalty with Jewish sympathy for Ruby. In it Smith claims both that Kennedy was a Communist and was assassinated by a fellow traveler because Kennedy planned to thwart the Soviet Union and embrace right-wing ideology *and*, using Ruby's more identifiably Jewish given name, that "'a Los Angeles Jew was raising money to free Rubinstein'" (216).

The testimony of General Edwin Walker, Smith's fellow John Birch member and the victim of Oswald's first assassination attempt, suggests that he shared Smith's view of the assassination as a Communist plot. Furthermore, Walker clearly attempts to link Ruby to a Kennedy assassination plot based on extremely flimsy evidence.[15] Committee attorney Wesley Liebeler questions him:

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[15] A 1961 letter written by Morris Udall attests both to Walker's affiliation with the John Birch society, and to the Society's position that communists were infiltrating the

Mr. Liebeler: Do you know if anyone discussed the assassination with Oswald prior to the time he assassinated the president…do you have any indication of that?

General Walker: I have no personal knowledge that they did.

Mr. Liebeler: Do you have any indication that they did?

General Walker: I certainly do…The indications seem to be not only mine…that Oswald and Rubenstein had some association.

Mr. Liebeler: Can you indicate what it was?

General Walker: Well I am wondering about one thing, how Rubenstein can take his car in to be fixed and Oswald can sign the ticket and pick up the car.

Mr. Liebeler: Now can you tell us where and when that happened?

General Walker: I haven't been able to verify that it happened for sure, but I have been told it happened.

Mr. Liebeler: Who told you that?

General Walker: My information came from a repairman, from another fellow, to a friend of mine, to me.

United Stated government: "[T]he testimony revealed that Gen. Walker is a member of the John Birch Society, an organization whose leader says former President Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles and other high officials of our government have been Communist dupes." See http://www.library.arizona.edu/

> Mr. Liebeler: Could you give me the name of that person?
>
> General Walker: I don't think it is necessary. I think you have all the information…(WC, v 11, 419-20)

In addition to his obvious wish to cast Ruby as a conspirator, Walker (like Smith) insists on referring to him as Rubenstein, in spite of the fact that the Committee does not do so. Walker's heightened awareness of racial and ethnic difference is underscored by several other references, including a shooting that he read about in the paper, which included "a *Latin type* running away [italics mine]" (*WC* v11, 418).

Perhaps more disturbing, is the fact that the tone and content of Walker's testimony before the Commission indicate that, far from feeling marginalized by his association with an extreme-right-wing political organization, Walker seems to expect preferential treatment from the Committee for himself and his colleague, General Clyde J. Watts.[16] In fact, the atmosphere in the room appears congenial enough (or at least, that Walker and Watts are sufficiently relaxed), to move Liebeler to remark (possibly ironically),"Since this is almost a friendly, if I may say so, session, I assume that we can take it that the remarks you are making will be under oath, is that correct?" (*WC* v.11, 415). Furthermore, Walker repeatedly takes control of the questioning, often refusing to provide information and instructing the Commission on what kind of information he is willing to give, commenting, "I would prefer you to question me on which way you want

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[16] It is worth noting that General Watts is at pains to distance himself from Walker, commenting that, "My opinion and General Walker's don't generally jibe" (415).

me to discuss this case and I will answer what is necessary" (418), and offering "I will answer that at some later date if you find it necessary, I will reconsider it" (422).

Mailer's uncritical acceptance of Ruby's seemingly bizarre and paranoid statements regarding the fate of the Jews is particularly telling, given his skepticism of Ruby's cover story, not to mention his compelling readings of Ruby's other comments as veiled attempts to point the Commission in the direction of Mafia involvement:

> We all know [Ruby's] famous story or cover story. He was grief-stricken by the death of JFK, so bereaved that he shut down his strip-joints for the weekend, and was so appalled at the possibility that Jacqueline Kennedy might have to come to Dallas to testify in Oswald's trial that he decided to shoot the accused—'the creep,' as he would call him. But only at the last moment did he so decide. No premeditation…Yet never on the face of it has a crime seemed to belong more to the Mafia. (733-4)

The credence Mailer gives to the Mafia involvement theory suggests that he is no opponent of the argument that special-interest groups vying for power planned Kennedy's death. Furthermore, the exhaustive research on which Mailer based his "Talmudic" commentary makes it unlikely that he overlooked the potential validity of Ruby's arguments. But, as McCann points out (in the spirit of Menand) Mailer is not particularly interested in depicting or combating the victimization of Jews, the enmities of white nationalist groups, or the hegemonic power of high-ranking white officials. While Mailer is clearly no fan of Reagan, Hitler, or the John Birch Society, he lacks the quintessentially liberal interest in ameliorating difference and fostering social harmony.

On the contrary, it is in these oppositions that his vision of the nation inheres. Because, for example, "the separatist politics of black nationalism partake for Mailer of a higher degree of integrity than integrationism ever did," Mailer sees such divisions as a location for the "'explosive individuality'" (McCann 325-6) he celebrates in all of his novels.

In choosing to champion a heroic "Emersonian" Oswald over a "snarling little wife abuser" (*OT* 607), Mailer celebrates the possibilities of American individualism in something of a critical vacuum. Without an equally acute treatment of the ramifications of his "psychopath," Mailer's argument, though audacious, is somehow incomplete.

Herein lies the difference between DeLillo and Mailer's accounts of the trajectory of Lee Harvey Oswald. Unlike Mailer, DeLillo is a liberal; his depiction of Oswald is a critique of the very psychopathic personality that Mailer celebrates more or less uncritically. While Mailer also suggests that Oswald-as-psychopath "may…be the perverted and dangerous front-runner of a new kind of personality which could become the central expression of human nature before the twentieth century is over" ("White Negro" 345), the primacy of the Psychopath has for him a Darwinist inevitabilitythat he sees as a morally neutral bid for survival within the conditions dealt to us by society: "For the psychopath is better adapted to dominate those mutually contradictory inhibitions upon violence and love which civilization has exacted of us…" ("WN" 345)

Both Mailer and DeLillo disapprove of the tenor of such a civilization (which they seem to agree was expressed and brought to fruition by Reagan's policies in the 1980s),but they do so on different grounds. This is not to say that *Oswald's Tale* is not, like *Libra,* a social critique, but only that its goal is not a progressive bid for social change. In keeping with Mailer's abiding faith in the dialectic, a fresh perspective on his

position is soon provided by the publication of Phillip Roth's next novel. The critique that Mailer so deliberately avoids is the center of Roth's surprisingly acid condemnation of the 1960s, *American Pastoral.*

Chapter Four: The Apolitical Political Novel: *American Pastoral*

At an hour, in a season, through a landscape that for so long now has been bound up with the idea of solace, of beauty and sweetness and pleasure and peace, the ex-terrorist had come…back from Newark, to all that she hated and did not want, to a coherent and harmonious world that she despised and that she, with her embattled youthful mischief…had turned upside down.
Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* [1]

I do not think literature …has direct social and political consequences. I think its goal is to alter consciousness, not to alter the housing problem.
Philip Roth [2]

In *American Pastoral* (1997), Philip Roth returns to the realism he spent three decades rejecting. As Morris Dickstein points out, by the late nineties "Roth ha[d] come full circle" in his journey from "Jamesian realism…to the metafictional play of his Zuckerman novels" (Dickstein 1999, 20). But Roth's circuitous route from James to Jameson (so to speak) and back does not does not constitute a return to formal tradition per se so much as an embrace of tradition itself. For in both form and content, *American Pastoral* is a peculiarly retrograde work. Not only does the novel's condemnation of the sixties negate Roth's personal and artistic engagement with the decade, but its invocation of the pastoral and its attendant tropes of the Garden and the Fall resurrects the very literary tradition that Roth defied in his self-creation as a postwar American writer.

Roth's return to the formal conventions of literary realism is accompanied by a surprisingly passionate yearning for the certainties of mid-century American life. The

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[1] Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (New York: Vintage International, 1997) 420-21.

[2] Quoted in John N. McDaniel, *The Fiction of Philip Roth* (Haddonfield: Haddonfield House, 1974) 205.

author's "alter brain" (McGrath, B8) reappears to narrate the novel, but this is hardly the transgressive Zuckerman (or Roth) that readers have come to expect. In place of the amoral pioneer of personal freedom who narrated Roth's "postmodern" novels, is a new champion of duty, order, and generational continuity. To that end, *American Pastoral* is Nathan Zuckerman's "realistic chronicle" (89) of the life of America's last gentleman, Irving "Swede" Levov. Zuckerman imagines the rise and fall of his boyhood hero, whose blameless life is ripped apart by the turmoil of the 1960s: The Swede's daughter Merry joins the Weathermen and blows up the local post office, killing a local doctor. The glove business he inherits from his father is destroyed by the Newark riots. He is simultaneously blackmailed and propositioned by a diminutive terrorist who mocks him for refusing to sleep with her. His wife has an affair. Middle class people go to see *Deep Throat*: Chaos reigns; things fall apart.

The novel's critical and popular success suggests that its embrace of tradition struck a chord with a wide variety of readers. *American Pastoral* won the Pulitzer Prize for 1998, and received some of the best reviews of Roth's career. Not surprisingly, Greil Marcus locates Roth's "literary project" (43) at a moment of national flux that saw "the routing of the Democratic majorities…by a new, morally rearmed Republican army" (43). According to Marcus, "Roth took up a patriotic literary project" that "emerged from the wreckage of the Gingrich revolution" (43). Marcus' comments suggest that the breadth of novel's appeal lies in the political ambiguity inherent in its critique of the sixties. And indeed, Roth's apparent liberal apostasy made for strange bedfellows at both ends of the political spectrum, from Newt Gingrich to Irving Howe. Although Marcus treats *American Pastoral* as a corrective to Newt Gingrich's "totalistic remaking of

America", the novel could just as well be read as an illustration of Gingrich's position. Marcus is probably quite right that Roth's "political sympathies… could not be more different" than Gingrich's (43), but the sensibilities of the novel are remarkably consistent with the rhetoric of return, restructuring and "promise-keeping" that informed Gingrich's "Contract With America."[3]

Marcus' interpretation of the novel as a repudiation of the contemporary Republican agenda is just one example of the many critical misreadings that the novel's positioning invites. Both Timothy Parrish and Edward Alexander have likened *American Pastoral*'s harsh critique of the New Left to Howe's, arguing on that basis that Roth's worldview had evolved, or really revolved, to conform to that of his most formidable literary opponent.[4] Sandra Kumamoto Stanley reads the novel in quite the opposite way, characterizing it as an act of individuation from Howe's critical authority. According to her, *American Pastoral* is not "Roth's *mea culpa*," in the form of a substantive "acknowledgement of Howe's critique of the left" (as Parrish claims), but rather, "a defiant answer to Howe's charges that Roth cannot successfully access his own 'thin personal culture'" or establish "his relation to the mainstream of American culture'", and has no " 'vision of major possibilities'" (Kumamoto-Stanley 3).

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[3] See Gingrich's Inauguration Speech for the opening of the 1995 Congress. In it Gingrich invokes the day "those of us who ended up in the majority…stood on these steps and signed a contract." He goes on to quote from the document, which was "aimed at restoring the faith and trust of the American people in their government." http://www.newt.org/backpage.asp?art=375, accessed 2/5/2007.

[4] See Timothy Parrish, "The End of Identity: Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*" *Shofar* 19.1 (Fall 2000): 84-99, and Edward Alexander, "Philip Roth at Century's End." *New England Review*, 20.2(Spring, 1999): 183-90.

In Kumamoto-Stanley's reading, then, the novel is not so much a repudiation of Howe as a direct response to Howe's criticisms, both of Roth's work, and of the American novel in general. As such it occupies for Kumamoto-Stanley a middle ground between Howe's politics and his specific criticisms of the literary merit of Roth's work. For Kumamoto-Stanley, *American Pastoral* marries both aspects of Howe's vision in that it is both "political", and steeped in social and literary tradition:

> For [Roth] the sixties usher in not a culmination of consensus ideology but a rupture, an interrogation of the mythic basis of the American dream. Roth investigates why this vision…goes awry, using as his vehicle the mythic tradition of the Great American Novel articulated in the academy of the fifties and early sixties. (Kumamoto-Stanley 3)

In playing out the mythic and "universal" themes of chaos and order on the domestic stage of American history, *American Pastoral* does begin to look like Roth's bid for the specifically American "novel of ideas" that Irving Howe praised so highly in the European tradition, and despaired of an American writer producing. Contrary to Kumamoto-Stanley's assertion, however, *American Pastoral* would never have passed muster with Howe. While Roth's revival of the mythopoetic literary conventions that informed "the 1950s gospel of art" (Dickstein 2005,180) confers both the artistic legitimacy and the "moral seriousness" that Howe praises in *Politics and the Novel*, the central conflict of *American Pastoral* is not really "political"- between left and right, black and white, or haves and. have-nots, but rather, mythic- between the competing forces of chaos and order. In spite of its indictment of radicalism, the novel does not

attribute the upheaval of the decade to “ideological” conflict. Instead, Zuckerman subsumes disparate events like the Weathermen bombings, the Newark riots, and even the loosening of sexual mores into a monolithic entity he calls “the indigenous American Berserk.” Both aberrant and intrinsically American, Roth posits the Berserk as a “counterpastoral,” an ever-present chaotic force that threatens the foundation of American society.

Despite the novel’s seemingly “political” subject matter, then, Roth’s pastoral/counterpastoral (or chaos/order) binary is an aesthetic notion rather than a polemic. By imposing an aesthetic framework on historical events, Roth’s narrative subsumes the concrete political issues at stake (the Vietnam War, racial and economic inequality, and even changing sexual mores) into an ostensibly “larger” metaphysical context. While this shift in focus suggests a rather brilliant attempt to link the novel (and therefore Roth himself) to two mutually exclusive literary traditions, it is wholly antithetical to the novel’s political possibilities. And although Roth’s aesthetic choices are clearly both his to make and central to his authorial identity (nor must the content of his novel fulfill any particular “moral” or “political” obligation) they create an insoluble contradiction at the heart of the novel. As Robert Boyers points out, “This novel wants to have it both ways”(39); while *American Pastoral* is supposedly “about” the impact of political events on American lives, its relegation of radical ideology to the realm of “irrationality and the unconscious”(39) drains radicalism of historical context and releases the tension at the center of the novel. Boyer s complains, as would Howe, that "… [t]he conditions that aroused so many adults to participate in the anti-war and civil rights movements are barely mentioned in a book committed to examining the period.

There is no attempt in Roth's novel to link it to the genuine tradition of American radicalism…" (39).

But to say the novel is not internally "political" (which is to say, political in content) is not to say that it does not have political ramifications, many of which would have disturbed Howe. The repercussions of Roth's "aesthetic" choices are themselves "political" in two ways: First, Roth's privileging of formal/ aesthetic concerns over the "political" content reinstates the aesthetic/ideological split that the "postmodern" novels of his peers revealed to be artificial. More importantly, in doing so Roth's narrative obscures the very political issues it purports to raise.

Roth's aesthetic choices limit his novel in another important way. In reviving "the 1950s gospel of art" *American Pastoral* only reinscribes a gospel of another kind-the formal, social, and historical narratives that Doctorow, DeLillo and Mailer's novels worked to contest. While *American Pastoral*'s ideological disenchantment and mix of forms (history and biography) propose an obvious kinship with Doctorow, DeLillo and Mailer's narratives, Roth's "portrait of America" (Boyers 37) is actually their mirror image. First, by its very nature as a pastoral, the novel embraces an idealized notion of the American past that Doctorow, DeLillo, and Mailer's novels are predicated upon rejecting. Second, while *American Pastoral* is a biography, Roth's choice of protagonist employs the power of the genre to the opposite effect. Unlike *Pastoral*, Doctorow, Mailer, and DeLillo's novels are biographies of cultural outsiders. As such, they elicit sympathy for their protagonists at least partially through the readers' identification with the notion of radical individualism. It is this duality that Mailer and DeLillo depend on to sustain a serial killer and a presidential assassin as the "heroes" of their novels. More

importantly, in illuminating the experience of their marginal and disgruntled protagonists, *The Book of Daniel*, *The Executioner's Song*, *Oswald's Tale* and *Libra* perform a critique of their lives rather than their acts, and by extension, of American life as a whole.

In contrast, Roth's biography of the Swede reverses the positions of the key players, and hence the target of his peers' critique. By placing the exemplary Swede Levov at the center of the novel (rather than his radical daughter), Roth shifts Doctorow, DeLillo and Mailer's critique from the state to its citizens, portraying the white middle class as uncomplicated victims of Black rage and the betrayal of their children. What is both significant and disturbing about the novel's depiction of the 1960s is its resurrection of the era's status quo power relations in the guise of a courageous attack on the supposedly hegemonic forces of left-wing radicalism. Todd Gitlin's description of the novel as "Roth goes pre-postmodern" (63) is particularly apt in this sense: Rather than functioning as a counterforce to the historical "master narrative" of the sixties (as Linda Hutcheon argues about the postmodern novel), *American Pastoral* merely reproduces it in a different form. Equivalent (which is to say status quo) versions of Doctorow, DeLillo or Mailer's narratives already exist in the form of "official" documents such as the transcripts of the Rosenberg trial and the HUAC and Warren Commission hearings. *American Pastoral* then, is neither an extension nor a critique of these counter narratives, but rather, an expressly reactionary work. Far from breaking new ground, Roth's re-revisionist spin merely returns his peers' project to its starting point.

But if Roth's goals are not political, the question of his curious reversal remains. Although it has been explained away by a number of critics (Kakutani, Alexander, and Parrish) as evidence of Roth's artistic and personal "maturity", there is something

strangely overdetermined in the novel's rhetoric and worldview. How an author whom Mark Shechner characterized as "a *Weatherman* of culture" and "who, with *Portnoy's Complaint*…had thrown off the *lendings* of *high cultural ambition* to run naked with the counterculture (or the 'adversary culture' or the 'new Left') [italics mine]" (Shechner 203) came to create such a vitriolic portrait of a Weather Underground bomber, and to do so in the rhetorical mode of a tradition he and his peers rejected, can not be wholly explained as a bid for the artistic legitimacy that Roth had already attained.

The answer may be that, while *American Pastoral* is not an adversarial novel, Roth is clearly an adversarial novelist. In this context, Roth's critique of the Left may have little specific content beyond its power as reactionary impulse. Boyers rightly cautions against taking Roth's exhortations too literally, calling him "[a]n expert in apostasy and distortion," who "has made of his own occasional attraction to moralizing rhetoric an opportunity for savage contradictoriness and wit" (Boyers 36). Unlike Howe's commitment to the Left, which was both lifelong and clearly articulated, "[Roth's] present interest in the ordinary and the virtuous is new [only] in the sense that they now hold him, tempt him, transfixed and bewildered, in a degree not discernible in his earlier fiction."(Boyers 36).

But, again, to say that Roth's critique is a product of his authorial aesthetic is not to say that *American Pastoral* has no political ramifications, nor that Roth is not accountable for its political stance. Neither can Roth's authorial identity exist wholly separate from its cultural context. According to Marcus, "Roth took up a *patriotic* literary project" that "emerged from the wreckage of the Gingrich revolution" (43). In Marcus's view, Roth's " *re*discover[y]" of "what it means to be American" is both a

direct response against Gingrich's "*re*making" of this notion, and a kind of mission whose importance demands its fulfillment "even if [it] means leaving the country itself behind…" (44).

Marcus' use of the word "patriotic" in this context is instructive, because it suggests that he sees patriotism as simultaneously adversarial and redemptive: "True" loyalty entails holding the nation to its ideals even when "the…attempt to keep the American promise betrays America as such" (44). But this understanding of "patriotism," as adversarial, is neither inevitable, nor, as Marcus contends, that demonstrated by *American Pastoral*. On the contrary, Roth's critique of the sixties is not a critique of the nation, but seemingly, a critique of dissent. Through the story of the Swede, which functions as a kind of object lesson, Zuckerman (and seemingly Roth) mourns the loss of the social strictures against which he originally rebelled. Rather than rediscovering "what it means to be American" or "inventing a country" (44) the Swede is devastated by the destruction of the status quo, which he thinks of as the fabric of American life: "[t]he old system that made order doesn't work anymore" (422). Not only is the dismantling of "the old system" a loss, it is a betrayal. The upheaval of the sixties, Zuckerman implies, has violated an unspoken contract: "What should be did not exist. Deviancy prevailed…Improbably what was not supposed to happen happened and what was supposed to happen had not happened" (422).

Marcus, Parrish, Alexander, and Kumamoto-Stanley argue persuasively (if contradictorily), but fail to consider the novel in the context of Howe's political and Roth's authorial stance. While it is true that Howe was alienated by the revolutionary ideology of the New Left, he never disputed their adversarial relationship to American

Cold War ideology. Unlike Howe, whosequarrel with the New Left never swayed his loyalty to the Old, Roth's *political* loyalties have shifted with the times to maintain the very *personal* sense of alienation that has formed his identity as a writer. Thus, although Roth's critique of the New Left seems to align him with Howe, it expresses the same highly personal and socially divorced ethos that irked Howe at the beginning of Roth's career.

Ironically, then, the same stance that forms Roth's affinity with Howe ultimately bears out Howe' s original critique, both of Roth's work, and American political novels in general. As I have pointed out, the genre was for Howe a virtual impossibility in a nation so devoted to individual concerns, for, as he claimed "[i]n personalizing everything…[Americans] could not do justice to the life of politics in its own right…personalizing everything…they could brilliantly observe how social and individual experience melt into one another, so that the deformities of one become the deformities of the other" (*Politics* 166-7).

While the seeds of *American Pastoral* lie in Roth's response to the Vietnam War, the novel's stance owes more to Roth's artistic and personal sensibilities than his political views. In an interview about the novel, Roth tells Charles McGrath that he'd "begun the book some 20 years earlier [than its 1997 publication], near the end of the Vietnam War. I wrote about 70 pages, but never knew how to proceed after the daughter blew up a building to protest the war" (B8). Like E.L. Doctorow, Roth was galvanized by the political atmosphere of the 1960s, in which he also saw parallels to the McCarthy era.

However, the two writers have radically different artistic visions.[5] While Doctorow saw *The Book of Daniel* as an opportunity for a rich discussion about American politics, Roth saw the political scene as material for a great novel. After Doctorow became preoccupied with the Rosenberg case, he "started to write the book and discovered I could hang an awful lot on it—not only the explicit and particular story of two people… but also the story of the American left in general and the generally sacrificial role it has played in our history."(Trenner 61). Doctorow's comments make it clear that his political passion drives his writing. He describes himself as having been "fully sensitive to the McCarthy period" long before he wrote his novel about the period, but that "the case didn't propose itself to me as a subject for a novel until we were all going through Vietnam" (Trenner 46).

Doctorow's claim that the Rosenberg case "proposed itself to him" suggests that he thinks of writing is something of a calling (his subject matter chose him rather than the reverse), and there is something nicely inclusive in use of the pronoun "we" in reference to Vietnam. Unlike Doctorow, whose work is informed by a sense of collective responsibility, Roth's first loyalty is his artistic growth. Roth quite deliberately chose the same two periods as artistic muses which would allow him to broaden his scope as a

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[5] The finding aid for a collection of Roth's paper in the Library of Congress lists correspondence between Roth and both DeLillo and Mailer encompassing the publication dates of *Libra, Oswald's Tale and American Pastoral*. It is unclear whether Roth corresponded with Doctorow, although the finding aid lists a miscellaneous alphabetical "D" file covering the period between 1956-1996. All files containing correspondence from living writers is currently restricted until 2013,or the event of Roth's or his correspondent's death. See "Philip Roth: A Register of His Papers in the Library of Congress" Finding Aid URL http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/eadmss.ms006030, Boxes R7, R8 and R21.

writer: "'I found that dealing with a very important, powerful decade in American life, the Vietnam years, *enabled me to write in ways I hadn't written before.* I began to wonder what other time was like that in my experience. I realized of course that it was the McCarthy era [italics mine]." [6]

With the exception of *Our Gang*, his Coover-like satire of Nixon, Roth has never been an expressly political writer. Nor, despite his love of "epatism" (Schechner 203) has Roth ever really been a political animal. Instead, Roth has maintained a strict separation between art and politics throughout his career, going so far as to deny that his work contains any political "ideas." In an interview about *Portnoy's Complaint,* George Plimpton asks Roth about the "idea" that that was the "genesis" of the book. While Plimpton is presumably asking Roth to reflect on its *content*, which might include the novel's plot, characters, and perhaps agenda (to challenge prevailing social mores,for example) Roth's limits his discussion of the novel's "ideas" to the more purely "literary" realm of form:

> Some of the ideas…have been in my mind ever since I began writing. I mean particularly *ideas about style and narration…Then there's the matter of language and tone*…I've been attracted to

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[6] Quoted in Edward Alexander, "Philip Roth at Century's End." 183. An e-mail exchange with the author revealed that the format of *The New England Review* omits citations, but that the quote was from a then-unpublished interview given for a Houghton-Mifflin press packet. It is now available on the Internet under the title under the title "I Married a Communist Interview," at

http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/authors/roth/conversation accessed 4/28/2007.

> prose that has the…intonations and cadences, spontaneity and ease, of spoken language, at the same time that it is solidly grounded on the page, weighted with the …precision, and ambiguity associated with a more traditional literary rhetoric [italics mine]. (*Reading Myself* 15)

The fact that Roth is making a deliberate distinction becomes clear when Plimpton attempts to return the conversation to the content of the novel, explaining that that by "ideas" he was "thinking more in terms of the character's… predicament". Roth answers, "I know you were. That's partly why I answered as I did" (Plimpton 16). When Plimpton expresses skepticism that the central ideas of *Portnoy's Complaint* are first and foremost "literary" ideas, Roth rather disingenuously insists that the plot and characters of the novel are somewhat immaterial:

> My point is that until my "ideas"-about sex, guilt, childhood, about Jewish men and their Gentile women –were absorbed by an overall fictional strategy and goal, they were…not unlike anybody else's. Everybody has "ideas" for novels that they cannot begin to *write*… *Portnoy's Complaint* is full of dirty words and dirty scenes…*When She Was Good* had none. Why is that? Because I've suddenly become a "swinger"?…No, the reason there is no obscenity or blatant sexuality …in *When She Was Good is* that it would have been disastrously beside the point (16).

In a 1988 interview with Asher Z. Millbauer and Donald Watson, Roth underscores his vision of literature as a "pure" form, which should remain unsullied by

the distortions of politics. To that end, he argues literature and politics as mutually exclusive entities. As such, Roth's artistic vision rejects the notion of literature as having a specifically activist, or even analytical function. When asked to characterize fiction as either "a way of *knowing* the world or *changing* the world," Roth replies,

> As a way of knowing the world as it's not otherwise known…The intelligence of even the most intelligent novelist is debased when … it's isolated from the novel that embodies it. Without ever intending to, it addresses the mind alone without suffusing a wider consciousness, and however much prestige it may be accorded as "thought," ceases to be a way of knowing the world as it's not otherwise known. Detached from the fiction, a novelist's wisdom is often just more talk…Novels do influence action, shape opinion, alter conduct—a book can, of course, change somebody's life, but that's because of a choice made by the reader to use fiction as for purposes of his own (purposes that might appall the novelist) and not because the novel is incomplete without the reader taking action…My point is that whatever changes fiction may appear to inspire have more to do with the agenda of the reader and not the writer…*A writer's first responsibility is to the integrity of his own discourse* [italics mine]. (47-8)

While Roth certainly protects "the integrity of his own discourse," that discourse is not always specifically literary. A look at Roth's comments about his life and his responses to the sixties suggests that *American Pastoral's* depiction of the decade owes

as much to his personal sensibilities as to his artistic vision. In a 1974 interview, Roth refers to "The Vietnam War years" as "the most 'politicized' of my life" (*Conversations* 87*)*, but is careful to define the word narrowly, adding

> …*But* by being "politicized" I mean something more telling than writing about politics or even taking direct political action. I mean something akin to what ordinary citizens experience in countries like Czechoslovakia or Chile: *a daily awareness of government as a coercive force,* its continuous presence in one's thoughts as far more than just as an institutionalized, imperfect system of necessary control [italics mine] (*Conversations* 87-8).

Roth's description of government here expresses the basic relationship to authority that informs all of his work. A "system of *control*," which limits freedom and provides boundaries is "necessary" and therefore acceptable, while "coercion," which forces participation, is not. For Roth, "politicization," therefore is a passive state of "awareness "rather than a call to action. At a decade's remove from the Vietnam War, the intensity of Roth's focus on the "daily awareness" of governmental coercion has softened. Now Roth's outrage over American involvement in the war appears as a mere component of his response to the decade. When asked by Alain Finkielkraut, "How would you assess the '60s now [in 1981]?" Roth answers

> As an American citizen I was appalled and mortified by the war in Vietnam, frightened by the urban violence, sickened by the assassinations, confused by the student uprisings, sympathetic to the libertarian pressure groups, delighted by the pervasive theatricality,

> disheartened by the rhetoric of the causes, excited by the sexual display, and enlivened by the general air of confrontation and change. (Finkielkraut 124)

Here Roth is clearly beginning to forget any former empathy he had with the "virulence and rhetoric" that fueled the uprisings of the sixties. Instead, his remarks upon his sympathy with "libertarian" groups, and his "delight" and "excitement" in the social and sexual playfulness of the decade make it clear that his own path to revolution was paved with social transgression rather than political activism. In this the themes of *American Pastoral* are already apparent; Roth, as will Zuckerman sixteen years later, describes himself as fearful of the riots, alienated by the "rhetoric" of what he groups uninterestedly together as "causes," and "confused" by the SDS uprisings.

By the late eighties, Roth's increasing distaste for the political events of the sixties is counterbalanced by a resurgence of affection for the United States. According to Hermione Lee, "by 1988, [Roth] was clearly falling in love with America again" (*Conversations* 262). Lee suggests that in England, where he was living at the time, Roth disliked the British separation of politics and personal life, which he experienced as repressive: "What frustrated him…was that he couldn't hear the country. Nobody screamed at each other, nobody let rip, nobody went on about things. Nobody came into a room for dinner-as they do every night in New York—saying 'You know what gets me about this place'- Nobody, for instance, talked to him about Northern Ireland." (262). On the other hand, Roth was often treated to critical views of American foreign policy, and "developed distaste for what he saw as fashionable anti-American leftism; it felt to him un-self-critical and biased" (262).

Placed in the context of Roth's life and work, *American Pastoral* is quite literally a reactionary book, and thus for Roth, a highly personal book. If the novel's critique of the sixties reverses his earlier sympathy with the Left, it also serves the newfound American patriotism with which Roth rejects the "fashionable anti-American leftism" of the British. Roth's profession in a 2000 BBC interview of a new concern with "…the joining of the public and the private, seeing the private drama as the public drama" [7] reads like a direct response to his complaints about the British tendency to separate the two realms. But while *Pastoral* may well represent Roth's attempt to join the public and the private realms, the novel is imbued with a specifically Rothian interpretation of their relationship. In the first place, what "frustrates" Roth about the politics of the British is largely personal: it is not the views they express as much as responses they repress. In England, (unlike Roth's novels) "nobody scream[s] at each other" or "[goes] on about things," or (unlike fellow New Yorkers) "c[omes] into… dinner" exclaiming their outrage. On the other hand, what Roth sees as a "public/private" division in British reticence about Northern Ireland may in fact be the result of its polar opposite-their refusal to see domestic politics as separate from British private life. While he clearly objects to their criticism of the United States, the insight that dominates the passage is Roth's irritation with the refusal of the British to discuss domestic politics with an outsider. Lee does not claim, for example, that none of the British opposed their government's policy toward Northern Ireland, but only that nobody discussed it with Roth.

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[7] Quoted in Parker Royal 186-7.

For Roth the notion that "the personal is political" does not elevate the intersection of individual experience and history to the realm of political importance so much as it elevates elements of Roth's experience to the level of historical event. While this particular linkage of "public and private dramas" has forged Roth's authorial identity, it has unavoidable political repercussions. Roth is careful to protect the moral neutrality of literature from the readers' "use of fiction for [their] own purposes," but has no such compunction about using its supposed neutrality to avoid the political impact of his artistic "purposes." If as Roth asserts, politics compromise literature, so, as Howe has claimed, do Roth's personal goals distort the novel's vision of the 1960s.

Whether a response against "fashionable anti-American leftism," or a moment of genuine nostalgia, *American Pastoral*'s "patriotic" vision of America is ultimately as "un-self-critical and biased" as the vision it opposes. Greil Marcus's description of the setting of the novel implicitly acknowledges the anxiety that drives its retreat to familiar ideological territory: "To find the solid ground that Zuckerman will feel crumbling beneath his feet; Roth takes him back to the idealism of his boyhood." (46) The unclear pronoun referent in Marcus's sentence ("his" boyhood) points up the ambiguity of the boundary between Roth and his narrator. Despite Roth's frequent protests against being confused with his fictional counterpart, the author's comments about his work justify and often encourage such readings. Although Roth claims that "writing is a performance" and that he "imbue[s] the characters with aspects of my personality," his argument that "I'm the writer not the actor" (Matchan 241) actually places him in the both camps.

Roth's own confusion about the boundary between himself and Zuckerman comes up again in McGrath's interview in *The New York Times*. In it Roth tells McGrath that

American Pastoral would not have been possible without Zuckerman. Although Roth had begun a version of the novel in the 1970s, he "never knew how to proceed" until [t]his mediating intelligence named Nathan Zuckerman solved the problem of how to launch the book. Only when I got Zuckerman in there thinking could I get the story of the Levovs going…Zuckerman was my insider…[O]n page 90 I jettisoned Zuckerman-he was no longer necessary" (8).

Roth's description of Zuckerman as a mediator seems apt, but his "jettisoning" of Zuckerman so close to the beginning of the novel flirts with the possibility that "Roth" just may be narrating after all. And if as Hermione Lee points out, "Nathan Zuckerman makes his way through Roth's own fictionalized journeys," (Lee 259) *Pastoral* invites the readers to make their way through Roth's. Zuckerman's biography of Swede Levov is also the story of postwar Newark, and thus, in a sense, Roth's autobiography: The novel's "American" postwar is Roth's postwar; its Newark, the Newark of Roth's youth. In an interview for Houghton Mifflin about his American Trilogy, Roth goes a step further, suggesting "his" Newark to be a microcosm of urban America itself. According to Roth, Newark "has come to represent for me …modern times in America, and the fate of Newark has been the fate of many other cities…I'm just trying to resurrect it in its different stages. I think that there may be something of interest for other Americans." [8]

Roth's comment provides a valuable insight into his assumptions about "other Americans", and hence, the context of his novel. His positioning of Newark as

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[8] Houghton Mifflin press release http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/authors/roth/conversation.shtml, acc. 4/28/07.

representative of a general urban phenomenon casts Newark's rise and fall as part of a shared American experience. One of the novel's most compelling techniques, for better or for worse, is its drafting of the reader into a kind of nostalgic "American" consensus. While this inclusiveness provides much of the novel's emotional resonance, it is also, given the narrative's reliance on the historical record, somewhat disingenuous. By casting his personal experience as a universal experience, Roth (through Zuckerman) presents his version of events as the received version, often obscuring complex social and economic forces that were not part of his experience. In the "Paradise Remembered" section of the novel, Zuckerman takes the reader back to the early postwar. Suddenly, the era of Roth's own boyhood is the readers' as well: "*Let's* remember the energy," it begins [italics mine] (40). Here Zuckerman "reminds" the reader of the powerful faith in progress, in democracy, in America, that characterized the period:

> Americans were governing not only themselves, but some two hundred million people in Italy, Austria, Germany, and Japan. The war-crimes trials were cleansing the earth of its devils once and for all. Atomic power was ours alone. Rationing was ending…in an explosion of self-assertion, auto workers, coal workers, transit workers…laborers by the million demanded more and went on strike for it. And playing Sunday morning softball on the Chancellor Avenue field and pickup baseball on the asphalt courts behind the school were all the boys who had come back alive, neighbors cousins and older brothers, their pockets full of separation pay, the GI Bill inviting them to break out in ways they could not have

> imagined possible before the war. Our class started high school six months after the unconditional surrender of the Japanese, during the greatest moment of collective inebriation in American history. And the upsurge of energy was contagious…Americans were to start over again, en masse, everyone in it together (40).

Zuckerman's tone at the beginning of the passage is tinged with an almost diffident irony, as though he is embarrassed by his own sentimentality. But however distanced by intellect, Zuckerman's patriotism is surprisingly earnest. His satire of the country's upbeat imperialism ("Americans were governing not only themselves but some two hundred million people") and gentle mockery of American naiveté ("the war crimes trials were cleansing the earth of its devils once and for all") soon gives way to sepia-toned nostalgia. Zuckerman characterizes the 1940s and '50s as a time of camaraderie, unity, and above all, progress. Soldiers were "brothers, cousins and neighbors," and Zuckerman refers to "our" class starting high school "six weeks after the…surrender of the Japanese." Opportunities, both personal and political are expanding wildly. Workers demand more money, while the GI bill seems to offer almost limitless personal fulfillment. The passage's stress on the social unity and creative "energy" of the period (it is referred to twice) foreshadows, by contrast, the discord and destruction that the 1960s will bring. Unlike the era of riots, bombs and protest, the postwar is imbued with a spirit of optimism. Zuckerman describes his neighborhood as "a place bright with industriousness…there was a big belief in life and we were steered relentlessly in the direction of success. The goal was to have goals, the aim to have aims" (41).

Roth's comments about his own youth suggest that the universal American experience that Zuckerman calls up in our collective memory bears a strong resemblance to his own. In a 1974 interview, Roth describes his adolescence as "a period of suspended animation" that contrasted with an exuberant and spirited childhood lived out against the dramatic background of World War II:

> …From age twelve…to sixteen…I was by and large a good, responsible, well-behaved boy, controlled (rather willingly) by the social regulations of the self-conscious and orderly lower-middle-class neighborhood where I had been raised, and mildly constrained by the taboos that had filtered down to me…from the religious orthodoxy of my religious grandparents…Rather than becoming a sullen malcontent or a screaming rebel…I obediently served my time in what was, after all, only a minimum –security institution, and enjoyed the latitude and privileges awarded to inmates who make no trouble for their guards. (Mauro 81)

In Roth's comments it is possible to discern the simultaneously satiric and elegiac tone that characterizes Zuckerman's reflections on his youth. Like Zuckerman's, Roth's gentle self-deprecation only underscores the sweetness of his nostalgia for the period. But however similar in tone, it is important to note that the contexts of the two narratives are diametrically opposed. At the time Roth made these comments, his relationship to the nation was decidedly adversarial. A 1973 interview establishes Roth's contemporary view of his generation as "the most propagandized" in American history, thus casting what he calls the "demythologizing" power of the 1960s as a corrective to a false national

image As Kumamoto-Stanley asserts, Roth at that point views the sixties in terms of "a Cold War battle over the realm of the social imaginaire" (1), which Roth characterized as " 'a struggle between the benign national myth of itself that a great power prefers to perpetuate, and the relentlessly insidious, very nearly demonic reality…that will not give an inch in behalf of that idealized mythology'". [9]

By 1997, Roth's relationship to the "social *imaginaire"* had apparently made a 180-degreee turn. The Roth of the early seventies would have dismissed *American Pastoral*'s vision of the sixties as a product, if not a vehicle, of the very propaganda he debunked. In the novel, the battle for the imaginaire rages on, cast as a clash between the differing social visions of the Swede and his radical daughter Merry. This time, however, the valences of myth and reality are perfectly reversed. Suddenly, the "benign national myth" alluded to in the "Pastoral" of the novel's title is not "mythic" in the obscurantist or repressive sense Roth intended in the '70s, but now represents a desirable and threatened ideal. In turn, the "demonic reality" of the Vietnam War and the political activism of the New Left is no longer a protest against a coercive and disingenuous vision of America, but figures as a betrayal and a disruption of that vision. The political "problem" with *American Pastoral* lies less with Roth's failure to critique the Swede's vision-which is difficult to assail in positive terms, than with his failure to consider *both* visions of American life as arising from a similar utopian impulse. The same demand for

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[9] "On the Great American Novel," 90. In *Reading Myself and Others*. (New York: Farrar, 1975) 75-92. Also quoted in Kumamoto-Stanley, 1.

social justice and the freedom to "break out in ways not possible before the war" that arose from the "big belief in life" in the '40s and '50s is condemned as nihilistic in the sixties. As a result the novel creates a simplistic binary between the liberal and consensus-based ideology of the Swede and the radical and adversarial ethos of the New Left, as represented by Merry.

Kumamoto-Stanley also characterizes the standoff between the Swede and Merry as a manifestation of two competing pastorals, pointing out, "Ironically, what Roth terms the counterpastoral in his novel itself involves pastoral yearnings" (6). However, rather than reading *American Pastoral* as a critique of the Left, Kumamoto-Stanley reads the novel as a critique of pastoralism, which is to say, as a critique of *both* the Swede and Merry's visions. She argues that "Roth portrays the members of the "greatest generation" who were baffled by…the sixties with sympathy, but he also critiques the myths by which they lived and exposes their refusal to acknowledge how that very mythology might propagate the social and economic injustices that sixties radicals battled" (3). In other words Kumamoto-Stanley sees Roth's critique of the Swede's pastoralism as balanced by the context of Merry's: Using Leo Marx's framework, Kumamoto-Stanley designates the Swede's and Merry's pastoral visions as "sentimental" and "rustic," respectively. In Kumamoto-Stanley's reading, the text's adherence to Marx's framework privileges Merry's "authentic" pastoralism, that of "*the rustic* who lives the simple life of a shepherd [italics mine]"(12), over the Swede's life as a "modern man…who adopts the trappings of a 'sentimentalized image of the simple, unworldly, 'common

man'"(Kumamoto-Stanley12).[10] According to Kumamoto-Stanley, "For the Swede and his wife, [their life in] Old Rimrock represents the sentimentalized vision of the pastoral, but neither wishes to separate from the established order," while " Merry articulates her pastoral yearnings-to disengage herself from [her parents'] … social and economic world by creating an adversarial enclave within the dominant social and economic system, attacking the materialism of a hegemonic culture that ignores the powerlessness and poverty of the disenfranchised" (12).

While *American Pastoral* does present two competing visions of America, the novel is by no means the even-handed critique of pastoralism that Kumamoto-Stanley claims. This is not to say that the novel dos not contain implicit grounds for such an argument, but only that Kumamoto-Stanley credits Roth with her own critique. In the first place, *American Pastoral* is narrated from the Swede's point of view rather than Merry's. Far from creating a tension between the Swede's "sentimental" and Merry's "'dissident'" pastoral (as Kumamoto-Stanley argues), the explicit trajectory of the novel "from the American Pastoral to the American Berserk" favors the Swede's vision of opportunity and harmony achieved over Merry's violent protest against its lack. While Merry does indeed reject the middle-class "hegemonic culture" that "ignores the disenfranchised," the novel's harsh treatment of Merry and one-sided depiction of the Newark riots makes such an argument unlikely to be Roth's. And, although Roth does, to

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[10] Kumamoto-Stanley refers to Leo Marx's essay "Pastoralism in America" in *Ideology and Classic American Literature* ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 36-69**.**

some extent, examine the "Greatest Generation's" (1) complicity in their children's rebellion, the novel's discrediting of Merry and outright mythologizing of the Swede reveals the critique of "the myths by which they lived," to be Kumamoto-Stanley's and not Roth's. Despite her assertion that the novel critiques the rural ideals of its Newark-born Jewish protagonist as artificial or "sentimental," there is no evidence of satire in the novel's depiction of any of the Swede's ideals-from his love of his 18th-century home, to his Johnny Appleseed fantasies.

In short, rather than engaging in a critique of the "benign national myths" contained in the novel, *American Pastoral* seems bent on restoring their lost credibility. Ironically, however, the novel's American chauvinism ends by flattening both the Swede's and Merry's "vision[s] of major possibilities" for American life. While the novel mythologizes the Swede as an uncritical amalgam of national heroes (from Johnny Appleseed to John F. Kennedy) its concomitant vilification the Left as agents of "the Berserk" conflates the left-wing characters in the novel into a single irrational and destructive entity and obviates any rational assessment of their ideas.

In "Paradise Remembered" Zuckerman likens The Swede to John F. Kennedy, "another man of glamour exuding *American meaning* [italics mine]" (83). Rather than interrogating the nature of the Kennedy myth and its relationship to "America" (as did Mailer and DeLillo's narratives), the passage both depends upon and foments the Kennedy myth in order to establish consensus regarding "American meaning". According to Zuckerman, the Swede's

> great looks, his larger-than-lifeness…our sense of his having been exempted from all self-doubt by his heroic role-that all these manly

> properties had precipitated a political murder made me think of the compelling story…of Kennedy, John F. Kennedy…another privileged son of fortune, another man of glamour exuding American meaning, assassinated while still in his mid-forties, just five years before the Swede's daughter violently protested the Kennedy-Johnson war and blew up her father's life….But of course. He is our Kennedy (83).

In the context of the passage it is unclear whether "American meaning" refers to the meaning of the concept of America, or to a more existential notion—what is meaningful to Americans. In either case, the passage's conflation of the Swede and Kennedy as "embodiments of American meaning" also elevates Merry's betrayal of her father to the level of Oswald's assassination. While such a comparison elevates the Swede's "personal" experience to the level of "political" status, it also negates the political meaning of the actual assassinations by reducing them to acts of personal revenge. The attribution of Kennedy's "political murder" to Oswald's petty jealousy of the president's "manly properties" deliberately sidesteps, and in fact reverses, the critique of American culture *Libra and Oswald's Tale* based on the same material. In turn, the trivialization of Merry's actual murder in favor of the figurative murder of her father ultimately credits the Swede's private experience with more "political" importance than the victim of his daughter's bomb.

Roth's analogy is imperfect, and the slippage between its antecedents suggests that Roth is forcing the comparison. In the first place, the passage thwarts expectation by positing the Swede as a model for Kennedy rather than the reverse. It is the Swede's

"great looks" and "larger-than-lifeness" that makes Zuckerman think of *Kennedy* as the other "man exuding American meaning." In this way, the Swede's "murder" is deftly made to prefigure and supersede Kennedy's assassination that happened "*just* five years before". In the second place, the "political murder" that forms the first half of the analogy and must therefore mirror Oswald's crime should logically be that of the innocent postal customer killed by Merry's (ostensibly) Weathermen bomb. Instead, Roth establishes the true subject of his analogy, and hence his novel, to be Merry's "murder" of her father. When the Swede finds Merry, who has been in hiding for several years. Zuckerman describes him as "angry as the angriest father ever betrayed by a daughter or a son, so angry he feared that his head was about to spew out his brains *just as Kennedy's did when he was shot* [italics mine]" (256).

Here Roth explicitly equates Merry's violation of her father's values with Oswald's shooting of Kennedy. This, by the logic of Roth's analogy, elevates Merry's betrayal of her father, *rather than her innocent victim*, to the status of a "political murder." The novel's transference of victimhood from the postal customer to the Swede seems almost deliberately perverse. Not only does Merry's bomb "blow up her *father's* life," but the Swede's brother Jerry explicitly states, "the real victim of that bombing was [the Swede]" (68). In this way Roth shifts the location of Merry's "political" acts (the bombing of a local post office) to the personal realm (the "detonation"/"blowing up" 68, 83) of her father's life. While the linkage of these supposedly separate realms is the expressly *political* goal of the post-Vietnam novels of Roth's peers, *American Pastoral* raises the same issues to the opposite effect. In Roth's Kennedy/Swede syllogism, the two realms are not mutually influencing, but exactly reversed. While the Swede's

personal heartbreak at the hands of his daughter is (perhaps accurately) cast as political, *both* Merry and Oswald's politically motivated acts of protest are presented as driven by personal dissatisfactions. This not only quashes discussion of the political bases of their acts, it neutralizes their acts of political dissent, however misguided, as nihilistic and deliberately destructive.

Howe's assessment of Kennedy's "American meaning" is diametrically opposed to Roth's in stance and tone, and appears to have influenced Mailer and DeLillo's assassination narratives. Unlike Roth, Howe saw Kennedy's *assassination* rather than Kennedy himself as an avatar of American culture. Rather than mourning Kennedy as the lost repository of American meaning, Howe's essay interrogates the racism and political apathy revealed by his assassination. In contrast to Roth's "patriotic" paean to the Kennedy myth, Howe's essay "On the Death of John F. Kennedy" is explicitly adversarial. It begins: "It had been hard, these last few weeks, to feel much pride in being American" ("Kennedy" 187). Howe's depiction of Kennedy also lacks the sentimentality of Roth's. In contrast to *Pastoral*'s hagiography, Howe assesses Kennedy's presidency on its political, rather than emotional grounds. While he hastens to acknowledge Kennedy's death as a tragedy, he is careful to distinguish between fellow-feeling, which he regards as humane, and true esteem, which inheres in Kennedy's acts as president:

> Would it be sacrilegious to whisper that John F. Kennedy-for all his charm, his style, his intelligence-was not quite the 'great president' almost everyone feels obliged to say he was? To enter this *dissent* in no way affects *the grief every decent person feels at the President's death:* after all, even not-so-great Presidents, like not-so-great

> human beings in general, have right to live out the natural course of their lives [italics mine].(“Kennedy” 191)

Howe goes on to praise Kennedy’s signing of the atom test-ban treaty, but takes the President’s commitment to progressive action and the civil rights movement to task:

> …[A]s for the rest of Mr. Kennedy’s record, especially in domestic affairs, he was not a firm or innovative liberal, and what is more, he did not particularly claim to be…[H]e did not understand the necessity or value of trying to arouse the masses of people to a strongly felt political involvement and participation…and on the crucial issue of civil rights, he lagged at first, [and] responded only after a great mass movement of Negroes exerted heavy pressure…(191)

Also unlike Roth’s, Howe’s analysis of the Kennedy assassination, encompasses Oswald’s point of view. What Howe understood in 1963, and what Mailer and DeLillo would not express for over 25 years is that the retelling of Oswald’s tale is by its very nature a political act, for it contains within it an implicit (and at times, explicit) critique of American culture. What is most “political” in Howe’s essay, and in DeLillo and Mailer’s renderings of the Kennedy assassination is the illumination of the *distaff* experience, and how this experience, that of an *un*manly, *un*glamorous, *under*privileged, son of *mis*fortune” created in Oswald the utopian longings that would irrevocably change the fate of the nation. Like Mailer and Delillo’s, Howe’s insights into Oswald are not only sympathetic, but also empathetic. He imagines Oswald to be “… alienated, without roots in nation, religion, class” and “a Southerner, a poor Southern boy burning with memories

of class humiliation" (188). Rather than simply condemning Oswald, Howe also indicts the oppressively hierarchical culture of the American South:

> The South is a violent society, and as long as it is committed to racism it must remain a violent society…Lashed together by the delusion of superiority, the whites know how to be a potent threat to the dark. And those very few who turn against the society must find it hard-so wracking is their apostasy-to avoids the extremist fevers which course through it. (188-9) [11]

In an argument echoed by DeLillo twenty five years later, Howe refers to Kennedy's death as "the common responsibility of governors and lunatics," charging the collective force of greed, hypocrisy, and racism with complicity in the crime:

> Two assassinations, each ghastly in its own right and each uncovering still another side of our social pathology; callousness, maybe planned negligence on the part of the Dallas police; fourth-grade children in the South cheering the news that that a 'nigger-loving' President had been murdered; subversion of the process of law enforcement to the demands of television…there remains the common breeding-ground of a hate-driven society, the common responsibility of governors and lunatics; and then the smogs of piety

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[11] Howe's description of Oswald as "at once military and anarchic" (189) is echoed in Mailer's assessment of the contradictions in Oswald's character, and suggests that Howe's essay may have influenced Mailer's depiction of Oswald in *Oswald's Tale.*

> about "national reconciliation" and "an era of good feeling in American politics—it is just too much. ("Kennedy" 187)

In *American Pastoral*, there is nothing "patriotic" about adversarial politics. Instead, "radical ideas about fundamental change are held almost exclusively by lunatics" and political passions are merely "psychological expressions …of rebellious adolescents working out their…impotent rage against authority" (Boyers 38) The foremost proponents of "oppositionist and critical views." are Merry and her "luridly drawn companion" (Boyers 39), Rita Cohen**.** The heroically adversarial crusader that Kumamoto-Stanley sees in Merry is nowhere to be found in Roth's text. Rather, she is presented as both "the sullen malcontent" *and* the "screaming rebel" from whom Roth distanced himself at an early age. In this way, Merry's politics are simultaneously denied agency and credited with power that they do not possess. Merry begins as "a girl blessed with golden hair and a logical mind and a high IQ and an adultlike sense of humor even about herself, blessed with long slender limbs" (95), and who "all at once shot up, broke out, grew stout, thickened across the back…so that almost overnight she became large, a large, loping, slovenly sixteen-year-old…nicknamed by her schoolmates Ho Chi Levov" (100).

The link between Merry's burgeoning unattractiveness and the advent of her political consciousness is not coincidental. Like Mailer and DeLillo's depictions of Gary Gilmore and Lee Harvey Oswald, Zuckerman/Roth attributes Merry's adversarial politics solely to her personal alienation**:** her stutter and her rage at not fitting in**.** However, Roth's depiction of Merry is a direct reversal of his peers'. While Mailer and DeLillo's narratives indict the failings of American culture, Roth's places the onus on Merry

herself. After struggling unsuccessfully with her stutter, Merry projects her frustration onto politics. For Merry,

> [t]he impediment became the machete with which to mow the bastard liars down. "You f-f-ucking madman! You heartless mi-mi-mi-miserable m- monster!' she snarled at Lyndon Johnson whenever his face appeared on the seven o'clock news. Into the televised face of Hubert Humphrey she cried, "…sh-sh-shut your lying m-m-mouth, you c-c-coward, you f-f- filthy fucking collaborator!" (100)

Merry's politics are not only an outlet for her rage; they also allow her to reject expectations that she feels she cannot fulfill. Protesting the war in Vietnam guaranteed that "her stuttering was no longer going to be the center of her existence…Vehemently she renounced the appearance and the allegiances of the good little girl who had tried so hard to be adorable and lovable…renounced her meaningless manners…her family's 'bourgeois' values"(101).

The novel's presentation of Merry as a malcontent both echoes and reverses Roth's political stance of the sixties. Rather than addressing Merry's political commitment as a dissent, the novel recasts it as a kind of hyper- orthodoxy. In frustration, the Swede asks himself,

> Why must she always be enslaving herself to the handiest empty-headed idea? From the moment she had become old enough to think she had been tyrannized by the thinking of crackpots. What had he done to produce a daughter who… refused to think for herself—a daughter who had to be either violently against everything on sight

> or pathetically *for* everything, right down to the microorganisms in the air we breathe? (241).

The Roth of the seventies saw American Cold War ideology as propaganda; in *Pastoral* the Marxism of Angela Davis fulfills the same role. As a dissenting, and hence "anti-American" belief system, Marxism is configured in the novel as a secular religion. Contrary to Kumamoto-Stanley's reading, however, it is not *Merry's* oppression with which the novel is concerned, but the Swede's:

> Yes, now he remembers clearly sitting at Merry's desk trying to read Angela Davis…wondering how his child did it, thinking, Reading this stuff is like deep-sea diving. It's like being in an Aqua-Lung with the window right up against your face and the air in your mouth and no place to go…no place to put a crowbar and escape. It's like reading those tiny pamphlets and illustrated holy cards about the saints that [her grandmother] used to give her in Elizabeth. (158-9)

In yet another reversal of Roth's Vietnam-era stance, Merry's interest in social justice is not seen as an extension of the progressive ideals of the postwar, but rather, a betrayal of American ideals:

> She had wasted enough time on the cause of herself… A brand new Merry had begun, one who'd found, in opposing the "v-v-v-vile war, a difficulty to fight that was worthy, at last, of her truly stupendous strength. North Vietnam she called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, a country she spoke of with such patriotic feeling that,

> according to [her mother], one would have thought she'd been born not at the Newark Beth Israel but at the Beth Israel in Hanoi. (102)

What Kumamoto-Stanley quite accurately identifies as dissent, the novel brands as anti-American. Zuckerman imagines the Swede's bewilderment in the face of his daughter's righteous indignation:

> That violent hatred of America was a disease unto itself. And he loved America. Loved being an *American*. But back then he hadn't dared to explain to her why he did, for fear of unleashing the demon, insult…Imagine the vileness with which she would have assaulted him for revealing to her that just reciting the names of the forty-eight states used to thrill him back when he was a kid. (207)

While the Swede understands his love of America as a perilous "insult" to Merry, much of the novel is taken up with the ways in which her adversarial stance offends *him*. For Merry, he thinks, "being an American was loathing America…There wasn't much difference, *and she knew it*, between hating America and hating them" (213). Rather than appreciating the "blessings" of being American, Merry takes up the cause of those disenfranchised by the United States, people who, according to her "just want to go to b-b-ed at night in their own country…without thinking that they're going to get b-b-blown to bits…all for the sake of the privileged people of New Jersey leading their p-p-peaceful, secure, acquisitive, meaningless l-l-little bloodsucking lives!"(108).

Merry's rhetoric is so extreme that it is almost impossible to take her protest against the Vietnam War seriously. But obviously, a tremendous number of Americans felt the same way, not least of whom was Roth himself. Roth's 1974

interview with Walter Mauro reveals that Merry's stance and even her rhetoric echo his own of that time. Roth tells Mauro that although "we hadn't personally to fear for our safety and could be as outspoken as we liked… this did not diminish *the sense of living in a country with a government morally out of control and wholly in business for itself…* [italics mine]"(*Conversations* 87-8). Roth's comments indicate that in the sixties he too was drawn, however briefly, outside the circle of domestic loyalties by the imperatives of wider concerns:

> Rather than fearing for the well being of my kin, I now felt toward America's war mission as I had toward Axis goals in World War II. One even began to use the word "America" as though it was the name, not of the place where one had been raised and to which one had a spiritual attachment, but of a foreign invader that had conquered the country, and with whom, one refused, to the best of one's strength and ability, *to collaborate*. Suddenly America turned into "them"—and with this sense of dispossession and powerlessness came the virulence of feeling and rhetoric that often characterized the anti-war movement [italics mine]. (Mauro 87-8)

Roth's vilification of Merry's cynicism about America is puzzling, outside of the context of his authorial identity. Given his own "daily awareness of government as a coercive force" in the sixties, and his use of Merry as a mouthpiece for his denunciation of the American government as "collaborators," Roth's reversal seems counterintuitive. But the intervening twenty-five years had altered Roth's *literary* estate in ways that made it necessary for him to "rewrite" his *political* sympathy with "the sense of dispossession

and powerlessness" from which "the virulence of feeling and rhetoric" of the sixties arose. For an author who "had striven to achieve authenticity and artistic power through cultural and psychological transgression," (Greenberg 488) literary success must necessarily pose a dilemma. And, as Greenberg points out, Roth's more recent work has expressed "a certain ambivalence about succeeding in the American mainstream" (488). Thus, while the novel's change in stance suggests a new political conservatism in Roth, it is more accurately evidence of his ongoing *artistic* (self-)inventiveness. The casting of Zuckerman's newfound social conservatism as old-school transgression merely reasserts in the nineties what Roth's literary and sexual iconoclasm accomplished in the sixties.

The greatest irony in Roth's discrediting of the left, then, does not lie in its reversal of Roth's sixties-based political sympathies, but rather, in the paradox created by his oppositional style. In a sense the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* made *American Pastoral*'s social conservatism inevitable. In "On Portnoy's Complaint" Roth is already possessed by the necessity of "lifting free and clear" of [his] his last book and old concerns" ("On *Portnoy"* 22*).*In a 1990 interview he claims that the seeds of his work often lie in "an argument with your previous book-you try to undo it." (Johnson 258). While these assertions shed light on the moralizing quality of *American Pastoral* as a response to the amoral protagonist of *Sabbath's Theater*, and the political stance of I *Married a Communist* (in which Zuckerman rails against the destruction by McCarthyism of an Old Left radical), they do not save Roth from being hoist by his own petard. Roth's depiction of the anti-war and civil rights movements ultimately resurrects the very "establishment" criticisms against which Roth defined himself (and which were already hackneyed) in the 1960s. As Boyers points out, "This tendency to reduce the movements

of the '60s to an undifferentiated cartoon …is given new life in Roth's novel" (39). Rather than a nuanced analysis of the Left, a wide variety of left-wing positions are conflated into a single ideologically fanatic, blindly self-righteous, and nihilistic entity. Nihilistic because, as Roth repeatedly makes clear, its common cause is not the creation of a new world order, but the destruction of order itself As a result, the novel makes little distinction between terrorists, activists and feminist university professors. Rather than addressing, or even refuting the issues raised by these characters, their presence in the novel as "types" (Boyers 39) seems specifically designed to discredit their positions and provide the Swede with foils.

Besides Merry, the most obvious example of such a type is the pint-sized revolutionary, Rita Cohen. After touring the Swede's factory in the guise of a graduate student, Rita reveals herself to be the emissary of his estranged daughter. She blackmails the Swede, excoriating him as "a shitty little capitalist who exploits the brown and yellow people of the world and lives in luxury…" (133), and less believably, exposes herself to him in a hotel room. While Rita's perverse attempt to emasculate the Swede isn't particularly credible, it does serve several important purposes in the novel. Rebuffing Rita's crude sexual advances underscores the Swede's great decency and reinforces Rita's "soulless" and "frighteningly psychopathic" qualities. This characterization in turn, dismisses Rita's critique of capitalism as a manifestation of madness. Finally, as though madness weren't enough to neutralize the dual threat of Rita's apparent sexual and political power, the novel presents her behavior as the anarchic and irresponsible whims of a child. Although Rita is several years older than Merry, the Swede observes "[h]er dark *child* eyes. Full of excitement and fun. Full of audacity. Full of unreasonableness…

To agitate. To infuriate…She was in an altered state. The imp of upheaval. Kid Mayhem [italics mine]"(146). Here again the Swede rages against *"[t]his loathsome kid* with a head full of fantasies about "the working class"! *This tiny being*…pretending she was striding on the world stage! What was the whole sick enterprise other than angry, *infantile egoism* disguised as identification with the oppressed? [italics mine]" (134).

While a number of critics [12] have seen Roth's critique of the Left as a capitulation to Howe's, a look at Howe's contemporary writings reveals only very limited common ground between the two. Unlike American *Pastoral*'s "undifferentiated" caricature, Howe's critique of the New Left is substantive. It presents a reasoned analysis of its ideology and methods rather than a wholesale rejection of its position. In his essay "Johnson and the Myth of Consensus" Howe calls for the uncompromising and nuanced discussion that Roth's reactionary positioning avoids. While Howe acknowledged the existence of the Left-wing intimidation tactics that Roth depicts, this awareness never compromised his harsh critique of American involvement the Vietnam War. In contrast with Roth's facile condemnation of the Left, Howe maintains the tension in the argument, specifically characterizing his stance as "… a difficult position: to fight against the moral and political insanity of the 'hawks' while dissociating ourselves unambiguously from the authoritarian 'left'" (202). Also unlike Roth, Howe's essay contains an unambiguous call to action, arguing, "If ever there was a need in this country for a strong articulation of

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[12] See Edward Alexander, "Philip Roth at Century's End," and Timothy Parrish, "The End of Identity", as well as Sandra Kumamoto-Stanley's summary of their arguments in "Mourning the Greatest Generation: Myth and History in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* " cited in this chapter and in the Bibliography.

a true liberalism, a clear democratic radicalism, it is now. I propose that we try" (202-3).[13]

Howe's primary difficulty with the New Left was not, as *American Pastoral* argues, with its discontent with the system, but rather with its belief that " 'the system can't be changed,'" and hence with its emphasis on revolution rather than transformation.[14] Howe recognized in this rejection of society (which he referred to as "disafilliation" ["New Styles" 43]) a kind of spiritual "nausea" and, as Roth himself alluded to, "a tacit recognition of impotence" ("New Styles"48). In contrast to Roth's depiction of the Left as career malcontents, Howe makes a clear and sympathetic account of the New Left's sense of alienation; he condemns as weakness only their determination to "opt out of society" rather than "liv[ing] and work[ing] within society in order to transform it" ("Styles'43). But the most important difference between Roth and Howe's assessment of the sixties concerns their relationship to racial politics and the civil rights movement. While Roth's critique of left-wing movements barely acknowledges and, in the case of the Newark riots, obscures the effects of racism, Howe held up the efforts of the civil rights movement, which he praises for "making of their radicalism a politics of common action" ("Styles"43) as exemplary.

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[13] Todd Gitlin coins the terms "Weatherguilt" (398) and "Weatherlogic" (399) to encapsulate the "authoritarian" quality to which Howe refers, and makes a similar point about the ethical dilemma presented by opposing the New Left: "To go with the weathermen was to take flight from political reality. To go against them was to go-where?" (396). Like Howe, Gitlin became disenchanted with the movement, but did not abandon the left altogether. See Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties.* (New York: Bantam 1987).

[14] Introduction to S*teady Work*, 4.

Even a cursory look at the novel's shortsighted treatment of the Newark riots reveals the grave "political" liability of Roth's "personal" and artistic vision. As an expression of the Berserk the Newark riots are cast as a kind of primitive demi-urge-a random and hence motiveless steam valve of collective hysteria, rather than a response to specific historical and social conditions. In this way, the novel sidesteps a discussion of the racial and economic inequalities that sparked them, and deprives the rioters of political agency. At the same time, in the context of the riots the supposedly "depoliticized" mythic realm of the Berserk takes on disturbing racial overtones that underscore the very social inequalities that the novel denies. The overall impression left by Zuckerman's imaginary "memory" of the riots is that of the perverse glee the rioters took in the destruction of their neighborhoods:

> In Newark's burning Mardi-Gras streets, a force is released that feels redemptive; something purifying is happening, something spiritual and revolutionary perceptible to all. The surreal vision of household appliances out under the stars and agleam of in the glow of the flames incinerating the Central Ward promises the liberation of all mankind. Yes, here it is, let it come, yes, the magnificent opportunity, one of human history's rare transmogrifying moments: the old ways of suffering are burning blessedly away in the flames, never again to be resurrected, instead to be superseded, within only hours, with suffering that will be so gruesome, so monstrous, so unrelenting and abundant, that its abatement will take the next five

> hundred years. The fire this time-and next? After the fire? Nothing. Nothing in Newark ever again. (268-9)

Roth's depiction of the riots as a kind of bloodletting is incisive, and, to extent that it conveys the fervor of the mob's collective desire for change, moving. But Zuckerman's account is not intended to vindicate the rioters. Rather, Roth's insight into the rioters' inchoate longing is used to satiric effect. Zuckerman's mock-fervent exhortation that the "household appliances…agleam in the glow of the flames incinerating the Central Ward" promise "the liberation of all mankind", coupled with his prediction of the "superseding" of "new suffering…so gruesome…that its abatement will take the next five hundred years" mocks the naiveté and irresponsibility of the rioter's faith in violence. But neither the Berserk, nor the violence with which Roth associates it exists outside a social context. The fact that Zuckerman hears "the sound of bongo drums" in the "burning Mardi-Gras streets" (269) suggests that Roth's anxiety around the unleashed energy of the Newark riots is racially, rather than metaphysically coded. On the other hand, Roth's ostensibly "political" depiction of the looting associated with the riots as a manifestation of rampant American consumerism actually obscures the link between race and poverty behind a supposedly even-handed critique of capitalism. The uncharacteristic delicacy that underlies Roth's unwillingness to accuse African-Americans of group larceny also glosses over the generations of poverty that fueled the looting during the riots. Zuckerman describes the

> looting crowds crazed in the street, kids carrying off radios and lamps and television sets, men toting armfuls of clothing, women pushing baby carriages heavily loaded with cartons of liquor and

> cases of beer, people pushing pieces of furniture right down the middle of the street, stealing sofas, cribs, kitchen tables, stealing washers and dryers and ovens-stealing not in the shadows but out in the open. Their strength is tremendous, their teamwork is flawless…The not paying for things is intoxicating. The American appetite for ownership is dazzling to behold. *This* is shoplifting. Everything for free that everyone craves, a wanton free-for-all free of charge…(268)

Here the supposedly neutral and inclusive rubric of the "*American* appetite for ownership" politely avoids any reference to the fact the fact that in 1967 (the year of the riots), the majority of Newark's Central Ward was African-American. While the rest of the narrative is brimming with dubious references to race, Roth's delicacy about the identity of the rioters only serves to obscure a history of oppression. The "appetite" that Zuckerman sees as the catalyst for "shoplifitng" and imputes to greed is nothing more "dazzling" or "American" than the rioters' wish for the standard of living enjoyed by Zuckerman (or Roth) himself. The greatest irony of the passage is that Roth finds something ironic in Zuckerman's jokes. In fact, Zuckerman's surprise at seeing shopping carts of goods being wheeled "right down the middle of the street…out in the open" seems as misplaced as his finding anything surprising about the looter's helping each other collect the goods they have lived without. That the looters work in the open is exactly the point. In the mind of the rioters "this" is certainly *not* shoplifting, but the

claiming of what should be theirs, not *instead* (as Zuckerman seems to fear), but *as well.*[15]

Roth's sole attempt to engage with the racial politics of the riots results in the most serious obfuscation of all. His invocation of "The Fire Next Time" locates Zuckerman's account of the riots in the very historical context of racial inequality that the notion of the berserk and his critique of "American" consumerism obscures. [16] The question and response that closes the passage, "The fire this time-and next? After the fire? Nothing. Nothing in Newark ever again" is a clear response to the warning that closes James Baldwin's essay.[17] As Zuckerman's description of the looting suggests, Roth apparently interprets Baldwin's exhortation for change as a threat of insurrection; the rhetorical questions that Zuckerman answers seem to charge the rioters with

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[15] For a far richer depiction of the urban race riots of the sixties, see Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex.* Eugenides' depiction of the Detroit riots, while remarkably similar in stance (it focuses on the destruction of a white-owned business) and tone (Eugenides depicts the same ecstatic quality in the violence), is markedly different in point of view. The riots are narrated by a little girl, whose ethnic and gender liminality acts as a kind of prism, presenting the riots in the context of a complex understanding of race, gender and economics. Despite the novel's "white" point of view, the rioters point of view figures prominently. The novel's self-consciousness about of the complexities of race and gender is evident in a number of ironic comments by the narrator: "I realized that I couldn't be *a* man without becoming The Man. Even if I didn't want to." (518) *Middlesex* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002).

[16] For eyewitness accounts of the Newark riots, go to the webpage entitled "The Newark and Detroit Riots: Witnesses" at http://www.67riots.rutgers.edu/n_questions.htm. When asked to characterize the "events" in Newark as "a riot", a rebellion or civil unrest, a number of the eyewitnesses chose civil unrest or rebellion over the more generalized "riot."

[17] If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy…is upon us: No *more water, the fire next time!*" James Baldwin, "Letter from a Region in My Mind" *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dell, 1963) 141.

responsibility for the fulfillment of their "wishes." But Roth has misread Baldwin. Moreover, his misreading of Baldwin is yet another of the novel's odd projection-based reversals, which, like most projections, reveals more about Roth's fears than the nature of the riots. Roth's rendition of the mob's collective *consciousness* charges the rioters with responsibility, not only for the riots, but for the "irrational" impulses that "caused" them. In this way Roth doesn't merely indict the rioters' violence, but more disingenuously, the rage that caused it.

A more objective look at Baldwin's essay reveals that Baldwin cautioned against the very spirit of vengeance that Roth condemns. Baldwin writes,

> And when I sat at Elijah's table…and we talked about God's-or Allah's- vengeance, I wondered when that vengeance was achieved, *what will happen to all that beauty then?* I could also see that the intransigence and ignorance of the white world might make that vengeance inevitable-a vengeance that does not really depend on, and cannot be executed by, any person or organization, and that cannot be prevented by any police force or army: historical vengeance, based on the law that we recognize when we say 'Whatever goes up must come down.'…Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands…If we, and I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others-do not falter in our duty now, we may be able…to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world…If we do

> not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy…is upon us: No *more water, the fire next time!* (140-41).[18]

The anxiety inherent in Roth's misreading of Baldwin and his depiction of the Newark riots also informs the novel's conflation of Rita Cohen and Angela Davis. While the comparison is apparently intended to dismiss Rita Cohen's politics, its troubling racial and sexual overtones are far more "political" than Roth's stereotype-heavy assault on her radical rhetoric. Rita is introduced as "a bone white girl…dressed like Dr. King's successor, Ralph Abernathy, in freedom- rider overalls and ugly big shoes and a bush of wiry hair" (117) that Roth later describes as "aboriginal "(142).[19] When the Swede sees Angela Davis on television, "[h]er hair reminds [him] of Rita Cohen. Every time he sees that bush encircling her head he is reminded of what he should have done in that hotel [italics mine]" (157-8). Here the Swede is presumably regretting his failure to report Rita

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[18] See also Baldwin's comments in *Notes of a Native Son* on the Harlem riots of the 1940s: "To smash something is the ghetto's chronic need. Most of the time it is the members of the ghetto who smash each other, themselves." (111) While Baldwin is equally disturbed by the violence of the riots, his concerns are the polar opposite of Roth's. It is not the destruction of property, but the *self*-destructiveness of the rioters that pains him, and which his essay elucidates. Furthermore, Baldwin's reaction the goods from looted businesses lying in the streets expresses none of the triumph or opportunism with which Roth credits the rioters, but rather, a recognition of the immensity of his disenfranchisement: "…The first time the word "wealth" ever entered my mind in relation to Harlem was when I saw it scattered in the streets" (111). *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955) 85-114.

[19] While Roth is obviously impugning Rita's femininity and satirizing what he suggests to be her insincere commitment to working class values, the passage contains potentially negative implications about Abernathy as well.

to the FBI. However, given the context of Rita's exhibitionistic behavior in the hotel, both the Swede's regrets and Davis' afro take on distinctly sexual connotations.

As a counterpart to its sexual and racial coding, the women's hair is credited with such subversive potential that it is practically a character in the novel. Not only does Zuckerman claim that Rita's "nonsensical hair constituted half of her revolutionary ideology" (134), he actually personifies it-- both as an expression of an"egoistic pathology that bristled out of her" (117), and as " nuttily proclaim[ing] 'I go as far as I want…all that matters is what I want'" (134). While Rita's hair is merely alienating, Zuckerman's description of Davis' hair is ambiguous-it is neither negative, like Rita's, nor positive, but, "extraordinary". Davis' hair, like her politics, suggests to the Swede a potential for a dangerous seductiveness: "She peers out of it like a porcupine. The hair says 'do not approach if you don't like pain.'" (160)

The exaggerated connotations of Rita Cohen's and Angela Davis' hair texture suggests that Roth's critique of the women's' left-wing politics is a displacement of his own uneasy race and gender politics. The association of Rita's "bush of wiry hair" and Davis' afro with outsized sexual and political power conveys, more than anything else, anxiety about their owners' power. However, because Davis' ethnic identity makes the legitimacy of herideology more difficult to dismiss as irrational (which is to say, as a manifestation of the Berserk) than Rita's, Roth neutralizes Davis' arguments by reversing the power relations between Davis and the Swede. Rather than addressing the issues of racial and social inequality, the novel's sympathy for the liberal guilt she elicits in the Swede casts Davis's "identification with the oppressed" as a kind of oppressive martyrdom. Mining the ironic potential of her first name, the novel presents her as a kind

of avenging angel whose approval the Swede is desperate to win because "he knows that Angela Davis can get him to see his daughter" (158). As a result, the Swede's fantasies about this "black Philosophy professor of about Rita Cohen's age" (157) express both anxiety and a mixed sexual and emotional yearning. In the imaginary "heart-to heart" talks he begins to have with Davis, she is at once softer and more formidable than the "real" woman the Swede sees on the news. He " envisions her [as having] long lashes, and wear[ing] large hoop earrings …more beautiful even than she looks on television...Her legs are long and she wears colorful minidresses to expose them" (160).

To the extent that the novel contains a critique of Davis' ideology, it is accomplished negatively. Roth neutralizes Davis' radicalism by recasting her martyr status as a kind of oppressive hegemony. The Swede's anxiousness to please Davis is not the result of her virtue, but rather, his enslavement to her worldview. Davis's imaginary power to restore the Swede's daughter leaves him no free will. As a result she extorts his "faith" no less than Rita extorts his money. The Swede "tells her whatever she wants to hear, and whatever she tells him, he believes. He has to [italics mine]" (160). This relationship ironizes the imaginary Davis' exhortations that Swede take pride in Merry's fight against "the struggle against repression" and her government's "terrorist suppression of dissent" (160). The grounds for Davis' international popularity are similarly called into question by the juxtaposition of her brand of activism and international hero status. After Zuckerman reminds the readers of the "communist" and anti-war professor's role in supplying guns for a jail break and the shooting of a trial judge, his description of Davis's supporters reads as ironic:

> …[A]ll around the world, as far away as France and Algeria, and the Soviet Union, her supporters claim she is the victim of a political frame-up. Everywhere she is transported by the police as a prisoner, blacks and whites are waiting… holding up placards for the TV cameras shouting, "Free Angela! End political repression! End racism! End the war!" (157)

Here again Roth reverses the roles of the "benign national myth" and the"demythologizing" Left that formed his adversarial position in the sixties. And again, his "personal" choice has unfortunate political ramifications. The novel's depiction of Davis as an ideological tyrant presents the demonstrators as fanatics in the grip of a global false consciousness. It is not only their support of Davis that is suggested to be spurious, but more specifically, their linkage of Davis's arrest, institutionalized racism, and American participation in the Vietnam War under the larger rubric of political repression.

Roth's notion of political dissent as a kind of paranoia—which is to say an all-encompassing misunderstanding of the world, underscores his deep, and according to Howe, generational apoliticism. In "New Styles in Leftism," Howe inadvertently identifies this gap in sensibility as the source of his protracted quarrel with Roth. Howe's essay is primarily concerned with the emerging split between the "the radicals of the thirties" and the various factions of "younger radicals" of the sixties (generally distinguished as the Old and New Lefts). The cause of this schism, as Howe saw it, was largely generational. As a result there was "an inordinate difficulty in communication between the young radicals and those unfortunate enough to have reached—or God help

us, even gone beyond—the age of 40" (47). As Howe explains it, the generational split over *ideology* was comparatively uncommon, dividing as it did "the radical young" from "those few older people who", like Howe, "ha[d] remained radicals" (47). But the essay also identifies a further schism, this one between the radicals of *both* generations of Left and the postwar G.I.- Bill generation of the late forties and early fifties. This generation had never been radical, and was in fact conspicuously apolitical. Thus, the gap to which Howe refers here is not precisely ideological, but rather, a gap in political *sensibility*. Howe argues, "a generation is missing in the life of American radicalism, the generation that would now be in its mid-thirties, the generation that did not show up" ("New Styles" 47).

Ultimately Howe and Roth's political visions are wholly divergent. What Roth's novel celebrates as the heroic self-sacrifice of "The Greatest Generation," Howe dismisses as political abdication. In this way, Howe takes as a given the very vision of American political life that *American Pastoral* critiques. While Howe's references, both to a *missing* generation, and a "*life* of American radicalism" make it clear that he saw radicalism as an integral part of American political history, *American Pastoral* presents the radicalism of the New Left as a disruption of that history. The implicit contention of Howe's comment is that it is not the dissent of the Sixties that was anomalous, but rather, the silent acquiescence of the fifties. Whether influenced by the "mixture of chauvinism, hysteria and demagogy…created during the Cold War Years" (45),[20] or simply

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[20] In contrast to current assessments of the Cold War, Howe's comment seems to suggest that he felt the influence of the Cold War to have passed.

preoccupied with the work of assimilation and upward mobility, Howe argues that Roth's generation retreated from the political fray.

Thus, while *American Pastoral's* positioning would seem to align Roth with Howe, it ultimately expresses the same highly personal and socially divorced ethos that irked Howe at the beginning of Roth's career. Despite the fact that Howe saw the Portnoy-era Roth as an avatar of the New Left, the bone of contention between Roth and Howe was never ideological per se, because Roth's agenda as a writer isn't "political' in the sense that Howe understood it. In a 1987 article, Mark Schechner writes that Howe "took Roth for a weathervane, if not a Weatherman, of culture" (203). Schechner even goes so far as to characterize Portnoy as the literary embodiment of Abbie Hoffman's theatrical "street politics" (203). Roth himself linked *Portnoy's Complaint* to the contemporary "epatism" that Schechner claims "combined Dadaist revelry with revolutionary zeal," but these concerns were not really "political" for Howe. Rather, Howe's censorious comment about the novel's betrayal of a "thin personal culture" on Roth's part seems aimed at its solipsism rather than its revolutionary qualities. Howe did not (or really could not) see it at the time, but his distaste for Roth's post-*Goodbye Columbus* work arose less from Roth's political convictions than from his lack of conviction. The novel's celebration of individual freedom —from the constraints of family obligation, social mores, and the subjugation of the ego— struck Howe as political abdication rather than political zealotry.

American Pastoral is neither, as Kumamoto Stanley claims, "a defiant answer to Howe's earlier charges that Roth cannot …establish his 'relation to the mainstream of American culture, in its great sweep of idealism and romanticism.'", nor, through its

invocation of "the New –Criticism-based language" of the " classic mid-century texts" of "the myth and symbol school" (3), a challenge to Howe's accusation of political abdication. On the contrary, this chapter has attempted to demonstrate that the deployment of such specifically literary archetypes in a historical context only emphasizes the very political abdication to which Howe objected at the beginning of Roth's career. The pastoral is, by its very nature a fantasy. As a result, as Frederick Karl points out, "[it]…is never really successful as an ideological mode in American thought. It works better as a fictional idea, as an image…as a fantasy interlarded with real people and events" (*American Fictions* 47).

Were the historical content of American Pastoral truly "beside the point," as Roth so passionately argued earlier in his career, the novel might have been more fully realized. While it is clearly not successful as a novel of political ideas, Kumamoto-Stanley is quite right that the novel "[a]rticulat[es] [Roth's] own 'vision of major possibilities'" for American life. But these "possibilities" are neither strictly "political", nor tailored to anything so programmatic as the establishment of "a common cultural tradition based on American archetypes" or the "legitimat[ion] of a lineage of national expression designed to make "American literature American" (4). Rather, it is more accurate to see both Roth's "political" and "aesthetic" ideas as extensions of his personal worldview. Instead of merely "emulating" the "New-Criticism based" tropes of R.W.B. Lewis, Henry Nash Smith, and Leo Marx, the novel specifically re-deploys these archetypes to "legitimat[e]" a purely Rothian vision and mode of "national expression" designed to make *Roth's* literature American".

In a conversation with Alain Finkielkraut, Roth makes it clear that he sees himself as a specifically American writer. But Finkielkraut's final question also sums up the ongoing tensions contained in Roth's oppositional relationship to America. Finkielkraut comments, "You seem to me to be made particularly rebellious by a strain of sentimental moralizing in American culture. At the same time, you strenuously claim your American heritage…What does America mean to you? (Finkielkraut 130) Roth answers,

> America allows me *the greatest possible freedom* to practice my vocation. America has the only literary audience I can ever imagine taking any sustained pleasure in my fiction…*My consciousness and my language were shaped by America.* I'm an American writer in ways that a plumber isn't an American plumber…or a cardiologist an American cardiologist…Rather, what the heart is to the cardiologist, the sink to the plumber, America is to me [italics mine]. (130)

Here Roth 's notion of "America" as a source of negative liberty —"the greatest possible freedom"—goes hand in hand with the inextricable relationship between American consciousness and American language. But if Roth's consciousness and language were shaped by America, these notions were themselves shaped by baseball. In "My Baseball Years," Roth writes,

> My feel for the American landscape came less from what I learned in the classroom about Lewis and Clark than from following the major-league clubs on their road trips…The size of the continent got through to you finally when you had to stay up until 10:30 p.m. in

> New Jersey to hear via radio…Cardinal pitcher Mort Cooper throw the first strike of the night to Pee Wee Reese out in…St Louis Missouri…Not until I went to college…did I find anything with a comparable *emotional atmosphere* and *aesthetic appeal* [italics mine].(181-2*)*

Just as America is inextricably related to baseball, baseball's "emotional" and "aesthetic appeal" is for Roth, inextricably related to literature. Roth's characterization of literature as a kind of substitute for baseball is underscored by his description of baseball "with its lore and legends, its cultural power…its native authenticity, its lingo, its characters" as "the literature of my boyhood" (182). In turn, the essay reveals the extent to which Roth sees the "lingo" and "cultural authenticity" of baseball as both broadly inclusive and specifically American. Baseball is

> the game that I loved with all my heart…for *the mythic and aesthetic dimension* it gave to an American boy's life—particularly to one whose grandparents could hardly speak English. For someone whose roots in America were strong but only inches deep, and who had no experience…of an awesome hierarchy that was real and felt, baseball was a kind of *secular church* that reached into every class and region of the nation and bound millions upon millions of us together in common concerns, loyalties, rituals enthusiasms and antagonisms. Baseball made me understand what patriotism was about, at its best [italics mine]. (180)

Here the "mythic and aesthetic" elements that attract Roth are not resurrections of exclusionary myths, but rather, form out of "the lore of baseball" a neutral belief system (a "secular church") that, like Doctorow's "secular transformation" has the power to "bind millions upon millions" in common concerns that transcend religious, ethnic and class differences. As Roth explains, this is "patriotism at its best" because it is quite deliberately not "ideological": it is "lyrical rather than martial or righteous in spirit," and cannot "be easily sloganized" (180). Most importantly, unlike institutional rituals, this form of consensus cannot be forced, but rather, is elicited:

> To sing the National Anthem in the school auditorium every week…left me cold. *It was different, however, on Sundays out at Ruppert stadium*, a green wedge of pasture…among the factories, warehouses and truck depots of industrial Newark…It would have seemed to me an emotional thrill forsaken if we hadn't first to rise to our feet (my father, my brother, and I—along with our inimical countrymen, the city's Germans, Italian, Irish, Poles, and, out in the Africa of the bleachers, Newark's Negroes) to celebrate the America that had given to this unharmonious mob a game so grand and beautiful [italics mine]. (181).

The Swede's experience in the army replicates in *American Pastoral* Roth's "secular church". Like baseball, the army is quintessentially American in that it coheres an "unharmonious mob" of ethnic, racial, and religious identities around service to the nation. In the army, the Swede serves alongside

> Irish guys, Italian guys, Slovaks, Poles, tough little bastards from Pennsylvania, kids who'd run away from fathers who worked in the mines and beat them with belt buckles and with their fists—these were the guys I lived with and ate with and slept alongside—even an Indian guy, a Cherokee, a third baseman…Not all of them decent people, but on the whole all right…Saw the South. Saw things I never saw. Saw the life the Negroes live. Met every Gentile you can think of. …Playing basketball and baseball with the Twenty-second regiment. Got to marry beautiful girl named Dwyer. Got to run a business my father built, a man whose father couldn't speak English… (213)

The "difference" of the Swede's Jewish identity becomes irrelevant in the microcosmic America of the twenty-second regiment, an America so diverse and immigrant-based that he is surprised to meet a Native American ("*even*" an Indian guy). In the army the Swede transcends ethnic and social stratifications, "liv[ing] with and "[eating] and sle[eping] alongside" people he would never have met in Newark, and seeing places that "he never saw." In its multivalent possibilities for belonging, the Swede's vision of American identity is (in Werner Sollors' use of the term) "consensual" in both the aspirational (through assimilation rather than genetics) and the ideological

(non-dissenting) senses of the word.[21] In this context, the Swede's conception of "being" American lacks both the *articulated* ideology and the didacticism that the novel attributes to the vision of the New Left. In place of the Left's "burden" of social responsibility, the passage invokes a kind of negative liberty informed by an expansive sense of variety and opportunity.

Butt the true genius of Roth's vision is its potential to transform Sollors' notion of consent *into* descent:

> Hate America? Why, he lived in America the way he lived inside his own skin…For [Merry] being an American was loathing America … To revile her "capitalist parents as though their wealth were the product of anything other than the unstinting industry of three generations. There wasn't much difference… between hating America and hating them. (213)

Through "the unstinting labor of three generations" the Levov's national, which is to say *American* identity has become synonymous with their physical, which is to say "genetic" or inherited identity. Now the Swede "lived in America the way he lived in his own skin." This conceives of American identity in a mutual relationship; as the Swede is American, so America is the Swede: "there wasn't much difference…between hating America and hating them."

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[21] See Werner Sollors' discussion of "consent" and "descent"-based identities in *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture.*(New York and Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1986).

It is no coincidence that a Cherokee, that soldier most American by descent, plays third base in the most "consensually" American game, for baseball functions in both Roth's life and the novel as a conduit for American identity. Roth's affection for the sheer *Americanness* of baseball's "lingo", from the terminology to the players' names, is apparent throughout the novel, as it is in his essays. Roth's invocation in "My Baseball Years" of "Brooklyn shortstop Pee Wee Reese" (182), "Mel Ott's cocked leg striding into the ball", and Jackie Robinson's pigeon-toed shuffle"(183) has far broader possibilities for American identity that any invocation of Adamic innocence possibly could. Roth's love for the American idiom is evident throughout his work, and argues in favor of the authentic American voice that Howe discounted until late in his life.[22] Just as Roth remembers with fondness the accent and diction of "Red Barber, the Dodger radio sportscaster of the forties", "a respectful, mild Southerner" with a "subtle rural tanginess to his vocabulary and a soft country parson tone to his voice" (183), the Swede delights in his father Lou Levov's easygoing American diction. According to Zuckerman, "The way his father talked to people, that got him too; the *American* way his father said to the guy at the pump: 'Fill 'er up, Mac. Check out the front end, will ya, Chief?'" (208) Lou Levov's rhetoric is both masculine and populist, suggesting somehow both the geographic and the social scope of the nation. Although Lou asks for service ("Check out the front end, will ya…?"), his use of "Chief" and "Mac" (as opposed to "kid", "boy" or

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[22] In a 1989 interview with William Cain, Howe acknowledges a change of heart. He tells Cain, "I now do believe in a distinctive American literature, but back then I would have been much more skeptical." He also agrees, though a bit reluctantly, that "[O]ne can locate a distinctive American quality, a voice, a tone." See "An Interview With Irving Howe." *American Literary History*, (Fall, 1989): 557.

"hey, you") creates an atmosphere of men among men, meeting as equals. Although they are strangers, there is a kind of disinterested camaraderie not based in common ethnicity, religion, or class, but rather, in the universal nature of a family man's stop for gas.

Roth's vision of America is also expressed in the novel's pairing of the Swede's Johnny Appleseed fantasy with its satiric depiction of Thanksgiving. Because the acid tone of the Thanksgiving scene suggests Roth's disappointment in the failure of the Appleseed myth, the tone of the Appleseed fantasy has been the subject of dispute among critics. According to Dale Peck, "descriptions of [the Swede's] essential goodness weigh heavily…including several pages in which the…Swede acts out a Johnny Appleseed fantasy so goofy that I'm not convinced that the intention wasn't to parody" ("Dangerous Girls" 22), while Elaine Safer insists that the episode is obviously parodic because its intention is to juxtapose "the pastoral vision…of innocent shepherds and meadows" with "twentieth-century American society engaged in the controversial Vietnam War…and interested in material gains-in the business world and the social life it affords" (Safer 84).

Both readings are accurate in different senses. The Swede's Appleseed impersonation *is* parodic, but not in the way either Safer or Peck intends. The novel's excoriation of the war protestors and loving account of the history of the Newark Maid glove factory directly contradict Safer's contention that Roth intended the Appleseed myth to critique either capitalism or the Vietnam War. And, despite Safer's contention, Roth's conception of an American pastoral is easily broad enough to reconcile an urban glove factory owner with the myth of "the cheerful, generous…man, devoted to living in harmony with nature and mankind" (Safer, 83). On the other hand, Peck's contention (despite his joke) that Roth's use of the myth is not parodic is also correct. The irony of

Roth's tone is the same that colors his depiction of the postwar: While diffident, Roth is in deadly earnest. If Roth's allusion to the myth critiques actual conditions in America, it maintains the values he sees expressed in the myth itself. Here again Johnny Appleseed represents an (ideal) American identity that trumps the divisiveness of ideology and religion, but interestingly, not race. As the Swede strides down the road scattering imaginary apple seeds, he thinks

> Johnny Appleseed, that's the man for me. Wasn't a Jew, wasn't an Irish Catholic, wasn't a Protestant Christian—Nope, Johnny Appleseed was just a happy American…No brains probably, but didn't need 'em…All physical joy. Had a big stride and a big bag of seeds and a huge, spontaneous affection for the landscape…Going everywhere, walking everywhere. The Swede had loved that story all his life. (316)

Although it expresses a deep cynicism about the possibilities for a durable American consensus, Roth's satire of Thanksgiving allows for a kind of negative vision of his American ideal. However ironically, *Pastoral* upholds Thanksgiving as a beacon, even as it dissolves into chaos in the novel's pivotal scene:

> And it was never but once a year they were brought together, anyway, and that was on *the neutral, dereligionized ground of Thanksgiving*, when everyone gets to eat the same thing, nobody sneaking off to eat funny stuff—no kugel, no gefilte fish, no bitter herbs, just one colossal turkey for two hundred and fifty million people…a moratorium on funny foods and funny ways, and

> religious exclusivity, a moratorium on the three- thousand- year-old nostalgia of the Jews, a moratorium of Christ and the cross and crucifixion for the Christians…A moratorium on all the grievances and resentments, and not only for the Dwyers and the Levovs, but for everyone in America who is suspicious of everybody else. It is the American Pastoral par excellence and it lasts twenty-four hours. (402)

In this, the close of the novel, the Swede's life falls apart. Irremediable social, political, and religious rifts (re)appear among his dinner guests, making a mockery of this "American Pastoral par excellence," whose "moratorium on…grievances and resentments" cannot survive even a single day. As the Swede realizes he has lost his wife, his daughter returns home filthy and emaciated to confess her crime, which may or may not cause a heart attack in the Swede's beloved father.

Here the novel departs from any pretensions to "political" or even national themes, revealing at its at its core a reiteration of the themes of *Portnoy's Complaint*, and in fact, Roth's entire career. Lou's heart attack (or broken heart), coming as it does on the heels of the Swede's utter destruction, functions as a meditation on one of the central conflicts of Roth's work: The inevitable futility of transgression. The Swede's discovery that "[o]pposing the father is no picnic and not opposing the father is no picnic" (387) illuminates the novel's otherwise unintelligible depiction of the Swede's regrets over having defied his father' wishes and married a Gentile. While Timothy Parrish somewhat understandably reads this moment as Roth's argument against assimilation, it is a perfect reiteration of Portnoy's plight. In Roth's explanation, "Portnoy's pains arose out of his

refusal to be bound any longer by taboos which, rightly or wrongly, he experiences as diminishing and unmanning. The joke on Portnoy is that for him breaking the taboo turns out to be as unmanning in the end as honoring it. Some joke"("On Portnoy" 19).

But Portnoy's complaint is also Roth's. In the case of *American Pastoral*, Roth's own refusal to be bound by taboos proves equally futile, making him, like both Portnoy and the Swede, "a prisoner of his own liberation" (Menand 94). To the extent that "the struggle of an artist like Roth for authenticity of identity" inheres in "a subversive approach to society that seeks to invert conventional theories and shock expectations…"(Greenberg 490), Roth's artistic goals are antithetical to the "political" content of *American Pastoral*. Thus, despite its apparent 180-degree "political" turn, *American Pastoral* is neither expressly political, nor much of a departure for Roth. Rather, both its "political" and "aesthetic" content are an extension of the personal sensibilities that Roth's work has expressed since the beginning of his career. As Louis Menand points out, "…[A]t bottom [*American Pastoral*] seems to be about the same thing that almost all of Roth's books are about: The life—the aspirations, the pride, the accomplishment—of the vanished world of Weequahic, the Jewish Atlantis" (93). In other words, Roth has spent the majority of his career writing about himself.

Ironically, then, while the novel's the anti- Left stance and moral "seriousness" suggests a late-life affinity with Howe, it only bears out Howe' s original critique of Roth's work specifically and American political novels in general. Unlike Howe, whose generational quarrel with the New Left never swayed his loyalty to the Old, Roth's "political" loyalties have shifted in order to maintain the very personal sense of alienation that has formed his identity as a writer. As an expression of Roth's personal sensibility,

American Pastoral would have seemed to Howe innately apolitical. And that same stance, whether or not it reflects Roth's true political sympathies, ultimately rewrites the adversarial narratives of Roth's peers, and"undoes" the work of their specifically political novels.

Thus, while Greil Marcus pinpoints *American Pastoral* as the beginning of a narrative arc that "emerged from the wreckage of the Gingrich revolution" (43), the novel also marks the end of a twenty-five-year narrative arc begun by *The Book of Daniel* in 1971. Beginning with Daniel Isaacson's alienation from political ideology as a whole, and dwelling, throughout the eighties and much of the nineties in the chaos of Mailer and DeLillo's post-ideological world, the journey of the post-Vietnam novel closes with a paean to the ideology of America. While *American Pastoral*'s vision of America is dystopic, its faith in the American myth remains strong. But *Pastoral*'s return from what Marcus calls "the long journey out" is not merely a retreat to or repetition of the past. It also sheds light on our present circumstance. The perspective of a quarter of a century has not only borne out the thesis of Daniel Bell's *End of Ideology*, it has also revealed an outcome that Bell, from his vantage point in the late 1950s, could not have predicted. In its intensely personal agenda, *American Pastoral* displays the ideological disenchantment that Bell identified, and represents in literary form one of the personal micro-ideologies that Bell predicted would replace collective political engagement. For Roth, the engagement with art serves, in a sense, the same purpose as Howe's commitment to politics. Roth, has been engaged, rather, in a "struggle with shadows of the past and illusions about the present…" in order to "creat[e] a new set of goals (and a new set of

transgressive pleasures) for art consisting largely of process and catharsis"(Greenberg, 490).

As Richard Poirier points out, Roth's own "process and catharsis,"—his struggle to "perform himself"— is both peculiarly American and innately political (Poirier viii). *American Pastoral* is not itself a political novel, by Howe's criteria or that of his peers. But, As a vehicle for Roth's "effort to find accommodation" for his "human shape and sounds," the novel represents "an act that partakes of political meaning" (viii). While not itself political in "content," Roth's novel is evidence of the widespread acceptance of a purely American definition of "the political" as inextricable from the personal realm. In this sense, it is possible to read in *American Pastoral*'s rejection of his peers' project its overwhelming success.

Conclusion

In this study I have made a case for a new political novel. While generic and even disciplinary boundaries are much contested, the post-Vietnam political novel, as I have called it, is both "new" and "political" in ways that make it recognizable as a discrete genre. The most obvious commonality among its rhetorically disparate works (with the exception of *The Executioner's Song*) is a preoccupation with the events and ramifications of the 1960s.[1] A more important element however, is their foregrounding of the individual as the location of political agency. It is through this construction that the post-Vietnam novel launches its social critique, and in which its political power most truly inheres.

Strictly speaking, there is nothing "new" or necessarily "political" in the novel's concern with individual experience; in fact, it would not be inaccurate to see these post-Vietnam texts as part of the larger trend of postwar American literature as a whole. Morris Dickstein's point about the difficulties of delimiting the genre is particularly well taken in this context: Because this "new" political novel is also a quintessentially American and quintessentially postwar novel, it was by its very nature excluded from Howe's definitive critical framework for political novels. Another reason for the post-Vietnam novel's delayed emergence as a specifically political genre is the inextricable

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[1] To a large extent, this is also true of the films of the same period-*Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*-even those that were neither ostensibly "political" (Altman's *The Long Goodbye*), nor set in the sixties (M*A*S*H*, and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*).

relationship between its temporal context and its political valence. Not only did the "postmodern" shift in the location of the political from content (novels about ideology) to context (the ideology of novels) obviate their specific political vision, but that vision has only recently come into focus on the critical landscape. The most obvious reason for this is that a certain amount of distance is required to make out the shape of any artistic or political movement in its entirety. And to extend Myra Jehlen's dictum that "projections of the future generally sum up the past"[2], the genre's projection of the past describes a very specific narrative arc that can in retrospect be seen to mirror its contemporary zeitgeist: Originating in the political disillusionment that followed Vietnam and Watergate, it passes through a state of alienation "beyond" ideology, and seemingly concludes in *American Pastoral* with a return to the point at which (for Roth) the American way was lost.

The trajectory I have proposed for the post-Vietnam political novel suggests in turn a narrative arc for the American political novel as a form. If we are to see *The Book of Daniel* as a "new" political novel, and *American Pastoral* as a kind of antithesis -a wish that we should be, as E.L. Doctorow put it, "too good for political novels," we are halfway to sharing Doctorow's nostalgia for a lost community of politically passionate readers, writers and critics. This point of view locates the heyday of the American political novel in the early part of the 20th century (from, for example, *Iron Heel* (1908)

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[2] Myra Jehlen, "Literary Criticism at the End of the Millennium," *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994) 49.

to, perhaps, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)), and its death throes in the anti-Communist and anti-Stalinist novels of the late 40s and early 50s (Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey*). According to this narrative, the form virtually disappears from the mid-Fifties until shortly after the Vietnam War, when it enjoys a twenty-five year renaissance before lapsing into a kind of nostalgic despair in the second half of the 1990s.

But if the last twenty- five years have taught us nothing else, it is to distrust narrative. While *Daniel's* disillusionment with its contemporary political realities is clearly more politically engaged than *Pastoral*'s retreat to a rose-tinted past, Doctorow's literary pastoral is arguably no less sentimental than Roth's American pastoral. This is not to say that the political engagement of readers and writers does not vary with the times, but rather that the boundaries of what is considered to be political (not to mention what is considered to be a novel) has varied far more.

In this sense it is less accurate to characterize the novels in this study as representative of a "new" political novel than of a "newly political" novel. Insofar as they present the conflict between individual identity and American identity as mutually influencing, these texts are simultaneously " American" and "political" in ways not previously identified by domestic critics. And, as we have seen, American critics' failure to identify such texts as *The Executioner's Song*, *Oswald's Tale*, and Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*, (as well as "women's" novels like Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and the underrated Joyce Carol Oates's *Black Water*) as expressly political has had long-reaching consequences for the perception of the American novel and the American self.

To say these texts are "newly" political, however, is not to say they are exclusively so; my goal in this dissertation has been to expand rather than delimit the boundaries of the American political novel. If the post-Vietnam novel shares certain sensibilities with its nineteenth- and twentieth- century counterparts (from Tolstoy, Dreiser, and James to Gold, Steinbeck, and Dos Passos) it is equally indebted to the work of Thomas Pynchon and the New Journalists. And while it could be argued that a novel as obviously concerned with "the political milieu" as *All the King's Men* is not really a political novel (as Penn Warren himself did), it is nearly impossible to argue that a "fiction devoted to the idea of experience," (as Howe characterized *Invisible Man*[3]) is not.

Placing the American political novel in a contemporary, and hence continuously changing context proposes an entirely different narrative arc. Contrary to Howe's (and even Doctorow's) assertions, political fiction has been and continues to be written in the United States. From the vantage point of 2008, however, its direction is unclear. A look at some recent publications, including Susan Choi's *An American Woman* (2003) and *A Person of Interest* (2008) (based on the Patty Hearst kidnapping), Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document* (2006), Hari Kunzru's *My Revolutions* (2007), and Peter Carey's *His Illegal Self* (2008) suggests that the genre's ongoing rumination about the sixties remains unresolved, while the recent proliferation of novels by women both remedies and underscores their underrepresentation within it. And, the fact that two of the four authors are not American (Kunzru is British and Carey is Australian) may well suggest an

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[3] *The Nation,* May 10, 1952

American influence on international political fiction.- another reversal of Howe's framework.

On the other hand, if he subject matter (the sixties) and the rhetorical hybridity (biography, history, journalism, and fiction) of many recent works confirm my argument for a discrete and newly political genre, they also reaffirm Howe's characterization of political fiction as "a literature of impasse." *(Politics* 252, Epilogue). For while the American political novel is clearly alive and well, it is not necessarily thriving in creative terms. Unlike a number of recent films and plays (most notably Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and *Slavs*) few if any recent novels have addressed the relationship of individual and national identity in a current political context. Neither, for the most part, have they extended or contested the "postmodern" poetics with which Doctorow and DeLillo challenged the received narrative modes of twenty- five years ago.

As of this writing, the American political novel seems oddly frozen in time, fated as it were, to re-enact its formal and historical past. But the current impasse writers face is not "political" in the way that Howe experienced it in the postwar years. Rather it is temporal-a product of our current historical moment. For the same "postmodern" self-consciousness that constituted the "newness" of the genre's formal and social critique now casts a retrospective pall over every conceivable representational strategy. But the word "conceivable" here is key, for the notion that there's nothing new under the sun is ultimately as naïve as its opposite. Contemporary authors need not be trapped within

Jameson's stifling binary of parody or pastiche [4] any longer than their own imaginations permit. For, as Myra Jehlen points out, "[s]elf consciousness never wholly comprehends the self; there are always more things in heaven and earth than can be dreamt of in anyone's philosophy" [5].

The same might be said for American selves, and the novels that strain to encompass them. For both are dreamt in the personal philosophies of their authors. And as long as these philosophies enact Americans' identities, they will continue to enact America itself. For the future of the political novel, this suggests no shortage of material.

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[4] See Fredric Jameson's discussion in *Postmodernism: or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 16-19.

[5] Jehlen 19.

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